



A Big Frog in a Small Pond or a Giant of Asia? Understanding the Political Leadership Style of Lee Kuan Yew

H.M.S. Amanda Herath

Abstract: The passing of a national political leader, widely regarded as a world figure, marked the beginning of the year 2015. The long standing Senior Minister of Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew left an undeniably significant mark upon the political leadership sphere. In order to assess his intriguing leadership style I will be using three theoretical models namely; Kouzes and Posner Model (1995), Blondel Model (1987) and Simonton Model (1988). The paper will mainly focus on Lee Kuan Yew's attempts at building a new Singaporean Identity from a multiethnic pluralistic society. By this exercise I try to answer the question of whether another leader can adopt Lee Kuan Yew's leadership style as a guiding principle.

Key Words: Lee Kuan Yew; Singapore; Political Leadership; Identity; Leadership Styles.

Introduction

Leadership is as old as mankind. It is universally present in every aspect of human society. From the smallest unit of family to the nation-state, leadership is omnipresent and inescapable. Among these leaders that we see in our day-to-day life, political leaders command much more attention than other leaders:

[a]mong the various aspects of leadership, political leadership, in particular in the nation-state, occupies a special position. It is not that it is intrinsically different in kind or character from leadership in other organizations, but it is vastly more visible and, ostensibly at least, vastly more important. Within each nation, political leadership can command and reach out widely and extensively, and the rulers of the most important nations have a resonance that carries an echo to all corners of the world. If one reduces politics to its bare bones, to what is most visible to most citizens, it is the national political leaders, both at home and abroad,

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that remain once everything else has been erased; they are the most universal, the most recognized, the most talked about elements of political life. ¹

The passing of one such national political leader, widely regarded as a world figure, marked the beginning of the year 2015. The long standing Senior Minister of Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew left an undeniably significant mark upon the political leadership sphere. When it comes to describing the Singapore's late Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, so many adjectives seem to be thrown around. They vary from a champion-of-the-state-guided capitalist to an authoritarian ruler; from a charismatic intellect to a big frog in a small pond. All these assessments create an intriguing picture as to Lee's political leadership style.

What sort of a leader was he? Was he an exemplary leader? Into which category of leaders does he fit in? These are the questions addressed in this paper. In order to assess his leadership style I will analyze his ideas and actions pertaining to one significant aspect of Singapore: the building of a new Singaporean identity from a multiethnic pluralistic society. By such an analysis the paper tries to answer the bigger question of whether another leader can adopt Lee Kuan Yew's leadership style as a guiding principle.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows; the next section will outline the theoretical literature on political leadership, which will guide the analysis of the rest of the paper. The third section will try to analyze the effective leadership characteristics displayed by Lee Kuan Yew, and will try to determine the leadership category that he belongs to. The paper will conclude by answering the main question as to whether it is possible to adopt the Lee Kuan Yew style leadership by another leader.

Literature Review

Before moving on further it is better to clarify the term "political leadership" and the importance of studying it. What is meant by the term "political leadership"? According to Blondel (1987) it is essentially a phenomenon of power; it consists of the ability of the one or few who are at the top to make others do a number of things (positively or negatively) that they would not or at least might not have done. And more specifically the national political leadership is the power exercised by one or a few individuals to direct members of the nation towards action.

Due to the immense power that national political leadership can wield, most of the political theorists viewed political leadership as a Leviathan. A frightening beast that should be tamed and for which means should be discovered to diminish its effects. Therefore most of the political theorists viewed the study of political leadership as an examination of the mechanisms by which the actions of leaders could be sufficiently

¹ Jean Blondel, *Political Leadership towards a General Analysis* (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 1987), 1.

constrained so as not to let them encroach unduly upon the lives of citizens. Yet it is worthy to pay attention as to how the power of leaders can be positively harnessed for the good of mankind. To see how it can be used to uplift, improve and develop. To see how this power can help to bring about a ‘better’ state of affairs in our societies. “Thus, while leadership may be a ‘beast’ which can frighten mankind, it can also be one of the most powerful means of leading to collective action, not just severally and in a discreet manner, but in a common endeavor over substantial periods: it can thus result in development for the whole society”²

In any of the studies pertaining to particular leaders, one of the most important questions would be whether that particular leader is an “effective leader”? This question obviously leads us to another practical problem as to how we can ascertain the effectiveness of a particular leader. Kouzes and Posner (1995)³ developed a leadership model highlighting the characteristics of effective exemplary leadership. In this paper I will be using this framework to ascertain the effectiveness of Lee Kuan Yew’s leadership in developing a Singaporean identity.

