

Much to learn. Much to do. A Master Class in Governance from Regional Compatriots.

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Prime Minister Narendra Modi.



Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong

Three events in the region have lessons for Sri Lanka. Addressing the Administrative Service Appointment and Promotion Ceremony, Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong provides a blueprint for a win-win nexus between a country's political leadership and the Public Service. At another media event, the current Singapore Prime Minister and his heir apparent, the next Leader-in-Waiting, Lawrence Wong, provide a framework to bequeathing leadership at the right time and harnessing new blood of successors to lead Singapore forward. In India, the fastest growing economy globally, Prime Minister Narendra Modi unveiled the Prime Ministers' Museum to the nation. At the event, Prime Minister Modi underscored the input of every prime minister of post-independent India to drive the South Asian country to the force it has become globally. These three events demonstrate the strength of good leadership and teamwork to drive results. These combinations can push any

agenda to succeed for the country's greater good and strengthen its position on the world stage. When any Prime Minister of Singapore speaks, the world listens. They always grow a global audience because they have walked the talk to demonstrate how they have made politics work for the country's development. Notwithstanding the criticisms about its stringent rules, none can deny that the city-state is still a symbol of herculean courage.

A small nation is making great strides in a world of phenomenally huge resource-rich geographies and countries rampantly rich in economics, international politics, and military strength. As it emerged 50 years ago, Singapore has shown competency and efficiency as the hallmarks of its success through a concerted and disciplined approach. The country has successfully retained its no-nonsense narrative through three generations of leaders. The current Cabinet is determined to carry forward the same leadership ethos robustly into the fourth generation of its administration.

The Administrative Service

It was yet another occasion to listen to Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong when he addressed the audience at the Administrative Service Appointment and Promotion Ceremony in April 2022. He identified his country's administrative officers as leaders in the Public Service, playing a pivotal role in shaping Singapore's future. Those are keywords that place the onus of steering the country's future on the political authority and the Public Service. Sri Lanka has had an illustrious Public Service and a distinguished Sri Lanka Administrative Service, the successor to the Ceylon Administrative Service, preceded by the Ceylon Civil Service, established way back in 1802. Lamentations against the SLAS include failure to measure up to expectations and its members sadly lining up to please their political masters. The ability of the rule-bound SLAS to work independently and with integrity in the service of the public in shaping Sri Lanka's future has been undermined and eroded by successive politically elected offices of the country that engages in cronyism to the point of revulsion. The political authority here applies the same shades of clientelism pompously nurtured in the electorates into the halls of Public Service. Political appointments have become the norm, and deserving candidates who have risen through the ranks languish at their desks. The top selection to the country's highest financial institution is a good case. The future of those historical mistakes is unfolding right before our eyes.

Key Takeaways

Loong used the occasion to speak of the critical lessons from the country's two-year

battle in tackling the COVID-19 pandemic. He described the pandemic as the “crisis of our generation,” echoing the magnitude of the problem that confronted them from 2020. But, he said the journey was never in the wrong direction through the twists and turns. At every stage, the Public Service had responded swiftly, ably, and resiliently, working closely with the political leadership, doing its best to stay on top of the situation. Loong identified three critical lessons from Singapore’s pandemic journey. The first lesson entailed bringing to the fore the great strength of its healthcare system and workers, who, despite being under severe stress, held up and delivered and enabled the people to transition to live with COVID. The second lesson was that a country must always look beyond the immediate problems, however pressing they may be, to anticipate and plan. Planning in this instance was Singapore’s proactive step of investing in vaccines even before they were available globally because the leadership deemed the vaccine a gamechanger. It envisaged that early investment in reserving its stockpile would save the country from having to scramble for them when they became available. The government had moved quickly to secure advance commitments for vaccine supplies long before. The third lesson was on the importance of implementing policy. Singapore’s national vaccination program was one such operation.

