

A tale of two accidental nations

An independent Singapore saw great opportunity. But partitioned Pakistan still has problems

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Born 18 years apart in 1947 and 1965, Pakistan and Singapore share August as their independence months – Aug 14 and Aug 9, respectively.

At Singapore's independence, Mr Lee Kuan Yew teared up when his belief of "merger and the unity of the two territories (Singapore and Malaysia)... people connected by geography, economics and kinship", collapsed.

Like Singapore, Pakistan is an "accidental nation". The establishment of Pakistan was also an anti-climax in terms of founding father Mohammad Ali Jinnah's political philosophy. Characterised earlier as "the ambassador of Hindu-Muslim unity", subsequently compelled towards independence, he had accepted to remain in "united India" as late as 1946.

Pakistan and Singapore, born out of mother nations – India and Malaysia – amid bitterness, both faced hostility in the neighbourhood. Pakistan, instead of taking advantage of its location at the crossroads of three sub-regions of Asia, has remained mired in conflict, leading to economic and social degradation. Singapore, through deft policy choices, has turned inadequacies of size, location and resources into advantages.

At 50, Singapore is undergoing deep introspection as to what needs to be done to remain ahead of its peers. Facing existential threats, deeply in debt, Pakistan foolishly believes that its "greatness" is preordained.

Both are nations of immigrants and their successors. Singapore's National Pledge – to build a society based on justice "regardless of race, language or religion" – instils tolerance and respect among communities. It is the bedrock of Singapore's excellence at SG50.

Pakistan chose to disregard these fundamentals. Its short-sighted policies on language laid the seeds of its dismemberment as early as 1948. Minorities that constituted over a quarter of its population in 1947 are now down to less than 5 per cent. And religion has become the most divisive force in Pakistan.

The partitioning of the Indian sub-continent and of the Malaysian peninsula has had opposite effects. In addition to dividing the country, the Indian partition tragically divided people who had lived in harmony for centuries. The division of the Malaysian peninsula arguably improved relations between communities living amid fear of race riots. Consequently, India and Pakistan are enemies, while Singapore and Malaysia are engaging fruitfully, both bilaterally and within Asean, for the betterment of the people.

Pakistan was unlucky with its leadership longevity. Founding father Jinnah, a brilliant attorney who loved Bombay – now Mumbai, where his family lives – died an unhappy man in the mayhem that partition created 13 months after Pakistan was founded in 1947. His lieutenant, Pakistan's first prime minister, Mr Liaquat Ali Khan, was shot three years after Mr Jinnah's death.

Beginning with a collegial group of dedicated men, Mr Lee made sure Singapore was ready with a credible team among whom one could succeed him, so that the country would be governed under the highest standards.

Preparing future leaders is the hallmark of visionary leaders. "I have done my job. I found a successor and handed over to another generation," Mr Lee once said. "Tell Musharraf to prepare for succession," is the only message that Mr Lee pointedly wanted me to convey to then President Pervez Musharraf, when I met him for the first time in 2004 after assuming my post in Singapore. In 68 years of history, Pakistan has had only one "normal" power transfer.

One key element of Singapore's success is corruption-free governance. Ranked No. 7 among 174 countries surveyed by Transparency International (TI) last year, Singapore's government remains one of the cleanest in the world.

In Pakistan, nearly all of the government's financial dealings are opaque, raising serious questions about leadership credibility. Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif obviously chose to disregard the advice Mr Lee gave him during the early 1990s on the need for responsive public policies, transparency and clean government, so goes a story in Pakistan's Foreign Office. No wonder TI placed Pakistan among the very corrupt nations, at 126.

Meritocracy remains fundamental to Singapore's excellence. Mr Lee and his core team nurtured the best talent available, both for politics and in public service. These people help Singapore to keep its edge.

In Pakistan, politics is hereditary and a business; bureaucracy is highly politicised in a system unresponsive to public needs and is, therefore, dysfunctional.

The contrast between the two countries with many similarities is best summed up in the words of former president SR Nathan: "Your country has to be a great opportunity or a serious problem if you are to get attention."

Singapore chose to be a "great opportunity", while Pakistan remains a "serious problem".

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