Kouzes and Posner’s framework highlights five practices of effective exemplary leadership (Atwater, 1996)⁴, namely;

1. **Inspire a Shared Vision** – creating and sharing a positive vision of the future that appeals to all organizational members. Leaders passionately believe that they can make a difference. They envision the future, creating an ideal and unique image of what the organization can become.
2. **Challenge the Process** – continuously looking for new and better ways to do things. This is one of the behaviors common to transformational leaders. Leaders search for opportunities to change the status quo. They look for innovative ways to improve the organization. In doing so, they experiment and take risks.
3. **Model the Way** – serving as an example of how the leader expects other people to behave. Leaders establish principles concerning the way goals should be pursued. They create standards of excellence and then set an example for others to follow.
4. **Enabling Others to Act** – empowering organizational members to take responsibility and ownership. Leaders foster collaboration and build spirited teams. They actively involve others. They strengthen others, making each person feel capable and powerful.
5. **Encourage the Heart** – actively motivating organizational members to achieve their full potential. To keep hope and determination alive, leaders recognize contributions that individuals make. In every winning team, the members need to share in the

2 Blondel, *Political Leadership towards a General Analysis*, 2.

3 Leanne E. Atwater, “The Leadership Challenge: How to Keep Getting Extraordinary Things Done in Organizations.” *The Leadership Quarterly*, 1996.

4 Ibid.

rewards of their efforts, so leaders celebrate accomplishments. They make people feel like heroes.

We can determine the effectiveness of Lee's leadership style with the aid of the above model, yet we still have to find the precise leadership category that he belongs to. Was he a transformational leader? Was he a dictator? Or was he a global leader or a mere manager of a small city-state? Categorizing leaders into specific cohorts is a complex task due to various goals and environmental contexts that they operate upon. This complexity has given birth to various models of leadership categorizations, each model offering different categorization methods. Most of these models are based upon the organizational leadership styles of business managers. Even though these models may offer useful insights into the phenomena of leadership, political leadership has some unique characteristics, which sets it apart from the other types of leadership styles.

As mentioned in the introduction section, political leadership affects a whole nation rather than a single enterprise. Political leadership operates on two distinct levels namely; internal domestic affairs and international affairs. Political leadership is far more influential on the lives of its citizens and at the same time operates far away from its constituents. Due to these differences a unique categorization method is required for categorizing political leaders. In this paper I will be using the Two-dimensional Political Leadership Typology developed by Blondel (1987)⁵ and the Personality-based Political Leadership Categorization developed by Simonton (1988)⁶.

Blondel's model of Political Leadership Typology categorizes political leaders based on two dimensions; the "scope of operation" and "magnitude of change envisioned." The "scope of operation" dimension analyzes the breadth of the policy intervention and the range of problems covered by leaders. This can range from a wide scope covering the whole nation to a specialized scope covering single policy areas. Between these two ends a number of combinations are also possible with varying degrees of breadth. "Magnitude of change envisioned" covers the amount of change that a leader is trying to bring about to the system. Some leaders may aspire to bring a revolutionary change to the existing system while some others may be satisfied with maintaining the status quo system. Between these two ends, we can yet again find infinite numbers of combinations. Blondel's model does not attach value judgments in its classification process. This means the leaders who are generally considered as "heroes" as well as leaders who are considered to be "cruel dictators" can all be classified under this model. Another note-worthy aspect of Blondel's model is that it allows for the time related changes that a leader may undergo during that person's tenure. A leader may start with a small scope and status quo aspirations but may

5 Blondel, *Political Leadership towards a General Analysis*, 97.

6 DK Simonton, "Presidential Style: Personality, Biography, and Performance." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 55, no. 6 (1988): 928-36.

eventually move on to become a leader with a wide scope and revolutionary aspirations. An outline of Blondel's Model is given in Table 1.

