

We can learn a thing or two from Singapore
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THE Malays have a saying: Kuman di seberang laut nampak, gajah di depan mata tidak nampak — "you can see a germ across the sea but not an elephant in front of you". This is how we treat our neighbour, Singapore. Politics and our troubled relations in the past continue to cloud our feelings towards the republic and its people.

Because of that, we'd rather venture further abroad looking for best practices, when we can find them easily down south.

We look at Japan's high culture of maintenance, when Singapore practises such high standards, too. Its public toilets are as immaculate as those in Japan. Its pre-Independence buildings are restored and maintained as if they were brand-new.

We eye Singapore with suspicion. We detest any form of comparisons between the two countries and their people. We sneer at Singaporeans' "kiasu-ness" but do not realise that this fear of losing in a highly competitive society is what made Singapore what it is today. The nation of 3.6 million, which turned 42 recently, has become the most successful economy in Asean.

Community Development, Youth and Sports Minister Dr Vivian Balakrishnan said "kiasuism" was not about being superior but for its own survival.

"Ask any ordinary Singaporean if they feel superior," the eye surgeon turned politician and minister said. "No oil, gas, palm oil, rubber, beautiful tourist spots or gems in the earth. What we have today is (the result of) hard work.

"If anything, we are probably insecure in that if we don't work hard, we will starve. Our focus on making money is actually survival.

"We are working to put food on our table for ourselves and our children. Any excess is put in reserves. This is security for the future," said Balakrishnan, who is also the second minister for information, communications and arts.

Asked if it was asking too much of one minister to handle several portfolios, he said: "It's the Singapore way of doing things. If it is proven effective, why not?" (In Malaysia, his equivalent portfolios are handled by three ministries).

Singapore is a small country in hectareage — even with its land reclamation — but through Temasek, Government of Singapore Investment Corp (GIC) and private companies, it has spread its tentacles far and wide.

While we get foreign manual workers in droves, Singapore gets the best brains from within the region through scholarships offered to students of the other nine Asean countries. While there are no bonds on the scholarships, nothing stops these students from staying on in the republic and working there.

When Singapore gained its independence in 1965, it had to be self-sufficient. Its leaders had to tackle widespread unemployment, raise the standard of living and implement

large-scale public housing.

Minister of Foreign Affairs George Yeo said the three main things the leaders prioritised in forming the structure for the country were education, health care and housing.

"We started by creating the foreign service and the defence force," he said. "Being small, we didn't have the numbers. We had to start National Service. Then we had to give our people some sense of ownership of the country."

The Housing Development Board (HDB) was formed two years after Singapore achieved independence. The agency has been in the red ever since but continues to build high-rise apartments — space constraints resulted in Singapore having to build upwards instead of sideways — to accommodate its growing population. It receives grants from the Singaporean government for its operational expenditure.

Married couples with a maximum combined income of S\$8,000 (RM17,600) a month are eligible for HDB flats. Singles aged 35 and above are also eligible, while those in the upper-income range can buy in the open market.

HDB also offers financing to homebuyers, making it easy for Singaporeans to buy the flats. Now, nine of 10 Singaporeans own houses. "We have created a structure for the country that over the years saw the government ceding its control and balancing the public and private sectors' roles in nation-building," Yeo said.

The country has now developed its economic infrastructure, curbing the threat of racial tension through HDB's ethnic integration policy and independent national defence system, centring on National Service.

Singapore's leaders and people have made something out of nothing. Take tourism. Last year, the republic received 9.7 million tourists and registered S\$13 billion in receipts.

This year, it wants to see 10.2 million tourists and 17 million in 2015. By then, it should be looking at S\$30 billion in receipts.

Singapore creates new tourism products every year — the Night Safari (on good nights, and there are many, visitors get to see more nocturnal animals than they would in Taman Negara) and the DUCKTours, which take visitors on an hour-long tour of the city on an amphibious vehicle that can also take to the river, among many other attractions.

Next year, the world's tallest Ferris wheel, with gondolas that can accommodate up to 35 people each, will open on Feb 14. Forget about being among the first to ride it: The attraction's booked solid for the first six months. Two casinos will also be opening. Construction of a Las Vegas Sands-operated casino near Marina Bay and Resorts World on Sentosa, with the Universal Studio theme park, is under way.

Singapore's been doing all this without a ministry in charge of tourism, just the Singapore Tourism Promotion Board. And up to 90 per cent of the workforce in the island's hospitality industry are Malaysians.

So, when Singaporeans recite their pledge — "We the citizens of Singapore pledge ourselves as one united people, regardless of race, language or religion, to build a democratic society, based on justice and equality, so as to achieve happiness, prosperity and progress for our nation" — I believe they mean it.

We don't have to open our hearts to them; just our eyes and ears. We may learn a thing or two.

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