"Regardless of Religion": Building a Stronger Singaporean Society

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Synopsis

A little-noticed but significant 2017 survey on the Singaporean public's responses to scenarios following hypothetical terror attacks appears to suggest this: notwithstanding the progress made after 52 years in our nation-building journey, more can be done to forge trust and understanding between religious and racial groups. The results of the survey should be parsed with the broader context in mind to make for a more resilient society.

Commentary

THE SURVEY "Regardless of Religion", commissioned by Channel NewsAsia (CNA) and featured in the documentary "Facing Terror" which was aired on 30 November 2017, polled 2031 members of the public from different racial and religious groups. They were asked for their views following hypothetical terror attacks in Singapore. The sample was weighted by race to ensure national representation.

The results highlighted differences in opinions across racial and religious groups -- specifically between Muslims and non-Muslims, and Malays and non-Malays. 1 in 2 (54%) non-Muslims thought a terror attack would occur in Singapore in the next two years, whereas 1 in 4 Muslims (27%) thought so. This result is noteworthy given the government's emphasis how it is not a question of "if" but "when" an attack would occur, and that Singapore's threat level is at its highest in recent years.

An Interpretation of Findings

45% non-Muslims thought there was suspicion about some religious communities in Singapore as a result of terror threats globally, while 39% Muslims thought so. 46%

non-Muslims agreed there was concern that "some religious communities are not doing enough to stand up against terror threats", whereas 33% Muslims agreed.

At the same time, 28% of Malay respondents (versus 12% non-Malays) thought their community was viewed by other groups as being linked to terror activities. 24% Malay respondents (versus 10% non-Malays) viewed their group as being targeted when others "speak about being vigilant about terrorists". These results square with a 2016 survey on race relations by CNA and the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), which found a significant number of Malays (48%) thought they were treated negatively on the basis of religion.

Some questions seemed to look for expected differences of views between groups; several results might relate to how the Malay/Muslim community has come to view local efforts countering radicalism. Some within the Muslim community might also feel enough has been done to challenge the misperceptions of Malays, Muslims and Islam. Despite the Muslim community consistently denouncing radicalised individuals and erroneous teachings in Islam, the results appear to reflect some degree of self-awareness that the community continues to be in the spotlight and under public scrutiny.

When asked "Do you think the Singapore government should do more of the following to safeguard Singapore against a possible terror attack?" and thereafter presented with several possible governmental measures, 43% non-Muslims agreed more should be done to "[restrict] the entry of foreign religious teachers into Singapore" while 28% Muslims thought so.

In this case, it would have been preferable if the phrasing had been refined to avoid associating all foreign religious teachers to terrorism (given there are foreign religious teachers of various faiths in Singapore). As the question stands, the lower proportion of Muslims compared to non-Muslims who agreed may imply their awareness that only a handful of foreign religious teachers have had exclusivist or extremist leanings.

The survey results should not be considered definitive. The data should instead be regarded a valuable snapshot of perception -- made more meaningful if used as the starting point of a future series of surveys. Responses from the survey can then be assessed better longitudinally and qualitatively. Longitudinal studies would ensure a systematic mapping of trends in the public's perceptions regarding religion and terrorism. Qualitative understanding of contexts surrounding the topic can provide a comprehensive appreciation of results attained.

For example, it would be worthwhile to assess over time why Malays (or Muslims) thought of their community as being viewed by others as linked to terror activities. More should also be done to seek actual views of Malay/Muslims, and other respondents, by allowing them added liberty in explaining their opinions -- rather than be limited to several selections or options given on a scale to represent their attitudes to a topic.

More Reason for Dialogue and Cooperation

Notwithstanding the limitations, the results give a sense of a Singaporean society

increasingly exposed to messages encouraging stronger community resilience. This includes movements such as SGSecure, and ground-level conversations by civic or civil groups such as the Inter-Racial and Religious Confidence Circle (IRCC), and OnePeople.sg.

Some 80% of respondents thought "there will be little or no backlash against them by people of other religions", in the event of a terror attack by individuals from the same religion as themselves. 55% also believed Singaporeans would take time -- a year and below -- to "denounce any hate against the religion associated with terrorists". This result is noteworthy – it may suggest the priority Singaporeans place in upholding social stability.

These may show Singaporeans' confidence in society's ability to overcome traditional fault-lines of religion and race, and potentially develop a renewed sense of community. They may suggest how society can remain even-keeled in today's heightened security complex -- complementing the same 2016 CNA-IPS survey which showed strong respondent endorsement for traits making up multiculturalism such as respect and equality.

The results may point to society's sensibility in confronting sensitive topics such as religion and terrorism in the public sphere, while having a reasoned recognition of the need to come together following a crisis.

Inching Towards Greater Understanding

As Singapore matures, the government may increasingly sensitise society to discuss difficult topics openly. Television programmes such as "Regardless of Race" featuring Senior Minister of State Janil Puthucheary as its host took an innovative approach, tackling thorny subjects related to race. The documentary "Facing Terror" also allowed government ministers to discuss religion and terrorism openly. Other concerted endeavours by grassroots groups such as the Interfaith Youth Circle also offer opportunities for discussion and activism.

Discussing previously taboo topics in public is a positive development in strengthening trust and community resilience organically. However, greater inter-religious and civic cooperation should take hold. For example, there should not be an expectation for Malay/Muslim groups to take responsibility for attacks in the name of religion. Nor should there be any toleration for discriminatory leanings against religion or race. In this regard, joint efforts to dismiss religious or racial prejudice within Singapore can be organised.

They should be minimally managed by authorities, to reduce public scepticism. The grassroots can invite authorities into collaborations and frank discussions regarding religion and terrorism instead, to assure a feedback loop between relevant stakeholders in Singapore society.

These efforts have no clear terminus. Challenges such as religiously-inspired terrorism, globalisation, nativism, or even right-wing politics may emerge to upend communal harmony. There is a need to reinforce a sustainable version of community

resilience in Singapore -- one involving a wider approach at cooperation across groups.

Values of moderation, mutual tolerance and respect should be encouraged, and complement efforts in countering narratives of hate and extremism. This aligns with Minister Shanmugam's suggestion to "spotlight a little bit less on terrorism and a little bit more on values and a Singaporean identity". Engaging the wider Singapore public bottom-up can provide more positive trends in the future, thereby speaking to Singapore's nation-building journey as a whole.

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