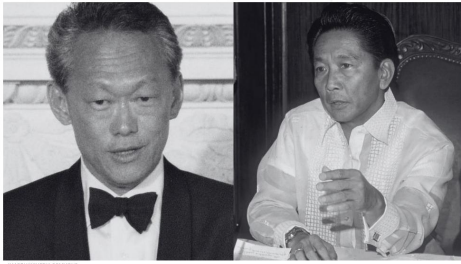


## What Singapore's Founding Father Lee Really Thought of the Marcos Regime

"The difference lies in the culture of the Filipino people. It is a soft, forgiving culture."

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Lee Kuan Yew passed away in 2015, but his legacy is still felt to this day in Singapore, the city-state he transformed from a third-world country to a first. During this 30-year tenure as prime minister, LKY forged what is now arguably the strongest, most advanced, and most stable country in Southeast Asia. Singapore's meritocratic system, supported by one of the most efficient governments in the world, is due largely in part to LKY's fierce pursuit of his dream of an advanced and progressive Singapore. While Singaporeans view him with respect and admiration, the same cannot be said for the West who criticized his almost authoritarian rule over the city-state. Meanwhile, supporters argue that it was a necessary style of leadership to transform Singapore into what it is today. But by all accounts, LKY created a blueprint for developing countries to emulate, even if his leadership style raised some eyebrows.

But as a leader known for his "strict" methods, LKY perhaps has the most curious impression of the Philippines' former president and dictator Ferdinand Marcos as the two were in office around the same time. In LKY's legacy book, *From Third World to First*, Singapore's founding father describes his legacy, views, and interactions with fellow world leaders in the frank yet eloquent manner that he's known for. The man lived through colonialism, World War II, the assassinations of John F. Kennedy and Ninoy Aquino, and almost every huge political moment of the 20th century, including that of the Marcos regime and the revolution that followed.

### On Ferdinand Marcos

In *Chapter 18: Building Ties with Thailand, the Philippines, and Brunei* of his autobiography, LKY recounts his pleasant state visit to the Philippines in Marcos' early years in office, calling Marcos and his wife Imelda gracious hosts. But his opinions began to change after Aquino's assassination in 1983. In his book, LKY focused on the economic and financial issues faced by the Philippines during that time, namely the \$25 billion owed to foreign banks, which stopped all loans to the Philippines after Aquino's very public killing.

"He (Marcos) sent his minister for trade and industry, Bobby Ongpin, to ask me for a loan of US\$300–500 million to meet the interest payments," wrote LKY. "I looked him straight in the eye and said, 'We will never see that money back.'"

In 1984, LKY met with Marcos again, this time in Brunei where LKY noticed the dramatic and sickly changes in Marcos. When the two were alone, they discussed loans, and LKY shared his frank advice to the soon-to-be-deposed president.

"As soon as all our aides left, I went straight to the point, that no bank was going to lend him any money. They wanted to know who was going to succeed him if anything were to happen to him; all the bankers could see that he no longer looked healthy," wrote LKY. "Singapore banks had lent US\$8 billion of the US\$25 billion owing. The hard fact was they were not likely to get repayment for some 20 years. He countered that it would be only eight years. I said the bankers wanted to see a strong leader in the Philippines who could restore stability."

LKY insisted upon his belief that what the Philippines needed "was a strong, healthy leader, not more loans." The succession then became the topic of discussion as it was clear Marcos didn't have much time left from his wasting disease, and even he allegedly admitted that succession was "the nub of the problem."

Later on in his book, LKY shared his discussions with then U.S. President Ronald Reagan, who was once Marcos' good friend.

"As gently as I could, I described to Reagan how Marcos had changed from the young anti-communist crusader of the 1960s to become a self-indulgent aging ruler who allowed his wife and cronies to clean out the country through ingenious monopolies and put the government heavily in debt," wrote LKY. "The credit ratings of the Philippines and his government had plummeted."

In *Chapter 17: Indonesia, From Foe to Friend*, LKY recounts how he was once asked by U.S. Vice President Walter Mondale, "You knew Marcos. Was he a hero or a crook? How does Suharto compare to Marcos? Is Suharto a patriot or a crook?" This was during the fall of Indonesian President Suharto in the '90s, whose controversial last years in office can be compared to Marcos'. In response, LKY said, "Marcos might have started off as a hero, but ended up as a crook... Unlike Marcos of the Philippines, Suharto did not spirit his wealth outside his country in readiness for a quick exit."

### On Philippine Development, or Lack Thereof

After the People Power Revolution, LKY had high hopes for his successor, Corason Aquino. But as time passed, the countless coup attempts only worsened the Philippines' bad investment reputation.

"This was a pity because they had so many able people, educated in the Philippines and the United States. Their workers were English-speaking, at least in Manila. There was no reason why the Philippines should not have been one of the more successful of the ASEAN countries," lamented LKY.

"Something was missing, a gel to hold society together. The people at the top, the elite mestizos, had the same detached attitude to the native peasants as the mestizos in their haciendas in Latin America had towards their peons. They were two different societies: those at the top lived a life of extreme luxury and comfort while the peasants scraped a living, and in the Philippines, it was a hard living. They had no land but worked on sugar and coconut plantations. They had many children because the church discouraged birth control. The result was increasing poverty."

Later, when Fidel Ramos succeeded Aquino, LKY expressed to Ramos that discipline was more necessary than democracy and that the British parliamentary-style system was more effective than the American-style separation of powers. According to LKY, Ramos agreed, but not publicly.

"Something had gone seriously wrong. Millions of Filipino men and women had to leave their country for jobs abroad beneath their level of education. Filipino professionals whom we recruited to work in Singapore are as good as our own. Indeed, their architects, artists, and musicians are more artistic and creative than ours. Hundreds of thousands of them have left for Hawaii and for the American mainland. It is a problem the solution to which has not been made easier by the workings of a Philippine version of the American constitution," wrote LKY, who proposed that the problem may also be caused by Filipino culture itself.

"The difference lies in the culture of the Filipino people. It is a soft, forgiving culture. Only in the Philippines could a leader like Ferdinand Marcos, who pillaged his country for over 20 years, still be considered for a national burial. Insignificant amounts of the loot have been recovered, yet his wife and children were allowed to return and engage in politics. They supported the winning presidential and congressional candidates with their considerable resources and reappeared in the political and social limelight after the 1998 election that returned President Joseph Estrada."

His last words on his view of the Philippines are certainly something to ponder.

"Some Filipinos write and speak with passion. If they could get their elite to share their sentiments and act, what could they not have achieved?"