

Dreaming Beyond Economic Progress: The Case of Singapore & UAE

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The Singapore PM has, in the past, said that the definition of the “Singapore dream” needed to extend beyond material success, indicating that he wanted to see a Singapore where everyone mattered and where everyone worked towards collective success. Of late, the UAE is also trying to build a society which focuses on education, R&D and creativity, rather than merely focussing on economic prosperity. The newer generation, especially those educated in the West, do not seem to be satisfied with the trade-off between freedom and prosperity.

In a video message to Singaporeans, on June 22, 2024, Singapore PM, Lawrence Wong, of the People’s Action Party (PAP) said: *“We want to broaden our concept of achievement. Beyond academic credentials, we are taking proactive steps to value the contributions of every worker in every profession and every field.”*

The Singapore PM also said that the definition of the “Singapore dream” needed to extend beyond material success, saying that in the past it was restricted to 5Cs- Cash, Car, Condominium, Credit card and Country club. He said that such a society ends up creating more anxiety and has adverse consequences for children. He also stated that he wanted to see a Singapore where everyone mattered and where everyone worked towards collective success.

Even after taking over as the PM, Wong had indicated that Singapore needed to reorient its policies to a generational shift domestically and a changing world. Said Wong: *“We will lead in our own way. We will continue to think boldly and think far.”*

In the past too, Wong, who has served in many important roles including Deputy Prime Minister, has underscored the need for the Singapore government to remain in sync with the changing social and political landscape of the ASEAN nation.

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Significance of Singapore PM’s remarks

The points made by Wong in his video are important for several reasons from a Singaporean perspective. First, like several other Asian countries, Singapore is also afflicted with the problem of cut-throat competition and growing economic disparities.

Second, while Singapore, on paper a multi-party state has been governed by the People’s Action Party (PAP) for over 6 decades, has done well economically and has established itself as a global benchmark for effective and transparent governance –

admirers of the island nation attribute this to visionary leadership, a focus on meritocracy and the rule of law — there have been criticisms regarding restrictions on free speech. The newer generation, especially those educated in the West, do not seem to be satisfied with the trade-off between freedom and prosperity. The growing strength of the opposition in Singapore is also a result of the same and the fact that the government has begun to take note of this aspect. In the general election held in 2020, the Workers Party achieved its best performance securing 10 parliamentary seats and over 50% of the vote in constituencies where it contested.

Changes being made by the UAE

In a broader context, not just Singapore but another country UAE – a constitutional monarchy with strict laws and a favoured destination for expats due to its economic vibrancy along with law and order – is also trying to build a society which focuses on education, research and development (R&D) and creativity, rather than merely focussing on economic prosperity. Like Singapore, the UAE, too, has been criticised for compromising political freedoms at the altar of efficient governance and law and order.

In a recent report published by Henley and Partners (2024), while the UAE is the favoured destination for millionaires, the US and Singapore are the second and third most sought-after destinations for expats.

Steps taken by Singapore and UAE indicate that with increasing globalization and interconnectedness, citizens are not satisfied with economic success and are not convinced by simplistic trade-offs between freedoms and law and order.

The Gulf nation's "**Golden Visa Program**" which provides a long term residency-visa is no longer restricted to just millionaires but also includes talented researchers, artists as well as philanthropists. UAE is also keen to attract immigrants from different professional backgrounds, but also ethnicities, to make itself more cosmopolitan. While a significant percentage of expats settled in UAE are from South Asia (especially India), the Gulf nation has also emerged as a sought-after destination for nationals from Western nations.

In recent years, the UAE has also been focusing on bolstering its "Soft Power". In one survey last year, it was ranked number 10 globally in Soft Power.

While there are differences between the political systems of Singapore and UAE, both have been hailed for the economic progress they have made in recent decades. Both countries have also sought to promote cultural diversity and social harmony.

For a long, many critics of Western liberal democracies have cited the success of Singapore and UAE while pointing to the political chaos and economic challenges of many of the Western democracies. Steps taken by Singapore and UAE do not in any way indicate that either country is moving towards a new political system, but they indicate that with increasing globalization and interconnectedness, citizens are not satisfied with economic success and are not convinced by simplistic trade-offs between freedoms and law and order.

If these countries focus on building holistic societies, they will be able to wean away individuals who would otherwise have migrated to the West. There is already a trend of several students and professionals from developing countries looking at alternatives to Western countries.

In conclusion, the points made by Wong and the attempts being made by the UAE to attract more talented immigrants and strengthen its soft power underscore the fact that economic progress is important, but a society's success needs to be judged more holistically.

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