Table 1.		Magnitude of Change Envisioned		
		<i>Maintenance of Status Quo</i>	<i>Moderate Change</i>	<i>Large Change</i>
Scope of Operation	<i>Wide Scope</i>	<p>Saviors (Moses, Churchill)</p> <p>Those who appear to be able to solve a major problem facing the nation or the state — in many cases, the threat of total annihilation. Before the savior appears, the nation is on the verge of collapse; afterwards, the danger is avoided and peace and calm return to the community.</p>	<p>Paternalists/ Populists (Bismarck, Stalin, Shah, Nasser)</p> <p>Wish to introduce some changes but do not want to upset the whole society, and they seek to accomplish this end either by 'integrating', rather than destroying, the existing underpinnings of the social structure, or by committing themselves to a 'middle way' in the introduction of new ideas.</p>	<p>Ideologues (Mao, Lenin, Hitler)</p> <p>Sharply modify the basis on which society is organized; they usually do so through a revolution, since it seems that only by a revolution can a 'radical' change in the norms and modes of behavior be achieved.</p>
	<i>Moderate Scope</i>	<p>Comforters (Eisenhower)</p> <p>Tries to 'comfort' a population worried by the speed of change; without being 'protectors' in the strong sense, because the system was not about to collapse, these leaders are concerned essentially with 'curing' and 'calming' the citizenry.</p>	<p>Re-definers (Kennedy, Reagan, Thatcher)</p> <p>Wishes to 'redefine' the agenda, for instance in terms of the relationship between the population and the state, in order to 'make people stand on their own two feet' or to 'take the government off the backs of the people.'</p>	<p>Reformists (Franklin D. Roosevelt)</p> <p>Concerned with reforming "an aspect" of the whole system which can have a huge impact to the overall system.</p>
	<i>Specialized Scope</i>	<p>Managers (ministers who administer day-to-day problems)</p>	<p>Adjusters/ Thinkers (ministers who modify an aspect of a policy)</p>	<p>Innovators (new policy; land reforms)</p>
<p>Source – Blondel (1987) * Change may mean "regressive" or "progressive" or a combination of both * Suggested examples were given by Blondel herself.</p>				

While Blondel's model is based on the actions and deeds of the leader, Simonton's model takes a psychological analysis method to evaluate the personality of political leaders. This model categorizes leaders into five categories, namely:

- 1. Interpersonal-** allows Cabinet members considerable independence, encourages the exercise of independent judgment by aides, gives credit to others for work

done, endears himself to his staff through his courtesy and consideration, is flexible, emphasizes teamwork, is frequently in contact with his advisers and Cabinet, maintains close relationships with a wide circle of associates, is willing to make compromises, relies on working in a staff system, deciding among options formulated by advisers, keeps members of his staff informed on matters concerning other departments, knows his limitations, and supports constitutional government.

2. **Charismatic-** finds dealing with the press challenging and enjoyable, enjoys the ceremonial aspects of the office, is charismatic, consciously refines his own public image, has a flair for the dramatic, conveys clear-cut, highly visible personality, is a skilled and self-confident negotiator, uses rhetoric effectively, is a dynamo of energy and determination, is characterized by others as a world figure, keeps in contact with the public and its moods, has ability to maintain popularity, exhibits artistry in manipulation, and views the presidency as a vehicle for self-expression, and rarely is shy, awkward in public.
3. **Deliberative-** understands implications of his decisions; exhibits depth of comprehension, is able to visualize alternatives and weigh long term consequences, keeps himself thoroughly informed; reads briefings, background reports, and is cautious, conservative in action, knows his limitations, supports constitutional government, skilled and self-confident negotiator, characterized by others as a world figure.
4. **Creative-** initiates new legislation and programs and is innovative in his role as an executive, rarely is a “middle-of-the-roader”, is emphatic in asserting his judgments, encourages the exercise of independent judgment by aides, views the presidency as a vehicle for self-expression, not cautious, conservative in action, does not pay attention to his limitations.
5. **Neurotic** - places political success over effective policy and suffers health problems which tend to parallel difficult and critical periods in office, almost never has direct, uncomplicated approach, exhibits artistry in manipulation, consciously refines his own public image.

