

A tale of 3 countries: M'sia, S'pore and S Korea
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COMMENT In terms of economic development, Malaysia and Singapore are quite similar to South Korea. But what a world of difference in other things.

A Malaysian, Xue Shu Qin, who has been working in Singapore for more than half a year, wrote a commentary, 'Singapore through the eyes of a Malaysian here' in Singapore Chinese newspaper Lianhe Zaobao on Aug 24, which was re-published in The Straits Times on Aug 28.

He wrote: "Mr Lee Kuan Yew's hope that 'the Singapore of tomorrow will be better than what it is today' reveals his expectations for the republic. In contrast, my country Malaysia is mired in mud, rejecting help from others.

"Perhaps it does not wish to leave the mud. Malaysians do not care whether Malaysia is good or bad; they care only about themselves and their community.

"Having been in Singapore for a while, I miss home. But when I compare my country with the city-state, I am really disappointed with my country.

singapore buildings"We have potential but we are not motivated. We seem to be complacent about the current state of affairs and do not move with the times.

"Everyone says Singapore is a nation with good public order but what I am struck with the most are the well-fed and well-dressed people. Who will think of robbery when his pockets are full?

"I am not blowing Singapore's trumpet. I only hope that my motherland will take a look at Singapore. Singaporeans achieved independence later than us, thus losing out at the starting line. But why is it that they have caught up?"

Reflecting on differences

On my last birthday, I delivered a three-hour lecture on Singapore's pension system (Central Provident Fund or CPF), under the Global Pension Experts Programme in Seoul, South Korea.

With not much to do on the seven-hour flight back from Seoul, I was reading Korean newspapers, and began to reflect on some of the differences among Malaysia, Singapore and South Korea.

NONE South Korea has a minimum-wage policy which has been reviewed annually since 1998. The current minimum wage is 4,110 won (RM10.80) per hour.

Malaysia is contemplating a minimum wage, with Human Resources Minister S Subramaniam's recent statement that it would be tabled at the cabinet in October, and that Malaysia's model would be unique and unlike other countries. Singapore has no plans to have one.

In this connection, even the Philippines government has introduced a minimum wage of US\$400 (RM1,257) and four days off a month, starting from August 2010, for Filipino

domestic maids working in Singapore. This has caused a quandary as Singapore employers have been used to paying not more than S\$400 (RM929). Hong Kong also passed a minimum wage law on Aug 30 with a minimum wage that is expected to be around HK\$28 per hour (RM11).

The default rate (delinquency rate) of bank loans on home-backed lending (residential housing loans) was 0.44 percent in October last year in South Korea. In contrast, Singapore's public housing (HDB) loans' rate of arrears exceeding three months is about 6 percent.

Does this mean that Singapore's delinquency rate is about 14 times South Korea's? What is Malaysia's delinquency rate?

suaram human rights report 2005 230606 bookMalaysia and South Korea both have National Human Rights Commissions.

Why is it that Singapore, being the most economically advanced country in Asean, does not have any plans to even discuss the setting up of a national human rights commission?

South Korea ratified the International Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) in 2001. The ICESCR covers areas like housing, healthcare, social security, etc. Malaysia and Singapore are not signatories to the ICESCR.

Of the eight core international human rights treaties (ICERD, ICCPR, ICESCR, CRC, CEDAW, CAT, ICRMW and CPD), among the Asean countries, Singapore has signed or ratified the least number at two, together with Burma. Malaysia has three like Brunei, and the other six countries have more - ranging from five to all eight.

According to Professor van Reenen, a widely-quoted economist in the British press who recently won the prestigious Yrjö Jahnsson Award - the European equivalent to the John Bates Clark Medal in the United States, which is given to the best economist in Europe under the age of 45 who has made a significant contribution to economics - productivity should not be overly focused on GDP per worker or per hour.

Longest working hours

In this respect, Singapore workers have one of the longest work hours per week in the world, more than South Korea that used to hold that record. In 2008, Singaporeans put in 45.9 hours a week, which was more than South Koreans. How many hours do Malaysians work?

factory workers sweatshops 090107 clothingPresident Lee Myung-bak held a town hall meeting on Nov 27, 2009 on some controversies over government plans. United States President Barack Obama also holds town hall meetings.

Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak held his first town hall meeting at the auditorium of the Kuala Lumpur City Hall, with 400 young people on Aug 27, 2010, in an effort to interact directly with Malaysians as he seeks to win back their support.

Before this historic gesture by the PM, when was the last time that such town hall meetings were held in Malaysia and Singapore?

South Korea is cited as an economic miracle. For example, it is the 9th biggest exporter in

the world, and its trade surplus was the 5th largest among the top 15 exporting countries. Malaysia and Singapore were ranked 21st and 12th respectively, for exporting countries.

South Korea has a thriving entrepreneurial culture, with world renowned companies like Samsung, Hyundai, LG, etc. Malaysia and Singapore have also been arguably miracles in economic development, but have hardly any notable global brands, other than primarily state-owned transportation and energy companies.

NONEPerhaps the next stage in Malaysia and Singapore's development is to show that economic development can continue, with less stress for the people (high housing loan arrears), a minimum wage, more developed social welfare systems, ratifying more human rights conventions like the ICESCR, town hall meetings, entrepreneurial spirit, etc, like South Korea.

One last thing - both Malaysia and Singapore have Internal Security Acts since 1960, whereas South Korea does not have similar draconian legislation.

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