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Singapore's Landscape of Religious Freedom: Hard-won, Constant Nurturing Needed

By Barry Desker

Synopsis

Singapore's racial and religious harmony has been hard-won and constant nurturing is needed to preserve it. The Government actively engages the different groups and balances their competing interests in a pragmatic way.

Commentary

THE RECENT American presidential election featured the rise of the "alt-right" who pushed for a Christian White America. In Syria today, a bloody civil war pits Shi'ite against Sunni and has led to the enslavement of minorities such as the Yazidis whose religious roots are in Mesopotamia.

Nearer home, the rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has attracted radical Muslim extremists in Southeast Asia who have convinced more than one thousand men, women and children from the region to proceed as warriors or supporters to the battle zones in Syria and Iraq. The threat of attacks by ISIS militants hovers over the states of the region, especially as social media enables self-radicalisation and captures the imagination of socially-isolated individuals. In Myanmar, the plight of Rohingya Muslims has galvanised opposition in Muslim majority states in the region such as Malaysia and could undermine support for a delicate ongoing peace process in the country.

Dealing With Differences, Singapore-style

These conflicts highlight the negative role that could be played by religious believers who are unwilling to recognise the diverse religious influences present in contemporary societies. In a study in 2014, the United States-based Pew Research

Centre named Singapore the most religiously diverse country in the world, and Asia-Pacific the most religiously diverse region.

Diversity can either be a source of strength or weakness, depending on how a society, its leaders, and its people choose to respond to it. The differences that Singapore has come to celebrate could very easily have been cause for conflict and fragmentation, had we chosen a different path in our early years of independence. Today, respect for people of different faiths and beliefs has entered the collective Singaporean consciousness. Singaporeans appreciate the importance of religious harmony. We have dealt with our differences cooperatively and maturely.

We have a strong legislative framework that underpins our religious harmony. Article 15 of the Singapore Constitution guarantees the freedom of religion and the right to propagate one's religion. Under the Constitution, the Government is also charged with "the responsibility...constantly to care for the interests of racial and religious minorities in Singapore."

The Presidential Council for Religious Harmony, consisting of both religious and lay leaders, was established to advise the President on matters affecting religious harmony. I am a member of the Presidential Council for Minority Rights, which was set up to scrutinise all laws passed by Parliament to ensure that the laws of the land do not discriminate against any ethnic or religious group.

The Inter-Religious Organisation (IRO) holds regular inter-faith dialogues to bring religious communities closer together. Various religious councils and advisory boards also advise the Government on matters affecting their respective groups.

More Than Laws and Institutions

Our commitment to religious harmony does not rest on laws and institutions alone. It stems from a strong and steadfast belief in the ideal of a fair and just multi-racial and multi-religious society. Our founding fathers worked hard to lay solid foundations of mutual respect and trust between the diverse local communities here, because we could not afford to be a divided society. Underlying our approach has been recognising the balance between rights and responsibilities in a multi-ethnic, multi-religious society.

The racial and religious harmony in Singapore today did not happen by chance, but by deliberate choices, policies and the collective will of our people. Each community did not insist on the primacy of its religion, race or culture, but was prepared to live together and accommodate others in the context of a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society. As a secular society, there will be a place even for those who do not subscribe to any religion.

This is in fact one of Singapore's most important and remarkable achievements in our short history as a nation, and a legacy that we must do our best to preserve. My own experience coming from a triple minority (ethnic, religious and language) is that there were no impediments to participating and succeeding in Singapore's competitive environment.

Building Bridges, Every Day

It is therefore incumbent upon the Government of the day to continue to make the difficult choices and take a prudent and hands-on approach to maintain peace and common space for all. Building common space involves fostering understanding and trust between communities and working hard to prevent isolation and mutual exclusion. There are many opportunities for Singaporeans to grow up together, live together, play together, and work together.

Schools in the neighbourhoods allow children of all cultures and religions to study and grow up together. From a young age, students are taught the origins of Singapore's major religions, the significance of religious beliefs and practices and ways to relate to people of different races and religions. This encourages them to share and maintain common space, and to guard against harmful prejudice and stereotypes.

We also celebrate festivities together. When the Muslim, Catholic, Protestant, Taoist and Buddhist communities held their SG50 commemorative events last year, all the other communities were also invited to celebrate together. Another interesting and uniquely Singaporean practice we have is that the leaders of our major religions come together to bless the race track ahead of the annual F1 Singapore Grand Prix. This may seem a fairly trivial or even laughable action, but it is a formal expression of a profound commitment that all our religious leaders are expected to share.

Role of Religious Leaders

A large part of a society's resilience stems from the trust that is built up within and between communities through simple, daily interaction and the expectation of such interactions. This is crucial in preventing everyday conflicts from escalating to dangerous levels. It is important that our religious leaders continue to look beyond the interests of their respective communities, understand our overriding national interests to know what is at stake, and to conduct themselves accordingly.

They play an invaluable role in building bridges and engaging candidly with one another to work out sensitive inter-religious issues that are bound to arise from time to time. Events constantly remind us that religious harmony is a work-in-progress for all societies, including for Singapore. Many states have been pulled apart by deep primordial racial and religious differences. Even in societies much older than Singapore, where different communities have lived together for centuries, religion remains a thorny issue.

Growing religious fervour can lead to mutual exclusion and distancing between different groups. This would not be good for Singapore, where our success as a diverse society is predicated on mutual compromise and respect. All over the world, there are increasing instances of hate crime, hate speech, and intimidation targeted at specific groups, religions and communities. Social media, and the anonymity it offers, makes it easier for people to cause offence and take offence. Identity politics has been used to play on the fears and anxieties of citizens for political expediency.

To preserve our hard-won racial and religious harmony, the Government actively engages the different groups and balances their competing interests in a pragmatic way. The Government also takes a firm stance against racial and religious chauvinists and extremists, because we know the kind of damage that will be done to our society if such conflicts were to erupt. There is always room for us to do more to strengthen Singapore's resilience against these pulls and influences.

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