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Rafalovich D., Ivkin V., Piskun O.
Explaining Singapore's Success

Belarusian National Technical University
Minsk, Belarus

Singapore's success says a great deal about how a country with virtually no natural resources can create economic advantages with influence far beyond its region. Its transformation from a small fishing village in the early nineteenth century to a modern and prosperous city-state today is an incredible story of from rags to riches [1].

Pragmatic leadership

The single decisive factor that made for Singapore's development was the abilities of its ministers and the high quality of the civil servants who supported them. Lee Kuan Yew and his colleagues have succeeded in stretching those constraints facing them and transformed Singapore to the First World status. Lee was also a pragmatic leader. Lee and Singapore assiduously courted MNCs because "they had the technology, know-how, techniques, expertise and the markets" and "it was a fast way of learning on the job working for them and with them". This strategy of relying on the MNCs paid off as "they have been a powerful factor in Singapore's growth" [1]. PAP government decided on a strategy of industrialization to deal with Singapore's declining entrepot trade, high unemployment and absence of natural resources. Accordingly, it invited the United Nations formulate an industrialization programme for Singapore. Singapore succeeded in developing its economy because Lee implemented the sound economic policies. Singapore has adopted a pragmatic approach to policy formulation which entails "a willingness to introduce new

policies or modify existing ones as circumstances dictate, regardless ideological principle” [1].

An effective public bureaucracy

The second secret of Singapore’s success is that it has an effective public bureaucracy. The public bureaucracy in Singapore consists of 16 ministries and 64 statutory boards. The World Bank defines “government effectiveness” as “the quality of public service provision, the quality of the bureaucracy, the competence of civil servants, the independence of the civil service from political pressures, and the credibility of the government’s commitment to policies” [1]. Singapore has performed well consistently on the World Bank’s governance indicator of government effectiveness as its score ranges from 1.85 in 2002 to 2.43 in 2008. It has attained 100 percentiles ranking for these ten years. Thus, it is not surprising that Singapore is ranked first for government effectiveness in 2016. A comparative analysis of the role of the public bureaucracy in policy implementation in five ASEAN countries has confirmed that Singapore is the most effective because of its favorable policy context and its effective public bureaucracy. The emphasis on meritocracy and training in Singapore’s public bureaucracy has resulted in a high level of competence of the personnel in implementing policies [2].

Sustaining clean government

Corruption was rampant among civil servants because their low salaries, high inflation and inadequate supervision provided them with ample opportunities for corruption. When the PAP leaders assumed office, they learned from the mistakes made by the British colonial government in curbing corruption and showed their political will by enacting the POCA on 17 June 1960 to replace the ineffective Prevention of Corruption Ordinance (POCO) and to strengthen the CPIB by providing it with more legal powers, personnel and funding.

Finally, the most important reason for the CPIB's success is its impartial enforcement of the POCA as anyone found guilty of a corruption offence is punished regardless of his or her position, status or political affiliation [1].

Also, education is the key to the long-term future of the population in Singapore which has no natural resources. In other words, Singapore has compensated for its absence of natural resources by investing heavily in education to enhance the skills of its population and to attract the "best and brightest" Singaporeans to join and remain in the public bureaucracy and government by its policies of meritocracy and paying these citizens competitive salaries.

The improvement in Singapore's economy in the 1970s resulted in higher private sector salaries, which led to an exodus of talented senior civil servants to more lucrative jobs in the private sector. In February 1972, the National Wages Council was established to advise the government on wage policies and, one month later, it recommended that all public sector employees be paid a 13th-month non-pensionable allowance comparable to the bonus in the private sector. The salaries of senior civil servants were increased substantially in 1973 and 1979 to reduce the gap with the private sector.

21 October 1994 justified the pegging of the salaries of ministers and senior civil servants to the average salaries of the top four earners in the six private sector professions of accounting, banking, engineering, law, local manufacturing companies and MNCs.

Edgar Schein attributed Singapore's success to its incorruptible and competent civil service as "having the best and brightest" [2] citizens in government is probably one of Singapore's major strengths in that they are potentially the most able to invent what the country needs to survive and grow". Indeed, the PAP government's policy of paying competitive salaries to attract the "best and brightest"

Singaporeans to join the public bureaucracy has been successful as reflected in Singapore's consistently high scores and percentile rankings on the World Bank's governance indicator on government effectiveness [2].

References:

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