

SINGAPORE SLINGSHOT

The Lee political dynasty continues, but its stance could be the harbinger of its own self-destruction.

By Bishen Bedi



Lee: Many see his rise as the making of a Lee political dynasty

SO, Lee Hsien Loong, son of Lee Kuan Yew, the founding father of Singapore, has won the elections in his own right. What's more, he won them hands down.

As elections go in Singapore, this last one, on May 6, was another no-brainer. Junior Lee, who took over from Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong in 2004, is a dead ringer for his father's policies, and his father's politics. Nothing much has changed since the elder Lee stepped down in 1990.

Upon 'retiring', Senior Lee remodelled himself as Senior Minister in the Prime Minister's Office. When Goh, only the second premier, retired in 2004, Senior Lee promoted himself to Minister Mentor, while Goh inherited his Senior Minister title. Both men are privy to Cabinet meetings and discussions.

The one legacy of his old man that Junior Lee has stuck to is the politics of fear that has long been instilled in Singaporeans, including the opposition political parties, who would dare challenge the establishment. The other is gerrymandering electoral politics that only the People's Action Party (PAP), which has ruled the city-state as a one-party show since 1965, can do. Never mind that opposition parties and a parliamentary system exist.

Junior Lee may have won the poll but the PAP's overall mandate has been slit. It won only 66.6% of Singaporean hearts and minds, compared to 75.3% in 2001. That's in spite of strong economic growth, Junior Lee doling out seductive election-eve budget sweeteners, and a raft of controls on opposition parties. The PAP government won all but two of the 84 seats in parliament - the same result it achieved in 2001. And, much to Junior Lee's chagrin no doubt, two opposition MPs, Chiam See Tong of the Singapore Democratic Alliance (SDA) and Low Thia Khiang of the Workers' Party (WP), were returned. More, though, Chiam and Low secured increased

majorities despite the PAP's strenuous efforts to depose them.

To this, Junior Lee declared that the PAP 'will review our strategy for approaching these two constituencies over the next five years'. If that means the PAP may be willing to accept genuine political pluralism in Singapore, don't hold your breath. It just won't happen. Still, having its mandate slashed, the PAP is nevertheless rejoicing one other result: the obliteration, virtually, of the opposition Singapore Democratic Party (SDP) at the polls.

Junior Lee wanted nothing less than a crushing win for the PAP and to not only rule Singapore in his own right but also his right to rule the tiny republic. And he couldn't have made this any clearer, with this monumental blunder during a campaign speech: 'Instead of spending my time thinking of what is the right policy for Singapore, I have to spend all my time thinking what is the right way to fix them, what's the right way to buy my own supporters over,' he said.

It came at a time when more and more graduates from abroad are returning home only to side with opposition parties. Wiping the SDP off the political landscape is a consolation of sorts. And ironically, older voters, especially low-income workers, have become more disgruntled because of job cuts, higher consumer taxes and rising transport and utilities costs. And younger voters simply don't like the PAP's authoritarianism.

More, many see Junior Lee's rise as the making of a Lee political dynasty. The 'first family' controls the island republic's politics, and Junior Lee's siblings, including in-laws, head up Singapore's biggest government-linked companies (GLCs). Junior Lee's younger brother heads SingTel, the state-owned telecommunications monolith, and his wife Ho Ching heads Temasek Holdings, the powerful state investment company. Temasek bought up majority shares in Shin Corp, the flagship and giant telco founded by billionaire Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, who stood down from his position in April. It was the deal of the century.

The PAP has a vice-grip on Singapore's media, making these its channels for propaganda and spin. It's part of Senior Lee's ongoing attempts at social engineering and control by mass producing Singaporean clones who would never question or challenge government. It puts the PAP state's institutions above the law and gives them extra-judicial powers. It's

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entirely self-serving because the PAP incumbents would never feel intimidation from voters or by its foreign critics.

Witness this from Senior Lee, when he said that some day, if [the opposition parties] have proved themselves, a more

active opposition would be acceptable. And he also added: 'I want a world-class opposition, not this riff-raff.' In one exchange with foreign journalists in Singapore recently, Senior Lee said: 'You are not going to intimidate me, ever. We're not going to allow foreign correspondents or foreign journalists or anybody else to tell us what to do. There are very few things that I do not know about Singapore politics, and there are very few things that you can tell me or any foreign correspondent can tell me about Singapore.'

The Lee family thinks Singapore is the 'model' country for not only the developing world but also the developed world.

Singaporeans have never won their fundamental freedom since gaining independence from Malaysia 41 years ago. It still has hang-ups about that. And there may be no end to Singaporeans' basic political rights being secured any time soon. Still, for all its smugness, the PAP must beware: its self-serving politics can and will only sow the seeds of its own self-destruction sooner or later. **mb**