Lessons from Sri Lanka

There have been many debates, political and outside, on Sri Lanka’s COVID-19 response. Looking at the initial response to the pandemic in 2020, many agree that the government led by President Gotabaya Rajapaksa was swift in imposing a lockdown-style curfew in March 2020, which continued until May that year. Many international agencies, including the World Bank, had praised Sri Lanka’s swift pandemic response led by the Ministry of Health. The national response to the pandemic in Sri Lanka, in general, was described as an excellent combination of multilateral, bilateral, and civil society collaboration and partnership. International agencies like the WHO, the ADB, and the World Bank joined the government to help the Ministry of Health to fill in the gaps and the needs in its response to the pandemic with appropriate strategies and priorities. UN agencies came on board to train and build the skills and competencies of community health workers in administering health guidelines in the country. Longerterm activities to strengthen the country’s pandemic preparedness and response included establishing COVID-19 isolation and treatment facilities around the country, developing the existing laboratory system to improve and increase testing and diagnostic capacity, and strengthening the country’s infection control and surveillance systems. In the meantime, the government took measures to provide relief to the people through

its well-established spread of local government agencies. The strong cadre of Administrative Service officers and members of the Public Service responded to the call to serve by working during periods of rising infection to provide people with relief and money to compensate for lost income. Concurrently, the government with relevant ministries and agencies introduced fiscal measures to buttress businesses affected by the lockdown-induced disruptions to business continuity. As Loong opined about Singapore's Public Service, Sri Lanka's Public Service machinery showed its strength in this crisis by rising to the occasion despite the obscurity surrounding the nature of the disease, stepping up, and going above and beyond the call of duty. The frontline workers in hospitals, healthcare facilities, quarantine centers, the tri-forces, the Police, and local government agents and officers rose to the occasion to raise the nation from its morass. In fact, like in Singapore, there was a collective response in Sri Lanka where the fundamental objective

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was to make Sri Lanka free of COVID-19. And like in Singapore, there were many times that Sri Lanka got things wrong and faced insurmountable challenges. Certain decisions to protect the people from infections and fatalities meant that the country would have to bear a high economic and social cost. The country's leadership had a great deal of trust in the different arms of the Public Service, including law enforcement and the armed forces, and the frontline workers to carry on their tasks unabated even under severe stress, which they did admirably. The government received the credit for keeping the country safe from the first wave of the virus in 2020. The masses showed their gratitude by ensuring a massive election victory for the Rajapaksa led government at the August 2020 parliamentary election.

The country's vaccination program that commenced in January 2021 with frontline workers continued despite the continued threat posed by the Delta variant, with over ten million people receiving the first dose of vaccines in Sri Lanka, which the WHO commended. President Gotabaya himself had set a target of at least giving

the first dose to all citizens above 30 by the end of August 2021. In addition, Our World Data placed Sri Lanka first for the highest rollout of vaccination in seven-day average per 100 people in the total population. As reported at the time, President Gotabaya was on the program through weekly meetings with the Vaccine Committee to assess the progress of the vaccine drive. The government machinery assured the public that every dose of different vaccines that arrived in Sri Lanka was counted, accounted for, charted, the number of doses administered, and avoided misuse through daily stock monitoring. The public began to trust the vaccination process once the tri-forces began issuing it, with its members taking down records meticulously. Building trust The defining ethos of Singapore's handling of the pandemic ensured that its citizens trusted their leaders to do the right thing. Leadership was a sacrosanct role that Prime Minister Loong described. "Key to our handling of the crisis has also been trust in the Government – trust that the Government has the best interest of Singapore and Singaporeans at heart, and trust that the Government is competent and will make the right decisions on behalf of Singaporeans." Those words spoken from the podium pithily sum up the degree to which the government takes its role as the leader, guardian, and servant of the people with utmost sincerity.

Those words reverberate like tantric mantras that truly define leadership in service. While many in the Public Service apparatus did their part on the sidelines, Sri Lanka's failure to procure and deploy adequate COVID-19 vaccines much earlier exposed it to supply disruptions. While Sri Lanka chose to vaccinate the frontline workers first, the scramble to get the vaccine through 'back-door' channels saw some not-so-nice deals perpetrated by unscrupulous individuals in public and political office. Vaccine equity suffered tremendously as the vaccine program progressed in 2021. That is where the public's trust in its government erodes, where one's right to a COVID-19 vaccine depends not on citizenship but one's connections to people in positions of influence. This situation was compounded by the spread of the Delta variant and the slow inflow of vaccines into the country as companies battled to meet global demand, especially in countries like India. The officers in dealing with the pandemic dragged their feet in procuring essential supplies of vaccines. Such delays dented people's trust in the state apparatus's ability to deliver the goods on time and equitably.

