Lee Kuan Yew

Born in Singapore on September 16, 1923, Lee Kuan Yew became the longest-serving prime minister in world history. Lee rose through the ranks of his country's political system before becoming the first prime minister of Singapore on June 5, 1959. In 1962, Lee led Singapore into a merger with Malaysia, but three years later, Singapore left the union for good. Lee resigned as prime minister in 1990, and his son became prime minister in 2004. Lee died on March 23, 2015.

**Early Years**

Lee Kuan Yew was born into a wealthy Chinese family that had resided in Singapore since the 19th century. After World War II, Lee studied law at Fitzwilliam College, in Cambridge, UK. In 1950, he was admitted to the English bar, but instead of practicing law there, Lee returned to Singapore to do so.

**Political Beginnings**

At the time, Singapore was a British colony and held Britain's main naval base in the Far East. The country was ruled by a governor and a legislative council, mostly comprising wealthy Chinese businessmen who were appointed rather than elected by the people. In the early 1950s, Singapore buzzed with talk of constitutional reform and independence, and Lee banded with other like minds to challenge the governing structure of the country. Soon breaking from this group and taking a more radical stance, in 1954 Lee became secretary-general of his own party, the People's Action Party.

**The PAP Evolves**

In 1955, a new Singapore constitution was introduced. It increased the number of elected seats on the council to 25 out of a total of 32, thereby allowing only 7 seats to be filled by appointment. In the elections that followed, the party founded by Lee's former colleagues, the Labour Front, won 13 seats, while Lee's PAP won merely 3.

But with his party represented on the council, in 1956 Lee headed to London as part of the delegation seeking self-rule for Singapore. After the negotiations failed, Singapore experienced a year of civil unrest, but in 1957, Lee returned to London yet again as talks resumed.

The next year, Lee helped negotiate what Singapore's status would be as a self-governing state, and a new constitution was formed.

Under the new constitution, national elections were held in June 1959. Lee campaigned on an anticolonialist, anticommunist platform and called for sweeping social reforms and an eventual federation with neighboring countries.

Lee's party won a decisive victory, taking 43 of the 51 seats in the assembly, and Singapore gained self-governing status (except in matters of defense and foreign affairs). Lee was sworn in as prime minister on June 5, 1959, becoming the first prime minister of an independent Singapore.

**Singapore Independence**

Once in office, Lee Kuan Yew introduced a five-year plan calling for urban renewal and construction of new public housing, greater rights for women, educational reform and industrialization.

His plan also called for a merger of Singapore with Malaysia, and after Malayan prime minister Tunku Abdul Rahman proposed the formation of a federation that would include Malaya, Singapore, Sabah and Sarawak, Lee began to campaign in favor of the effort and to end British colonial rule for good.

To show that the people of Singapore were supportive, Lee used the results of a referendum held in September 1962, in which 70 percent of the votes were cast in favor of the proposal. So in 1963, Singapore joined the newly created Federation of Malaysia. In elections held shortly after, the PAP retained its control of Singapore's Parliament, and Lee held onto his post as prime minister.

**Split With Malaysia**

Growing tension between Chinese and Malays in the Federation, however, resulted in rioting in Singapore, notably marked by the Prophet Muhammad Birthday Riots, or Sino-Malay riots, of the summer of 1964. A year later, with racial strife continuing, Lee was told by his Malaysian colleagues that Singapore must leave the federation.

Lee was passionate about working out a compromise, but his efforts proved fruitless, and he signed a separation agreement on August 7, 1965. The failure of the merger was a serious blow to Lee, who believed that unity was crucial for Singapore's survival. In a televised press conference, he was emotionally drained as he announced the formal separation and Singapore's full independence:

"For me, it is a moment of anguish," he said. "All my life ... I believed in Malaysian merger and unity of the two territories. You know that we, as a people, are connected by geography, economics, by ties of kinship ... It literally broke everything that we stood for ... now Singapore shall be forever a sovereign democratic and independent nation, founded upon the principles of liberty and justice and ever seeking the welfare and happiness of the people in a most and just equal society."

With the broken union came problems beyond Lee's personal grief: Singapore's lack of natural resources and a limited defensive capability were major challenges.

Singapore needed a strong economy to survive as an independent country, and Lee quickly spearheaded a program to transform it into a major exporter of finished goods. He also encouraged foreign investment and made moves to ensure a rising standard of living for workers.

When the opposition party decided to boycott Parliament from 1966 onward, the PAP won every seat in Parliament in the elections of 1968, 1972, 1976 and 1980.

**Later Years and Legacy**

Lee resigned as prime minister in November 1990 but remained the leader of the PAP until 1992. After 14 years away, Lee's family took its place at the head of the Singapore government once again in the summer of 2004, when Lee's son Lee Hsien Loong took power.

In early 2015, Lee Kuan Yew was hospitalized with pneumonia. By early March, he was on a ventilator, in critical condition, and he died soon after, on March 23.

Lee has left behind a legacy of an efficiently run country and as a leader who brought prosperity unheard of before his tenure, at the cost of a mildly authoritarian style of government. By the 1980s, Singapore, under Lee's guidance, had a per capita income second only to Japan's in East Asia, and the country had become a chief financial center of Southeast Asia.