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State and Society: Securing Social Cohesion

By Nur Diyanah Binte Anwar and Pravin Prakash

Synopsis

Recent weeks have seen the Singapore government articulate and emphasise the need to guard against inter-communal tension and conflict. Greater inter-communal conversations and an uninterrupted, honest and forthright feedback loop will be essential for state and society to function as efficient partners to protect Singapore's social fabric.

Commentary

AT A recent symposium on religion, conflict and peacebuilding, Minister for Home Affairs and Law K Shanmugam stated how the government prioritised pragmatism from early on to ensure “the safety, security and freedom of religion to all” in Singapore’s multicultural milieu. The Minister’s statements were timely, in light of the recent immigration bans forwarded by President Donald Trump which have caused disaffection globally.

Singapore is not immune to threats which may jeopardise its social cohesion. While Singapore has prided itself for its success at maintaining harmony amongst the different racial and religious groups, more can be done to enhance Singapore’s social cohesion.

What has worked for Singapore: Principles, Policies and Laws

Minister Shanmugam reinforced Singapore’s three-pronged approach which has framed Singapore’s management of the different racial and religious groups, while protecting equality to minority groups.

First, several core principles have guided the development of Singapore's multicultural society. Singapore prioritises "equality, and equality of opportunity" for all, and does not privilege one race or religion over another. At the same time, the government encourages its citizens to accept the differences which exist between different communal groups, while building an overarching Singapore identity. The government also manages racial and religious diversity by facilitating common spaces for interaction and understanding within society.

Second, well-established policies have been essential in organising the society and ensuring each community's needs are met. Singapore's core principles have largely been fulfilled through government-led policies espousing meritocracy as a means of rewarding hard work, and other policies encouraging common lived experiences such as the public housing quota system to encourage spatial and social interaction.

Minister Shanmugam also cited self-help groups as being successful as a source of leadership and guidance for the various communal groups organised along racial and/or religious lines. The Chinese Development Assistance Council (CDAC), Mendaki, the Singapore Indian Development Association (SINDA) and the Eurasian Association are viewed as an important conduit between the political leadership and the respective communities they represent. They also address issues within their respective communities which may be deemed sensitive.

Boundaries on Issues of Race and Religion

Third, the Singapore government also enforces robust laws intended to delineate what one can do or say with regard to race and religion. This includes penalties for insensitive acts of proselytisation of religion; protection against offensive remarks meant to create ill-feelings within any racial or religious group; and a limit to the freedom of speech.

Therefore, Minister Shanmugam emphasised how "whoever forms the government in Singapore must be committed to maintaining these values, protecting the minorities, and not play racial [or religious] politics".

There thus exists a general consensus that Singapore's policies have to a large degree functioned well and kept Singapore safe. There will unlikely be a revolutionary shift in the government's strategy at maintaining a harmonious multicultural society. Instead, Singapore's approach will most likely develop an evolutionary nature, pivoting from the entrenched principles, policies and laws which have kept Singapore stable thus far. Their necessity and importance in managing Singapore society will continue to be reinforced as both effective and pragmatic.

Where Do We Go From Here?

The necessary evolution will not come from a reduced role of a strong state - but from an expanding role society can play in fostering cohesion and coexistence, and a realisation that state and society do not exist in a zero-sum game in the public sphere. To continue to guard against inter-communal tension and conflict, a strong

state must be partnered with an active citizenry, equipped to combat these challenges.

Minister Shanmugam noted how community leaders have to redefine their roles as being beyond just the advocacy and promotion of their own communities and faiths. He contended it critical they “advocate, work hard at enlarging the common space, push back against polarisation, champion the cause of integration and interaction, rather than create greater differences”.

Therefore, the role society can play has to also go beyond the confines of respective self-help groups and self-organised units structured along racial and religious lines. While their efforts are laudable in fostering interracial and inter-religious understanding thus far, more needs be done to build upon existing approaches and ensure Singapore’s social fabric remains strong.

Foremost would be the need to create greater space for active dialogue and discussion at the grassroots level. Calls for greater inter-faith or inter-communal dialogue often come under criticism as having little practical application, with participants rarely finding consensus. The purpose of the platform was never to bring about agreement over different views; conversations across communal differences helped humanise ‘the Other’ instead, to look past different views and develop a sense of shared purpose and humanity.

Need for More Open Dialogues

While it is essential that interfaith and interethnic dialogue continues to take place amongst community leaders, the way forward is for greater inter-communal exchange at a deeper, more grassroots level. This would ensure conversations also take place between ordinary citizens, whose opinions and views can influence society as a whole.

In this regard, self-help groups and religious organisations are perfectly placed to ensure that potentially difficult conversations can take place in safe settings - especially in handling strands of anti-immigrant, xenophobic and anti-Muslim sentiments which have occasionally bubbled to the surface. They would be able to better reach out to Singaporeans on the ground, and may also prove to be even better facilitators at moderating discussions on misconstrued perceptions of religion, ethnicity and culture.

Increased open dialogues within and between community organisations will also help ensure an uninterrupted, honest and forthright feedback loop can exist between society and the state. Community organisations must take the lead and work together to engage all communities in difficult or sensitive conversations at the heart of society, and educate the government on existing perceptions and sentiments in a frank manner.

While this exists to some degree today, organisations must also be bolder both in engaging traditionally taboo topics and in resisting the temptation to self-censor the reporting of unpleasant and disturbing sentiments amongst the community. These

dialogues should nurture greater openness to share one's concerns and opinions, for Singapore's continued stability and cohesion within society.

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