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Young Singaporeans Challenge Lee

By SETH MYDANS

SINGAPORE, May 5 — As his party headed for what is expected to be another crushing victory in elections on Saturday, Lee Kuan Yew, the man who created Singapore in his own severe image, had an unsettling glimpse into the possible future of his country — and he did not like it.

In the newspapers, on the airwaves and in threats of lawsuits against opposition leaders, the tough operators of his People's Action Party were doing what they always do: grinding their challengers into broken, humiliated little bits and pieces.

At the last election, in 2001, only two of the 84 elected seats in Parliament were won by opposition candidates. If that number increases by even one or two this time, eyebrows will be raised.

But there they were on live television three weeks ago, a forum of 10 polite young Singaporeans, challenging Mr. Lee, who is 82, with a confidence and lack of deference that is rare among their elders here.

About 40 percent of today's eligible voters were born after Singapore became an independent nation in 1965. Whether their elders like it or not, they are their country's future, and their vision now stands side by side with Mr. Lee's.

"What we want is a choice," Mabel Lee, 28, an editor and television presenter said at the forum. "What we want is political vibrancy. What we want is a media that could reflect both the views of the opposition as well as of the ruling party fairly. What we want is to see that the opposition is being given a level playing field. What we want is fairness in the political sphere."

Mr. Lee argued back as if he had met, in this open-minded younger generation, his real opposition — interrupting, cross-examining and telling them that they needed to be put in their places like his own grandchildren.

"Let me tell you this," said Mr. Lee, who holds the title minister mentor and whose 54-year-old son, Lee Hsien Loong, is prime minister. "If what you say is a reflection of your generation, then I'm a bit sad."

People over 55, he said, people who had known the hardships his country had overcome to provide them with their affluence and stability, would never talk this way.

Indeed, even the political opposition acknowledges that Mr. Lee's vision of a tightly controlled, efficient meritocracy has produced one of the most stable, economically successful nations in the region.

Opposition parties are not calling for fundamental change in this city-state of four million people. Rather, one of the chief planks of the Workers' Party platform is to make elevators stop on every floor in government housing complexes, rather than on every other floor.

But no matter how slight the challenge — be it from young people on television or from politicians who want to improve elevator service — the ruling party's style has been a sort of doctrine of overwhelming force.

One common form of attack by the ruling party, or P.A.P., is to bring libel suits against critics, putting them on the defensive and contributing to a culture of self-censorship.

The suits have drawn criticism from human rights groups, from the United States, from members of the opposition and, on that evening last month, from one of Mr. Lee's young questioners, who said the tactic "gives the impression that the P.A.P. is arrogant and even a bully."

Just a few days later, Mr. Lee and his son threatened to sue members of one of the three opposition parties, the Singapore Democratic Party, for statements in its newsletter that they said appeared to link them to corruption.

The prime minister explained why.

"If you don't have the law of defamation, you would be like America where people say terrible things about the president and it can't be proved," Mr. Lee said. "Is it right? Is it wrong? Because even if it is wrong, the president cannot sue. Or it will be like the Philippines where people say terrible things about the president. She can't sue. Or Thailand where serious things are said about Thaksin and then he wanted to sue and eventually for other reasons, couldn't proceed." Thaksin Shinawatra is the caretaker prime minister of Thailand. In Singapore, government ministers sue.

The two most outspoken members of the opposition, J.B. Jeyaretnam and Chee Soon Juan, have both been sued, convicted, bankrupted and barred from holding political office. They are not candidates in Saturday's election.

Although there is no question that the ruling party will win, this election is seen as something of a political test for the prime minister. He is facing a general election for the first time since inheriting his job in 2004 from Goh Chok Tong, 64, who inherited it in turn from the elder Mr. Lee in 1990.

Since then, Singapore's leaders have been urging their nation to lighten up, to be more creative, to test accepted limits in order to stay competitive in the information age of the future.

But this does not necessarily extend to the kind of open, pluralistic government envisioned by the young journalists and university students who confronted Mr. Lee on television — during "the heat and dust of a clash in the arena," as he put it.

There were no opposition members in Parliament for the first 16 years of Singapore's nationhood, Mr. Lee noted recently, a period when the nation experienced some of its most dramatic social and economic progress.

Some day, if it proves itself, Mr. Lee said, there will be room for a more active opposition here. But he said: "I want a world-class opposition, not this riff-raff."

Speaking to his young questioners on television, Mr. Lee was at pains to describe some of the challenges Singapore has overcome in this racially mixed, resource-poor island. But his examples, dating from before they were born, may not have resonated with them.

In the last chapter of a long and successful career of nation-building, Mr. Lee seems to have little patience with critics who, in his view, see only part of the picture.

"You are not going to intimidate me, ever," he told a questioner at a recent meeting with foreign reporters.

"We're not going to allow foreign correspondents or foreign journalists or anybody else to tell us what to do," he said. "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."

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