In Simonton’s model:

The interpersonal and charismatic presidents seem to be person-oriented, aiming their energies toward other human beings: the interpersonal executive toward his colleagues in government and the charismatic executive toward the people. On the other hand, the deliberative and creative presidents appear to be more task-oriented, with much less devotion to maintaining social relationships. This difference in orientation mirrors the common distinction in leadership research between person-oriented leaders who are social-emotional specialists, and task-oriented leaders who are problem-solvers. The neurotic president, however, is neither person- nor task-oriented, but rather self-oriented,

focused on maintaining a some-what fragile ego.⁷

Building a Singaporean Identity⁸

Was Lee Kuan Yew an Effective Exemplary Leader?

In 1965 Singapore suddenly found itself to be an Independent Republic thrown out of the Malay Federation. At the heart of the problem was the growing Malay nationalism of the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) of Malaysia and the People's Action Party (PAP) and Lee Kuan Yew's push for a Malaysian Malaysia. The leading party of Malaysia –UMNO – wanted to build a country centered on the Malay nationalism, which represented the majority of the mainland Malaya. But in Singapore the majority were Chinese descendants and Lee Kuan Yew and his PAP party pushed for a multiracial Malaysia where every nationality would get equal opportunities. While the communal racial riots started to break out both in Malaya and Singapore, the Malaysian Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman and Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew decided on a separation of Singapore from Malaysia. Hence on 9th August 1965 Singapore was declared to be an independent nation. A new nation came into being which did not exist in history. That independent nation inherited a racial mix of a Chinese majority followed by Malays and Indians as minorities.⁹ Racial tensions were at its highest as the Malays found themselves at the mercy of a Chinese majority government, now without the protection of a sympathetic Malay government at the mainland. How did Lee Kuan Yew face this problem of racial tensions? Did he manage it effectively?

In fact the problem faced by Lee and his PAP government was not as simple as merely managing racial tensions. They had to invent a Singaporean identity for the newly created nation. An identity to which all the races can feel related to, to which all the races would subscribe. Lee's answer to this was, "we are going to have a multiracial nation in Singapore. This is not a Malay nation, not a Chinese nation, not an Indian nation. What we have can be preserved only if we together defend the integrity of our country and secure the interest of the whole community."¹⁰

Moreover, Lee Kuan Yew said that :

⁷ Simonton, "Presidential Style," 928–36.

⁸ The ideal Singapore Identity seemed to combine a self-consciously tough-minded meritocratic individualism, in which individual Singaporeans cultivated their talents and successfully competed in the international economy, with an equally self-conscious identification with "Asian Roots" and "Traditional Values", which referred to precolonial India, China, and Malay world. Singaporeans were to be modern and cosmopolitan while retaining their distinctively Asian traditions. Racial differences were preserved but tolerated. Barbara Leitch Lepoer, ed. *Singapore: A Country Study* (Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1989).

⁹ This structure remained as it is even in 2014. Singapore's 3,870,739 residents were divided into 2,874,380 Chinese (74.3 percent), 516,657 Malays (13.3 percent), 353,021 Indians (9.1 percent), and 126,681 others (3.3 percent) (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2014).

¹⁰ Alex Josey, *Lee Kuan Yew: The Struggle for Singapore: Reprinted and Updated with the Lesson of Indochina*. (London : Angus & Robertson, 1976), 196-198.

the acid test of who was a Singaporean was whether the person was so committed to Singapore that he was prepared to stand up and fight for Singapore. An emotive definition, a qualitative not quantitative test, of a Singaporean was a person either by birth and upbringing or residence who felt committed to upholding the society as it was, multiracial, tolerant, accommodating, forward looking and was prepared to stake his life for that community.¹¹[...] When Singapore was rejected by Malaysia some Chinese wanted Singapore to become a Third China. They wanted to make Chinese the official language. Lee stamped on the idea at once. Singapore would become a multiracial nation. There would be a Singaporean, not a Chinese identity.¹²

From the above quotations from Lee's speeches and from documents of his colleagues we can come to the conclusion that Lee took the initiative to inspire a shared vision of building a Singaporean identity based on multiracialism. According to Barr (1999)¹³ Lee Kuan Yew himself harbored the notions of racial and cultural supremacists beliefs regarding the superiority of Chinese genes and culture above the Indian or Malay genes and culture. Then why did he take the initiative for implementing a Singaporean identity based on multiracialism?

