

Is Singapore a Model for the West?

Sure, but only if citizens are willing to give up some of their freedoms in exchange for low crime, no drug problem and spotless streets

By JAY BRANEGAN SINGAPORE

SINGAPORE IS ASIA'S DREAM COUNTRY. Almost anywhere else, Goh Pang Meng, the son of a poor immigrant street vendor from China, would still be struggling to survive in a thatched hut like the one in which he grew up with 11 brothers and sisters. But at 44, Goh owns a comfortable five-room apartment and lives, like 87% of his countrymen, in a government housing project. He has three children, the minimum politically correct number preferred for the well-educated by a eugenics-inspired government: he received a \$12,500 tax credit for the third birth, and his wife, who helps out in his business, got an additional 15% annual tax cut, because she had advanced past high school. He runs a firm with 17 employees making computer screens, and rents factory space in one of the 28 government industrial parks scattered around the island republic.

Last year Goh won a \$15,600 government grant to upgrade his factory equipment. He winced when he paid \$38,000 for a small Datsun, but says the steep price was worthwhile because it helped the government prevent traffic jams by limiting car ownership. "Overall," he says, "life in Singapore is pretty good." Sultan Ahamed, an ethnic Indian Muslim spice trader with strong family links to his strife-torn homeland, speaks for many Singaporeans when he declares, "What shall I say? This is a paradise."

In today's global tumult, a country that enjoys full employment and stability—along with no crime, no pornography, no drugs, and no dirt to speak of—may strike many as at least a reasonable facsimile of paradise. Singapore, long an object of curiosity for its unique blend of open economics, authoritarian politics and social engineering, is attracting attention as a model modern society. Francis Fukuyama, the author of *The End of History?*, says the "soft authoritarianism" of countries like Singapore "is the one potential competitor to Western liberal democracy, and its strength and legitimacy is growing daily." Tiny anticom-

munist Singapore (pop. 3.1 million) has even found an ardent fan in mainland China (pop. 1.16 billion), where officials are studying the city-state for ideas on how they can throw off Marxist economics but keep dictatorial political control.

One of Asia's four rapidly developing "Little Dragons"—along with South Korea, Taiwan and Hong Kong—Singapore is the smallest and in some ways the most successful. The former British colony at the tip of the Malay Peninsula only achieved full independence in 1965, yet it boasts Asia's highest living standard after Japan, an average per capita income of \$15,000 (about the same as the U.S.) and by far the world's highest per capita cache of foreign reserves.

In contrast to other booming Asian cities that teem with noise, dirt and crowds, Singapore is orderly, regimented, well-planned—and rather boring. With low pollution, lush tropical greenery, a mix of modern skyscrapers and colonial-era buildings, the city resembles a clean and efficient theme park; even the subway stations are as spotless and shiny as Disney World. There are no traffic jams, even during rush hours. The multiracial population—78% Chinese, 14% Malay, 7% Indian—uses English widely.

But what makes Singapore work would hardly succeed in the individualist West. There are hefty penalties, vigorously enforced, on human foibles: littering (\$625), failing to flush a public toilet (\$94) or eating on the subway (\$312). The sale of chewing gum was banned last year, and 514 people were convicted of illegally smoking in public. A drumbeat of official publicity regularly enjoins Singapore Man to be more industrious, more courteous, thinner, healthier. Last year the government attacked his habit of arriving fashionably late at Chinese banquets as "a growing problem with wide implications for national productivity."

Sometimes dubbed Singapore, Inc., the nation had its credo set by visionary economic architect Goh Keng Swee: "Government policy must be directed to the pursuit of business excellence." The country is the

world's busiest container port, the third largest oil-refining center, the major exporter of computer disk drives. Its manufacturing relies on multinational corporations, and it has attracted some 3,000 foreign companies with generous tax breaks, ultramodern telecommunications,



an efficient airport and tame labor unions.

The industrial policy debate here was settled long ago: the government coldly ushers fading industries like textiles off-stage, and targets promising new ones like biotechnology with investment, grants and retraining of workers. Oddly in such a capitalist nirvana, the government owns scores of firms, from the telephone, electricity and airline companies to banks, supermarkets and taxis, but they all run on a competitive, profitmaking basis. Says a Western analyst: "Fortune 500 executives love it here because the government runs the country the way AT&T would."

Providing, that is, that AT&T could ignore the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. The country depicts itself as a British-style parliamentary democracy with regular elections, but in practice the ruling People's Action Party, which has held power since home rule in 1959, tolerates only token opposition, and the government owns the TV stations and indirectly controls the press.

The government has vast legal powers to stifle dissent: an Internal Security Act

that allows detention without trial, sharp restrictions on any statements that might stir racial or religious tension, and tough libel and slander laws. These have cowed most political opposition. "There is an undercurrent of fear," says a young man who left to live overseas. But Information Minister George Yeo does not apologize for "a political process that forces people to speak responsibly."

Most citizens would agree with Goh, the small businessman: "We have plenty of freedom here, except political freedom." And for most, that is just fine. Singapore is a nation of immigrants from countries historically ravaged by chaos and poverty. The average Singaporean is conservative and family-oriented, and cares most about two things: money and security. He approves of hanging drug dealers and locking up gangsters without trial. He has struck a simple social contract, accepting limits on personal freedom in return for prosperity and stability. What holds the deal together is the country's lack of corruption. When officials say some policy, no matter how abrupt or

painful, is for the public good, people usually believe them.

