

Is Singapore Growing Soft?

By: **DERWIN PEREIRA**



I called several retired executives here recently to discuss a proposal to set up a commercial franchise overseas. The idea was to wed international hardware in that business field with Singapore's software: professionalism, reliability, efficiency, honesty and a visceral sense of service. They were interested in the project. Good, I thought, but that was all. They had no urgency of interest in pursuing it, and they did not bother to tell me why. When I finally managed to get through to them after follow-up calls, one was the poolside. The other was drying her hair.

I felt like tearing my hair and blowing it away with a hairdryer towards the swimming pool below my apartment. So, this is what Singapore is coming to, I thought. We are growing soft because we have forgotten to be hungry – hungry not just for success but for food. We are forgetting to be ourselves – the abandoned children of an orphaned island. That is all Singapore is and will always be.

People of my generation would remember the adage on whose wings we came of age: No one owes Singapore a living. Ancestral Malaya, China and India do not owe us a living. Post-colonial Britain does not. America does not. Not one economic or strategic tear would be shed for this city-island-state should it disappear from the global map of survival – forget success.



Precarity conditions our existence. The day we believe otherwise, the moment we think we have arrived forever, we shall inaugurate our doom. And we would deserve to. Because we have forgotten to be ourselves – the unexpected citizens of an improbable land.

Singapore's first Foreign Minister, S. Rajaratnam, had a neuralgic understanding of this logic of success and failure. In a 1979 speech, he referred to the 14th-century Arab philosopher Ibn Khaldun's concept of *asabiyya* – social cohesion or group solidarity – to make a case for the survival of modern Singapore.

Ibn Khaldun had argued that *asabiyya* is a collective bond, found typically in harsh desert environments, which loosens as a nomadic group settles in an area and prospers in comfort and luxury. Bad news. Shorn of its instinct for survival, an *asabiyya*-born civilisation collapses within roughly four generations, or 120 years.

Rajaratnam challenged Ibn Khaldun's fatalism by arguing that *asabiyya* is not exclusive to the desert but can be nurtured even in a modern city-state by the sheer

exertion of human will. Singapore is not destined to last for only 120 years.

That human will take the form of Singapore's exceptional first-generation political leadership, of which Rajaratnam was a part. But leaders are only the beginning of the story: Followers constitute the rest. The rest of us behaved with urban *asabiyya* as well.

I have heard that when Singapore Airlines was formed, the unknown airline of a who-knows-where country, its executives got out of their comfortable offices in London to sell tickets to Singapore. That was urban *asabiyya* – the bond of economic survival forged in the fire of hardship.

Today, nothing can protect Singapore or its flagship airline but the realisation that Singapore must sustain its economic rationale. Everyone else is doing so, some nations better than others.

A friend tells me of what he witnessed in a Bangladeshi shop that sells fish and vegetables near Mustafa. A refrigerated container had a dirty glass cover. The

supervisor asked a member of the staff why. The man argued that he had cleaned the surface the previous day. The supervisor asked: "Did you eat rice for dinner yesterday?" "Yes," was the answer. Supervisor: "Did you eat rice for lunch again today?" Staff member: "Yes." Supervisor: "The refrigerator was clean yesterday. Then why is it dirty today?" The staff member fell silent.

Singapore should not fall silent.

No one owes us a living. We owe one to ourselves. In my work, I do not take the world for granted. I do not even take myself as a given. Everything is expendable; everyone is. I take the unexpected as being normal. The normal to me is always unexpected.

I am not busy at the poolside when a business contact calls me. I am not drying my hair.

If Singapore falters, it would be a hair-raising day at the pool – for all.