Lee may have pursued communal neutral multiracialism due to two reasons. Firstly, due to the internal and external political conditions assuming a Chinese identity would have been a threat to the stability of the new and fragile Singapore. Lee regarded Chinese culture as a threat to Singapore's stability because it was so closely associated with Chinese chauvinism, Chinese communism and loyalty to the People's Republic of China. Also, Lee considered that allowing even the appearance of creating a Sino-centric culture in the 1960s or 1970s would have heightened tensions between Singapore and its Malay neighbors¹⁴. Secondly, Lee had developed a utilitarian view of culture during his years of study at Cambridge. His studies at Law School, his involvement in Labor politics, and his private reading led him to believe that cultural identity was a tool to be used or discarded at need in the building of a new society.¹⁵ As his paramount need at the time of separation was to establish cohesion among the various races without provoking any communal riots, the most politically shrewd path was embracing the multiracialism.

To implement the multiracial Singapore identity, his first step was to challenge the existing emotional attachment to monolingual mother tongue education. He wanted every Singaporean to be bilingual, fluent in English and one other national language (Mandarin, Malay, and Tamil). English language was designated to be the language of business

11 Ibid.,198.

12 Ibid.,199.

13 Michael D. Barr, "Lee Kuan Yew: Race, Culture and Genes." *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 29, no. 2 (1999): 145-66.

14 Ibid.

15 Michael D. Barr, "Lee Kuan Yew in Malaysia: A Reappraisal of Lee Kuan Yew's Role in the Separation of Singapore from Malaysia." *Asian Studies Review* 21, no. 1 (July 1997): 1-17.

while other languages were kept as official languages. English language education was promoted as a means to create linkages between races that spoke different languages and also as a means to access western knowledge. Mother tongue education was encouraged as a means to protect the “Asian Values” of respective cultures. Lee also embarked on a “Speak Mandarin” campaign to bring the Chinese speakers into a common dialect. As a result of these campaigns the Nanyang University, which was wholly conducted in Chinese had to be amalgamated with the University of Singapore due to the lack of employment opportunities for Chinese graduates. National University of Singapore (NUS) was born as a full English language university.

Language policy was not the only aspect he challenged. As an independent nation Singapore was in dire need of its own defense forces. Building a defense force became a difficult task due to the cultural propensities of the races. The Chinese tradition that good sons do not become soldiers, plus the fact that most of the Singapore Indian communities were from non-warrior castes was disadvantageous in recruiting soldiers. He initiated a Nation Building National Service (military training), which was mandatory for young men to join for two years. According to Josey (1980)¹⁶ this was a successful experiment in developing Singaporean identity among the youngsters of all races who were hitherto concerned with their own interests and not of the interest of the country.

Lee’s methods of enforcing a Singaporean identity started to encroach upon the market practices as well as upon the private spheres of life. He initiated a government housing project to provide a house for each Singaporean family. In doing so he decided to scatter and mix the races to prevent them from being congregating according to their race. To prevent the house recipients from selling and re-congregating he imposed nationality quotas on neighborhoods thus affecting the market mechanisms and also the cultural and family ties of the residents.

Lee’s idea of a Singaporean identity was based on meritocracy. “Singapore is a meritocracy. And these men have risen to the top by their own merit, hard work and high performance.” (Josey, quoting Lee Kuan Yew, 1980)¹⁷ His idealistic view of an efficient, educated Singaporean citizen pushed him to the practice of eugenics. When he recognized that most of the educated women were not getting married due to the cultural practice of men marrying down and women marrying up he initiated a government matchmaking service, the Social Development Unit, to encourage young educated men to marry young educated women. His reasoning was that if the educated women were not marrying and not reproducing, the brightest of the genes will not be passed down and since the less educated women got married and had 3-4 kids the mediocre genes will be the only ones remaining. He initiated various policies to encourage educated women to get married and have 3-4 kids. Some of these policies were not warmly welcomed by the other ministers

16 Josey, *Lee Kuan Yew: The Struggle for Singapore*, 219-220.

17 *Ibid.*, 202-203.

or the general public.¹⁸

This forced creation of a Singaporean identity was pursued even to some comical lengths. Official actions were taken by the police and government servants to discourage hippie-ism. Long untidy hair was considered to be the badge of hippie-ism. Immigration authorities could deny the entry to the Republic if they considered someone with long untidy hair to be a hippie. In government offices posters were displayed showing illustrations of a 'reasonable' hairstyle. According to the government definition, long hair is hair that falls across the forehead and touches the eyebrow, or covers the ears, or reaches below an ordinary shirt collar.¹⁹