This strict ethos of honesty comes straight from the country's remarkable founding leader, Lee Kuan Yew, now 69, who "believed anything venal had to be destroyed," says Bilveer Singh, a leading political scientist. "Lee basically weeded out corruption by giving it no excuse or legitimacy."

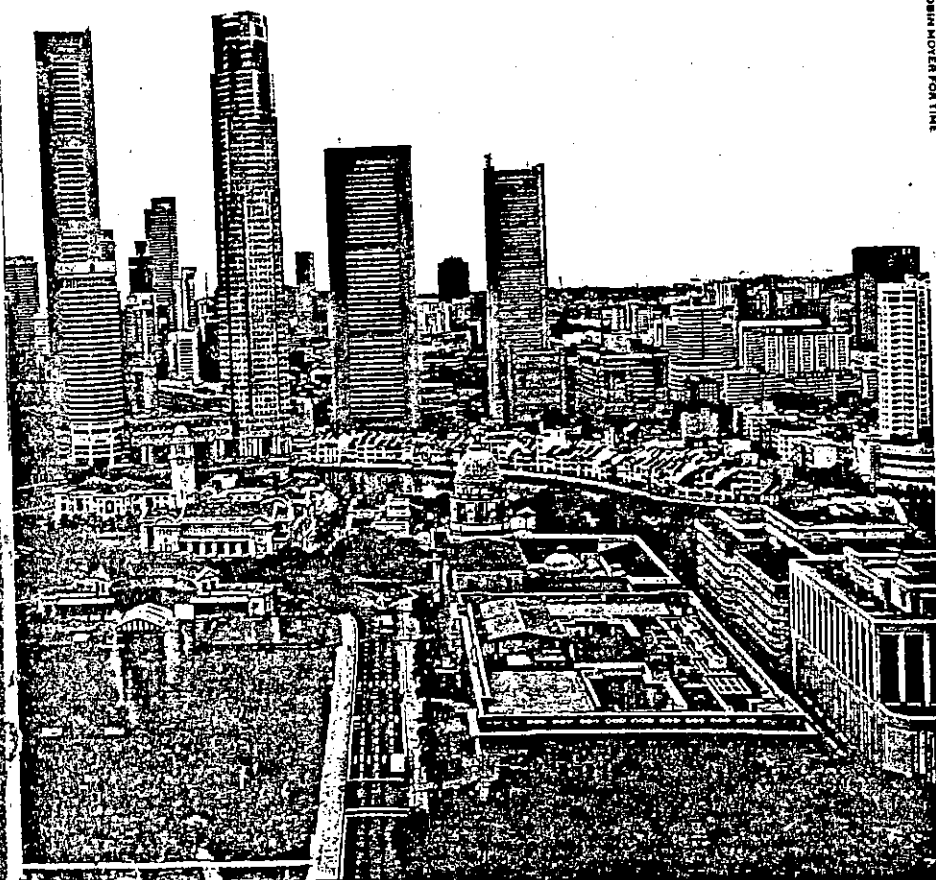
Vigilant, ruthless, shrewd, brilliant, pragmatic, Lee imposed his personal vision until he stepped down as Prime Minister in 1990 to become Senior Minister. He still approves important decisions. He believes that Western-style liberal democracy, with its emphasis on individual rights, won't work for most developing countries. "When you are hungry, when you lack basic services," he told an audience in the Philippines, "freedom, human rights and democracy do not add up to much." Instead, poor countries should promote savings, discipline, hard work and education, open the economy to foreign competition, spur investment.

Can Singapore be cloned? Not without a Lee Kuan Yew, say many citizens. Moreover, their city-state possesses special advantages: small size that makes control easy and infrastructure cheap, no job-seeking rural poor to overwhelm the city with slums, an ambitious immigrant population, a Confucian ethic stressing education and respect for authority, location on a major trade route in the heart of a dynamic region. The country's perpetual siege mentality—it feels threatened by bigger neighbors and fears its own ethnic mix is volatile—also encourages economic and political sacrifice.

Fukuyama asks "whether, in the long run, human beings are really made happy by the sacrifice of their individuality." Young and better-educated Singaporeans chafe at the petty restrictions and ruling-party patronizing. "Lee Kuan Yew thinks we are basically stupid," says law professor Walter Woon, a rare establishment critic.

Snug—and smug—in their manicured garden, Singaporeans are unprepared for the jungle of the outside world. "They generally don't transplant well," says a Hong Kong-based executive of an international firm. "When faced with difficulties, they wilt."

Singapore can adjust to meet new challenges, insists Yeo, without adopting the West's "hard liberalism." But neither can Singapore be a model for many other countries. Setting aside democracy to concentrate on economic development can work for a while. But the resulting affluence breeds more demands for democracy, even in Confucian societies, and autocracy can rarely remain enlightened and uncorrupt for long. Just as Singapore's leaders have made the most of its small size and unusual cultural mix, so too leaders of other countries will have to find their own formulas for success. ■



ROBIN MOYER FOR TIME

