

China should expect challenges in managing success, Singaporean academic say

By Chen Jipeng, Hu Juanxin

SINGAPORE, Nov. 24 (Xinhua) -- China should expect challenges as it manages its success both on the domestic front and in its relations with other countries, said Kishore Mahbubani, a notable Singaporean academic and former diplomat.

In a recent interview with Xinhua, Mahbubani said he was optimistic about the prospects of China, saying that the middle class in China will continue to grow significantly even if the country's economic growth slows down to 6 to 7 percent in the coming decade.

Mahbubani, who is the author of international bestsellers "Can Asians Think?" and "The New Asian Hemisphere," said that even this growth is still remarkable in any country.

According to him, China's tremendous economic growth resulted in the creation of a very large middle class and the middle class in China knows that their life will be better and that their children are going to have a better life than they experienced.

Mahbubani was former permanent secretary at Singapore's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the city state's former Permanent Representative to the United Nations. He is now dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore.

The former diplomat said the middle class in China can be very difficult to handle as they tend to think about higher levels of needs now that they do not have to worry about food and other basic needs.

He said this means that China's new generation of leaders will have to manage a transition collectively. "China should have to open the window to them so that they can play a bigger role," Mahbubani said.

According to him, China's new leaders should realize that in the coming decade, they cannot just apply what the previous Chinese leaders had done in the 1980s and 1990s and should think of new ways to win over the heart of the people, especially those of the new middle class.

The world nowadays is different, with the social media playing a bigger role in the civil society, creating the need for greater transparency and leading to challenges even for countries like Singapore, which has been known for its rule of law and sound governance, Mahbubani said.

"Every decade or so you've got to adjust and accept that it's a different world," he said.

The Singapore government also faces challenges in the aftermath of the first

general election in the era of social media. The ruling People's Action Party lost two of its ministers and had begun a series of adjustments.

The former diplomat said the Singapore government so far is succeeding but still struggling to find the right formula.

"Over the last two years, there have been remarkable changes in Singapore, especially after the elections in May 2011. The things we are struggling with today will be the things China will be struggling 10 years from now," he said.

The most prominent challenge facing China is still corruption and it can be very dangerous if people begin to lose faith in the government and would assume that the government is not doing the right thing in solving the problem, according to him.

China should try to adopt Singapore standards in eradicating corruption by building the rule of law although this cannot be achieved overnight. China should gradually strengthen the judiciary so that people have more and more confidence in the system, he opined.

China does not have to worry about the danger of upheavals like the Arab Spring, which he said was largely due to the deterioration in the living standards of the people in the Arab countries.

"No other country has seen its living standards improve as much as China has in the past decades," Mahbubani noted, adding that the Chinese people want change and stability at the same time.

In his view, China will have to, and will be able to, increase consumption as a share of gross national product. Chinese buyers have grown to be one of the largest buyer groups of luxuries, he said, adding that China will have to build a stronger safety net for the people so that they will be able to spend more.

The former diplomat said it's natural for China to have problems with the rest of the world while it is growing in a global village that is becoming smaller and smaller. Size matters, too, even though China is still a poor country, he added.

"It's quite natural for China to suffer difficulties with the rest of the world. So you got to have a more proactive foreign policy ... one that tries to reach out to the rest of the world and understands the needs of other countries," he stressed.

On the maritime dispute with other countries, Mahbubani said he agrees that some of the countries have been too provocative but China has to be delicate. "China has to defend its national interest but it should continue to follow the wise advice of its late leader Deng Xiaoping to keep a low profile," he said.

China must learn to be sensitive to the views and opinions of the rest of the world. China won a lot of good feeling in the late 1990s when it proposed to hold free trade talks with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, said the former diplomat.