Religious Fundamentalism and Social Distancing: Cause for Concern?

By Kumar Ramakrishna

Synopsis

Home Affairs and Law Minister K. Shanmugam recently warned of "social distancing" as a threat to Singapore's multi-religious and multi-cultural harmony. Social distancing is in fact evidence of religious fundamentalism, which in tandem with other drivers, could potentially produce extremist violence downstream.

Commentary

IN A wide-ranging policy speech on 19 January 2016 Home Affairs and Law Minister K. Shanmugam identified four inter-connected challenges to Singapore's multi-religious and multi-cultural harmony: direct terrorist attacks; radicalisation of a part of the Muslim population; the Muslim population growing "somewhat distant" from the rest of the society; and Islamophobia among the non-Muslim communities. Much analytical ink has been spilled in recent months over the direct physical threat posed to Singapore by the likes of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and its Southeast Asian affiliates, exemplified by the recent attacks in Jakarta; and the sharpening concern over young Singaporean Muslims being radicalised via exposure to slick ISIS ideological narratives online.

Where Mr. Shanmugam arguably broke new ground was his candid analysis of the remaining two worrying trends: the apparent social distancing of some Muslims from the wider community and anti-Muslim prejudice fanned by 15 years of the ongoing war against violent Islamist extremism. The notion of "social distancing" in particular deserves further unpacking.

Social Distancing and Religious Fundamentalism

Mr. Shanmugam noted that "Singaporeans as a whole are becoming more religious" and that "[i]nfluences from the Middle East have had an impact on our Muslim population as well". He added that some "younger Muslims feel that we should not wish Christians Merry Christmas or Hindus Happy Deepavali", while apparently some "groups preach that it is wrong for Muslims to recite the National Pledge, sing the National Anthem and serve National Service", as engaging in these actions "would contradict the Muslim faith".

The point is this: not just Muslims but Singaporeans in general have been deeply impacted by the ongoing collision between cultural globalisation and one powerful countervailing force worldwide: religious fundamentalism.

As what Thomas Friedman called the Three Democratisations of information, finance and technology deepen and intensify linkages between societies everywhere, traditional societies have not stood still. Fearing the erosion of long-held cultural values and religious mores, some religious communities within and outside the West have responded to the synchronising effects of globalisation into a generally Western social, economic, political and cultural model by developing a defensive variant of religion: fundamentalism.

Religious fundamentalism is related to but not quite religion per se. While mainstream religion emphasises universal harmony, fundamentalism emphasises policing of inter-religious boundaries to prevent "contamination" by contact with outsiders. Moreover, fundamentalism insists on a literalist, inflexible adherence to scriptural rules regardless of contextual factors. No surprise then that while devout but mainstream believers are largely able to function optimally within globalised, multicultural societies, religious fundamentalists encounter emotional dissonance.

They tend to feel out of place, retreating into insulated religious enclaves for fear of "polluting" themselves by mingling too closely with other religious and cultural communities. Conversely, fundamentalists may adopt a more assertive stance, forming pressure groups and political parties to secure the power to transform the entire societal structure into a form they would feel more "comfortable" with.

Fundamentalism's "Violent Potentials"

Such fundamentalist tendencies – whether displayed by Muslims or for that matter Christians, Buddhists and others – if left unchecked could become an even bigger problem downstream. Scholars of religious conflict have long cautioned that there are "violent potentials" within the "fundamentalist mindset" that - when twinned with extremist ideologies fuelled by inclement socioeconomic and political factors - may well be consummated.

To be clear, one is not suggesting that all religious fundamentalists are violent or that the problem is Islamic fundamentalism per se. Buddhist fundamentalists in Myanmar have long incubated a climate of intolerance that arguably contributed to anti-Rohingya Muslim violence in recent times.

Thus social distancing produced by intensifying religious fundamentalism in

Singapore and in the region is hardly harmless. Over time they will only entrench the fundamentalist mindset – "obsessed with the differences" with other faiths rather than the "many common things we have together", as Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean recently put it – and which in certain conditions may further transmogrify into a violent extremist outlook. This is no exaggeration.

In Indonesia, the Jemaah Islamiyah militant network emerged from a Middle Eastern-oriented fundamentalist tradition that - abjuring prevailing tolerant faith-forms that were both authentically Islamic and Javanese - promoted instead a starkly reductionist interpretation of Islam. Significantly, JI founders had urged their socially insulated followings to reject the national ideology of Pancasila and avoid flying the Indonesian flag. The bombings of Bali in October 2002 were one ensuing bitter fruit – to reiterate, in tandem with other enabling drivers - of such a stark us-versus-them outlook.

Need for Intra-Faith Dialogue and Non-Muslim Support

Mr. Shanmugam assured his audience that while the government will introduce new measures this year to "tackle acts" that "denigrate other races or religions, preach intolerance, or sow religious discord", it "will not interfere with doctrinal matters within each religion". Nevertheless, "doctrinal matters" pertaining to fundamentalist religion require attention, as they remain a challenge to Singapore's social harmony. Hence as some local Muslim scholars argue, intensified intra-faith dialogue to complement inter-faith initiatives are probably in order.

Rigid fundamentalist constructions of the faith that are often purveyed by some foreign clerics are hardly suited to the pressing needs of an utterly ventilated polyglot society like Singapore's. These need to be identified and delegitimised. Instead, theologically authentic initiatives honestly contextualising sacred obligations to local realities, like the Singapore Muslim Identity project first mooted in 2005, deserve further exploration.

Finally, non-Muslim Singaporean communities, as Mr Shanmugam pointed out, must stamp out Islamophobic tendencies, mindlessly tarring all Muslims with the same ISIS-stained brush. Right-thinking Muslims loathe ISIS and what it is doing to the image of Islam. Thus scribbling "Islam murderers" at a Bukit Panjang bus stop and on a toilet seat in Jurong Point mall – as Mr Shanmugam recounted - only weakens social cohesion and strengthens the hand of ISIS. If non-Muslim Singaporeans could collectively support their Muslim brethren as they navigate delicate internal matters of deeply held belief, the downstream benefits - for both social cohesion and the ongoing struggle against ISIS extremism - are likely to be profound.

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