Political theatre

There is a complementing relationship between politics and theatre. But the stage as an expression of civic engagement and storytelling is different from the presence

of theatre in real-world politics. It distracts and derails the mission. Loong warns to avoid political theatrics as distractions. Sri Lanka had its fair share of theatrics distracting its COVID-19 recovery. There was a grand theatre with public flirtations with unproven, unresearched, unscientific decoctions and rituals, making people follow illusions rather than empirically proven solutions. Loong had strong words for the political leadership to embrace the proper role in the COVID battle. He underscored the vitality of understanding the key issues, getting the priorities right and support, and providing the cover the public servants need to carry out their duties professionally, lest there is a distraction. As opined earlier, Singapore's proactive approach to the pandemic extended to making a colossal investment in medical science approaches to combating the virus, such as investing early in purchasing the vaccine, thereby avoiding the spread of infections and fatalities. Singapore discarded the theatrics of the unempirical while promoting the use of known therapeutic measures. The people trusted their leaders to do what was right in the circumstances, even by imposing stringent standards to tackle rising infections.

Countries develop by developing exemplary leaders

The trust deficit in Sri Lanka extends beyond the people versus the government. It extends to a trust deficit among members of the elected political authorities, the political regime, and the Public Service. While that may be our reality, take the case of Singapore's well-known Finance Minister Lawrence Wong, who has received endorsement as the People's Action Party's fourth-generation leader. According to analysts, when Wong received the reins to take charge of Singapore's COVID-19 response, he emerged with excellent visibility by providing appropriate output by making difficult decisions to resolve existing structural problems. Significantly, Wong demonstrated a willingness to harness the strength of teams by allowing every team member to demonstrate strategic leadership while showing empathy and solidarity with every group caught up in the pandemic melee. Wong thinks that the COVID crisis helped the government garner people's trust. As the fourth-generation leader, Wong is clear about his role in leading Singapore through its next chapter in the world order. It is never about one leader. Governance is a team effort of mutual trust among team players, complementing each other. His team dynamics dictate that one should be willing to give over to anyone willing to do a job.

Team Singapore, succession and accountability

They speak of a team for governing Singapore. The best fit for the best outcome for

the country. The mistake that Singapore's progressive leaders want to avoid is internal bickering that defines other countries' Cabinets and behind-the-back machinations that derail the national agenda while exposing their vulnerability globally. Instability has far-reaching consequences economically.

Wong is aware of being relevant to the new generation of Singaporeans. Given his relatively young age, he is relatable to the cyber netizens as he has embraced a vibrant social media presence to speak to the Singaporean constituency. At the same time, it is commendable that 70-year-old incumbent Lee has given way to making a 4G team leader for Singapore as he plans to hang his boots in time rather than be booted out. As the Singapore leadership unveiled its choice of 4G leadership to the world, the key takeaway was the appreciation of the city-state's leaders past and present in shaping the little global giant that Singapore is today. Discipline, honesty, and pragmatism dictated Singapore's forward march at its founding fathers' hands. Those have been non-negotiable traits of successive leadership, resulting in Singapore demonstrating constancy in its agenda while showing dynamism to adjust its sails when the winds of change blew in. The defining characteristic in handling the fallout from the pandemic was to confront it head-on. There was no blame game. The country developed the best team to come up with the most suitable response to the pandemic.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi echoed the same sentiments in his speech at the opening of the Prime Ministers' Museum, emphasizing that every leader past had brought their unique capabilities and strengths into their governments to deliver results. Through the vicissitudes of governance, every leader had contributed to shaping Brand India.

As many critics have pointed out, Sri Lanka seems to be missing the bus time and again. Then those in power look for a fall guy. Stop-gap measures, compartmentalized working arrangements, and personal agenda promotions cloud the vision of addressing the real problem. Personal aggrandizing rather than harnessing the strength of working in teams for the greater good has robbed Sri Lanka of achieving Singapore-like status. While failure is not an option, neither is passing the buck to previous administrations taking the country anywhere.

While many have argued that our development trajectory does not have to be that of another country, the best we could be is to have the same level of integrity, credibility, pragmatism, and zero-corruption that the city-state is known to be. More than anything, be accountable and stop blaming the past for present mistakes. It is

time to get on with the job.