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### Singapore: Always restructuring, avoiding convergence and reining in divergence

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# Singapore: Always Restructuring, Avoiding Convergence and Reining in Divergence

2004

Eugene K B Tan

Even as the government declares Asia - with China and India at the forefront - as a region of change and opportunities, the fear of becoming irrelevant ensures that Singapore will not relent in its drive to stay ahead of the regional economic competition. For instance, the search for new industrial winners, after the successful industrial programmes in electronics and the biomedical sciences, has begun resolutely with the formation of a high-powered ministerial committee to mould Singapore's research and development destiny. Restructuring in Singapore is a governing norm that is very much invoked as a policy necessity and a way of life in an uncertain world.

Education is a key competitive strength and the new approach is to 'teach less, learn more' by reducing the emphasis on examinations and providing students with a wider spectrum of choices in their studies. Further, Singaporeans are encouraged to accept new measures of success, which hitherto had been academically focused. Underlying this mindset change is the realization that the heavy hand of the state can have the deleterious effect of inducing apathy among the young. Equally important is the need to enthuse the younger generation concerning their ownership of, and responsibility in, shaping their life choices, and ultimately Singapore's.

Significant changes to the teaching of the Chinese language will be implemented from 2005 in a bid to ensure that it remains a living language. However, the economic motivation cannot be denied as political, economic, and cultural relations with China are growing and deepening rapidly. In the revamped Chinese language curriculum, those who can master the English and Chinese languages will be groomed to be 'biculturalists' with an expanded inter-cultural bandwidth characterized by an intuitive understanding of China and the ability to relate equally well with the West. They will be the future cultural and intellectual leaders of the Singapore-Chinese community. The nurturing process is a community effort with the government also including the Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Industry and Chinese clan associations in this endeavour to secure Singapore's cachet as a key meeting place and a bridge between East and West.

Fostering an entrepreneurial spirit among Singaporeans is another high priority area for restructuring. The government has affirmed its role as a facilitator: by providing a right mix of policies including expanding Singapore's hinterland, providing access to capital, and attracting entrepreneurial talent globally. Ultimately, the objective is to engender an environment conducive to a myriad of business activities and thereby reduce the heavy reliance on foreign multinational corporations and local government-linked companies.

The importance of the success of indigenous small and medium enterprises (SMEs), as nimble engines of innovation, is now better appreciated as Singapore aspires to be the 'Global Entrepolis'. In this regard, the government has aggressively pushed for wage restructuring founded on a flexible and performance-based wage system. Yet, SMEs have to cope with the central role of the government-linked companies in the Singapore economy. For instance, Temasek Holdings, the government's private investment company, has more than half of its S\$90 billion assets invested in Singapore. Temasek-linked companies, such as Singapore Airlines, SingTel, and Singapore Technologies, dominate the local bourse.

Despite the increased recognition of the dangers of convergence and 'group thinking' to a small society like Singapore, it remains to be seen if the ruling party is prepared to embrace a societal divergence of ideas, and accept significant challenges to its political monopoly and hegemony. Where political restructuring is concerned, the initial prognosis is that the dynamics of restructuring, if any, is more tentative, superficial, and perhaps more form than substance.

The removal of political constraints can catalyse the critical ingredients of cultural vibrancy, popular participation, invigorated stakeholder-ship, and inspire creativity, boldness, and innovative entrepreneurship. The conundrum that Singapore faces is this: the political economy of sustained prosperity and inventiveness mandates that the economic and political realms cannot be artificially separated.

**WATCHPOINT:** The quest for 'high-impact entrepreneurship' will be intimately connected with a genuine acceptance of competition, divergence, and non-conformism in broad facets of Singaporean life. Revitalisation of society in Singapore cannot be sustained unless there is a true marketplace of ideas in all sectors of Singaporean life.