To provide an example by action he himself started to learn Mandarin and Malay. "Most days with a teacher he polishes his Mandarin and his Malay, for it is of vital importance in a multiracial nation that the leader should be able to communicate directly with as many of the people as possible, and more people in Singapore speak Malay and Chinese than English."²⁰ He sent all his children to Mandarin Chinese schools and later to English universities. In his autobiography Lee mentions this fact as a political advantage for him to expound his ideals. "Those born and bred in homogeneous societies may not understand why the language medium in which I chose to educate my children had political implications. I had the political strength to make those changes in Nanyang University because, unlike many champions of the Chinese language who sent their children to English schools, my three children were completely educated in Chinese Schools."²¹ His sons also served in the military after their university studies. He himself was married to Kwa Geck Choo, a bright Singaporean lawyer. He showed the path that he wished his fellow citizens would take by modeling the way himself.

So far we were able to find three effective exemplary leadership characteristics shown by Lee Kuan Yew in his efforts to build a Singaporean identity, even though some of the practices remain questionable. What about the other two characteristics of the Kouzes and Posner model?

Josey describes the personality of Lee Kuan Yew as follows:

his puritanical streak emerges every time, as does the scarcity of genuine humor. He is more the fussy scoutmaster, the finicky schoolmaster, the precisian, the heavy intellectual, and

18 Scientists have a long held debate regarding the importance of genes when it comes to intelligence and by extension the importance of ethnicity for intelligence. The scientific evidence are also mixed. But the widely accepted notion is that genes is only part of the equation in explaining the intelligence of a person. Family environment, nutrition level, social exposure, education facilities, teaching methods can also have an impact on nurturing an intelligent human being. Hence there is no guarantee that an educated mother will have intelligent children and a less educated mother will have stupid children. The outcome could be drastically opposite as well. ("The Role of Genetics in IQ and Intelligence." A to Z of Brain, Mind and Learning. Accessed August 14, 2015. <http://iq-test.learninginfo.org/iq03.htm>).

19 Josey, *Lee Kuan Yew: The Struggle for Singapore*, 233.

20 Ibid. 5-6.

21 Lee, Kuan Yew. *From Third World to First: The Singapore Story, 1965-2000*. 1st ed. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2000,152

the stern father, than the dictator. He sees himself the elected leader, the man charged with the task of setting the pace and leading the way, pointing out the errors, correcting mistakes, praising where necessary (he is not very good at this, he finds it hard to compliment people for what he feels they should have done anyway), bollocking (his word) those deserving of censure, and keeping an eye in things generally (from a dirty lorry exhaust to damaged shrubs on highway dividers).²²

Tom Plate also described Lee as: “Mostly inaccessible, almost deliberately inept with small talk, but brilliant in a quietly intimidating way.”²³

According to the above descriptions Lee Kuan Yew does not seem to be a leader who encourages the heart of the people around him. More or less he seems to be a strict disciplinarian demanding the tasks to be done rather than coaxing the followers to do something. He applied the same principles when dealing with the citizens. Rather than using motivational methods to encourage higher levels of industrial participation, he simply passed legislation setting down longer working hours and limiting fringe benefits for Singapore workers, and he lectured the state’s organized workers to tamper their proletarian longings, lest they price Singapore out of the competitive Asian labor market. According to him Singapore workers want more work and more money for more work, not more leisure to spend the inadequate sums they earned.²⁴ Viewed like this the workers were deemed simply as machinery of the nation building rather than human beings.

Did he enable the others to act? As long as the subordinates and his cabinet members shared his views of Singaporean identity they were given the chance to act according to the guidance of Lee Kuan Yew. He even listened to the opinions of his cabinet ministers if he was sure about the loyalties of those people towards the common Singaporean interest. At the earlier periods almost all of his cabinet ministers were PAP party members and his long-term friends both in political life and private life. As a result there was a higher degree of goal and philosophical cohesion between Lee Kuan Yew and his inner political circle. The most prominent members of this inner circle were, Goh Keng Swee, S. Rajaratnam, Hon Sui Sen, Lim Kim San, Eddie Baker, Toh Chin Chye, Ong Pang Boon and Othman Wok. But a close analysis of his personality reveals that Lee Kuan Yew was not a leader who easily accommodated people. Josey Alex wrote that:

He (Lee Kuan Yew) usually wants his own way in an argument, he is no dictator and does not want to be and in any case, even if he did, his colleagues would not permit him to dictate. Abrasive and aggressive by nature, he believes he is right, but he hates sycophants, though by his manner and behavior he tends to create them, especially among some of the

22 Josey, *Lee Kuan Yew: The Struggle for Singapore*, 203.

23 Plate, *Giants of Asia; Conversations with Lee Kuan Yew Citizen Singapore; How to Build a Nation*. (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish International Ptd, 2010), 36.

