

MY SAY: The South Korean 'quick-quick' miracle

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South Korea has been the envy of many nations in the region given its rapid socio-economic development within a relatively short period. Its per capita surpassed Malaysia's by almost two times in 1977, and now it is almost three times more. In fact, South Korea is regarded as a model that is worth emulating by countries that harbour the same ambition.

Malaysia is certainly one of them. After all, not too long ago, it was racing neck-to-neck with South Korea until the latter's growth miraculously took off. South Korea is now a far cry from 1948 when it was regarded as one of the poorest countries in the world.

When the country celebrated its 60th anniversary of liberation in 2008, English daily *The Chosun Ilbo* revealed six secrets of the nation's success. One of them is education, which seemed to have triggered the start of its growth and propelled the country to where it is today. The unfolding events read like a rags-to-riches story centered on South Korea's human resource capabilities growing out of the devastation of the Korean War (1950-1953). Education, coupled with a passion and willingness to sacrifice for the sake of the future, is now acknowledged as the factor that helped South Korea accelerate.

The other secret apparently is the strong leadership of the then president Park Chung-Hee, although he came under much criticism. Park was bold enough to articulate what the nation needed to do to break free of the shackles of poverty and hunger. With widespread investment in the education sector, it is not difficult to see how South Korea transformed itself so rapidly. This then translated to hope and courage, solidarity and high spirits — the next three secrets named by *The Chosun Ilbo*. These are among the motivating factors that enabled the "liberation" of the country.

The last but not least factor is South Korea's "ppalli-ppalli" or "quick-quick" culture, which shows that the country is indeed in a hurry. Though considered crude and rough, it is admittedly a unique Korean approach — a brute force that makes things happen quickly. Unfortunately, there have been dire consequences that have left a lasting impression on the nation.

Just five years ago, South Korea's desire to be a hub for stem cell research resulted in a tragedy. It suffered a major setback when scientist-hero Dr Hwang Woo-suk was caught cheating. Some even called this one of the darkest moments of scientific history, no doubt a huge blow to South Korea's "quick-quick" attitude. Indeed, almost aptly, Hwang was quoted as saying "I was blinded by work and my drive for achievement"— to be the first to show how a human embryo can be cloned and stem cells can be produced in the hope that one day there will be new cures for a range of diseases, from diabetes to Alzheimer's. "I felt a national pride and tasted the confidence that we Koreans could achieve things too," he added.

While this event is still fresh in our minds, another bombshell exploded recently through a book titled *Think Samsung*. The book takes to task the world's biggest electronics company (based on revenue), with Kim Yong-chul, who joined the company in 1997, assuming the role of whistle-blower. He points out corrupt practices and what he calls "the biggest crime in the history of the nation". After all, Samsung has been described by some as a national pride, just like Dr Hwang once was.

Samsung is a conglomerate that reportedly generates "more than a fifth of South Korea's exports. It employs 270,000 people around the world and has become synonymous with success, style and pride in South Korea". The book, which was released recently, however, alleges extensive corruption in the company, including tax invasion and breach of trust in 2008. Although there have been denials and some are "seething with anger" at the revelations made, for the South Koreans such scandals are not particularly new. Perhaps it is a "small price" to pay for a country en route to becoming one of the world's industrial leaders.

According to a US lawyer and newspaper columnist in Seoul, who has taught at a Korean law school and worked for the Constitutional Court, the "elite power centres have a firm grasp on most government entities through implicit guarantees that evils will only be dealt with by a little slap on the wrist".

If this is so, before we start dancing to South Korea's "quick-quick" beat, it would be pertinent to step back and see if it is worth our while.

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