24 Josey, *Lee Kuan Yew: The Struggle for Singapore*, 250-251.

civil servants with whom he comes into contact.²⁵

Lee's intolerance of opposition ideas – especially those alternative ideas which were critical of him or his policies – were widely known. Yet he would still use the democratic method when dealing with the opposition leaders even if he wanted to suppress their ideas. PAP was notorious for bringing the opposition to the court through the “Anti-defamation laws” and would completely bankrupt the opposition leader.^{26 27} . Some were jailed without trial through the operation of “temporary law”²⁸. According to Lee, these opposition ideas, by spreading political violence, will tear away at the fabric of race cohesion and Singaporean identity by fanning racial tensions. PAP government was not cruel in its treatment to the imprisoned opposition members. They were properly treated but were not allowed the political freedom²⁹.

Another group of people who got the same level of limited freedom was the media of Singapore. Lee Kuan Yew made himself a prime target of criticism of press freedom movements of the West by closing down three Singaporean newspapers on the ground of suspicious foreign ownership and hidden agendas, which he called “black operations”.³⁰
³¹ “Singapore reporters are free to criticize in Singapore newspapers, but no one is free to use the Singapore press to sabotage or thwart the primacy of purpose of an elected government” (Josey quoting Lee)³². Lee's dubious description of press freedom leaves us no room but to identify press freedom in Singapore as merely sycophancy.

According to above evidence Lee Kuan Yew was not a leader who enabled the critical thinking of his citizens. What he created as Singaporean identity was a set of mechanized and routinized human beings capable of achieving a high-level of productivity within the guidelines provided by the government.

This leads us to the conclusion that Lee Kuan Yew did not exhibit all of the characteristics of an exemplary, effective leader. Too often we tend to look at the achievements of a leader when deciding his/her effectiveness. Hence if we merely looked at the GDP growth rates of Singapore brought about by Lee Kuan Yew, without a doubt he would be an effective, magnificent leader. But if we analyze his leadership practices through a different qualitative lens we cannot deny that his effectiveness as an exemplary leader falls short

25 Ibid., 203.

26 Barr, Michael D. “J.B. Jeyaretnam: Three Decades as Lee Kuan Yew's bête Noir.” *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 33, no. 3 (2003): 299–317. doi:10.1080/00472330380000201.

27 Andrews, Sally. “Soft Repression: The Struggle for Democracy in Singapore.” *The Diplomat*, February 2015. <http://thediplomat.com/2015/02/soft-repression-the-struggle-for-democracy-in-singapore/>.

28 Josey, Alex. *Lee Kuan Yew: The Struggle for Singapore : Reprinted and Updated with the Lesson of Indochina*. 3rd ed. Angus & Robertson, 1980. 232

29 Ibid.121

30 Kuan Yew Lee, *From Third World to First: The Singapore Story, 1965-2000*. (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2000), 188.

31 Josey, *Lee Kuan Yew: The Struggle for Singapore*, 268.

32 Ibid., 264.

of expectations.

Which Leadership Category does Lee Kuan Yew belong to?

Blondel Model

When Lee Kuan Yew became the first Prime Minister of Singapore in 1959, his major aspiration was to merge Singapore with Malaya to create the Malaysian Federation. He was prepared to be a prime minister of a small city under the rule of the Malaysian government. Hence at this stage his operative scope was moderate and his aspired change was also moderate. Therefore we can say that Lee Kuan Yew began as a Redefining Leader, who wanted to redefine the state organization after the independence from the British.

Right after the separation from Malaysia in 1965, he found himself in the position of a Savior without even planning to be there. He had to save this small city-state from hostilities of the neighboring Indonesia and Malaysia. Also he had to make sure that the country would not collapse into communal chaos. He had to find a new identity to rally around the people of that small country that he was entrusted with.

Later on as he progressed with his own idea of Asian style democracy and Singaporean identity he moved on to become an Ideologues leader aspiring to change a wide spectrum of the nation with large scale sweeping changes. Generally, ideologues leaders are widely remembered due to the massiveness of their impact on the humankind. Even though Lee may not have staged a revolution as Mao, building up a third-world insignificant city-state in to a First World luxurious hub ranks him among the giants. Most of the time Lee Kuan Yew mentioned that he did not subscribe to a particular ideology, but rather tried to find a workable solution to the problems of nation building^{33 34}. According to Plate (2013)³⁵ this “utilitarian pragmatism” is by itself an ideology. Hence we can credit Lee Kuan Yew as an Ideologues Leader who practiced this particular ideology to the fullest extent. Even though we have doubts pertaining to the exemplary characters of his leadership style we cannot deny that Lee Kuan Yew made a lasting impact in the modern history of mankind.

Simonton Model

According to the analysis thus far, the strongest personality characteristics shown by Lee Kuan Yew neatly categorize him into the “Deliberative” leadership style. Lee is widely regarded as a bright intellect who can almost never be defeated in arguments. Even from the conception of the Singaporean identity concept he showed cautious, shrewd decision making abilities. He always knew his limits in oppressing his opponents. He never used violent or cruel punishments towards his political opponents. No matter how controversial

33 Lee, *From Third World to First*, 212.

34 Josey, *Lee Kuan Yew: The Struggle for Singapore*, 23.

35 Plate, *Giants of Asia*, 44.

his ideas were, almost all the leaders of the world were willing to pay heed to his counsel.

Conclusion

The aim of the paper was to study the leadership style of one of the controversial leaders of Asia. Lee Kuan Yew achieved a great feat in his lifetime that most other developing nations are envious of. Some of the developing countries are actually clamoring for a leader similar to Lee Kuan Yew. Hence the biggest question will be: can another leader emulate Lee Kuan Yew style leadership?

As a general rule, emulating another personality is a difficult task simply because of the vast differences in circumstances faced by each leader. What Lee Kuan Yew faced in 1960s is completely different from today's world.

If we just forget about these contextual differences then comes the question of how much worthy were those qualities to be replicated? Out of the five characteristics of an effective exemplary leader, Lee lacked two characteristics, which are broadly relevant as interpersonal skills. He neither was a good motivator nor was he a good accommodator. Therefore to a great extent he appears to be a cold-hearted disciplinarian. Should a modern day leader become a cold-hearted disciplinarian?

Another problem with adopting Lee's style is that Lee was able to literally oversee almost all the aspects of the polity given the fact that he was presiding over a population of only 2 million and 716.2 km² of land area. Will that level of intervention and scrutiny be possible in a large country with a much larger population?

According to some scholars^{36 37} the PAP government established by Lee was a de-facto soft authoritarian regime rather than a parliamentary democracy as he popularly claimed. Hence if a leader in a democratic country adopts Lee style leadership strategy it will be a regressive change rather than a progressive change in the political freedom.

Finally we come to the most significant of arguments as to why Lee Kuan Yew style leadership can be a dangerous approach overall. Lee Kuan Yew's leadership style shares common characteristics with other hardline dictators and authoritarians. He shares the same leadership space as Mao and Hitler. Even though Lee never bent on abhorrent cruelty as Hitler, another political leader can simply move on to that dangerous zone after adopting the Lee style leadership practices. As for Lee Kuan Yew, his moral compass and education gave him boundaries of operation. But what if the other leader does not possess such moral boundaries and education refinements? What can act as a restraint on such a leader to keep him from moving from soft-authoritarianism to hard-authoritarianism?

This brings us to another important research area of political leadership. The role of

36 Denny Roy, "Singapore, China, and the 'Soft Authoritarian' Challenge." *Asian Survey* 34, no. 3 (1994): 231-42.

37 Kenneth Paul Tan, "The Ideology of Pragmatism: Neo-Liberal Globalisation and Political Authoritarianism in Singapore." *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 42, no. 1 (2012): 67-92.

ethics and moral in political leadership is a noteworthy area for further research. The study of moral and ethical boundaries of national leaders will enrich the study of political leadership. **GPR**

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