Forging Cohesive Societies

Singapore's Multiracialism: A Matter of Identity

By Han Fook Kwang

SYNOPSIS

Singapore's commitment to multiracialism and inter-faith harmony is not just about keeping the peace but about its identity as a nation. It has achieved much over the last 50 years but serious challenges remain. The speed in which fake news and hate speech are spread online can easily create enmity among the races and religious groups. Much depends on whether Singaporeans are merely tolerant of each other or have developed deep trust and understanding.

COMMENTARY

IT WAS, fittingly, President Halimah Yacob who announced that Singapore would be holding its first international conference on social cohesion and inter-faith harmony in June this year. It shows the high level of support from the country's leadership on issues related to religious harmony.

Indeed, soon after making the announcement, she spoke at a remembrance ceremony organised by the Inter-Religious Organisation (IRO) to honour those killed during the terror attack on two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand last month. The IRO, formed in 1949, with 10 major religions represented, has had a long history in Singapore of promoting understanding and goodwill. Why is inter-faith harmony taken so seriously in Singapore, including at the highest level of government? There are several reasons:

Matter of Identity

First, Singapore is a multiethnic, multi-religious state where more than five million people live in one of the most densely populated cities in the world. When so many citizens of different races and religions live side by side, in the same housing estate, working in the same company, enjoying the same recreational facilities, and with children going to the same school, it is a matter of national survival that they co-exist peacefully and respect each other's differences.

It was not so not long ago, in the early years of Singapore's independence in the 1960s, that racial tension between ethnic Chinese and Malays led to clashes and deadly riots. Since those divisive days, the country's leaders and people have strived to ensure racial harmony is not taken for granted.

But multiracialism is more than about keeping the peace. For Singapore, it is nothing less than what defines it as a nation, with an inclusive outlook that is accepting of people from all over the world.

That was how it grew as a city under British rule, attracting people from all parts of Asia, especially India, China and Southeast Asia. Singapore's largely immigrant stock was a major factor in making it a thriving society open to changes and new ideas, always striving to be better than its neighbours.

Diversity, Good and Bad

But diversity also meant that misunderstanding and distrust was only a neighbouring household away, and had to be carefully managed by the community and the authorities. This reality shaped Singapore's identity from the beginning, and its founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew was its most committed proponent.

When asked during an interview in 2010 for the book *Hard Truths To Keep Singapore Going*, which I co-authored, how he would define a Singaporean, he replied:

"My definition of a Singaporean, which will make us different from any others, is that we accept that whoever joins us is part of us...An acceptance of multiracialism, a tolerance of people of different races, languages, cultures, religions, and an equal basis for competition. That's what will stand out…"

Note that he did not define Singapore in terms of meritocracy or clean, competent government or economic success, which many people might identify more strongly with. For him, racial and religious harmony ranked foremost. Subsequent generations of Singaporeans have continued to uphold this, which explains why inter-faith issues are taken so seriously.

Government's Critical Role

So, how has Singapore managed the diversity even as it tried to forge a nation out of these differences? The Government played a critical role.

First, the Constitution protects the right of every citizen to practise his or her religion. But there are also strict laws such as the Sedition Act and the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act which make it an offence to say or do anything that might cause ill feeling or enmity between different groups.

Over the years the police have investigated and taken action against over zealous Christian and Muslim preachers alike. In a speech in Parliament last month, Home Affairs and Law Minister K Shanmugam summed up the Singapore approach:

"We have the current harmony because we did all this…We took no chances. We brook no agitation of race and religion. We refused to let the State bow to any religious or racial group, minority or majority." But it would be a mistake to believe that the Singapore way is all fire and brimstone. In fact, tough action has been required in only a few instances.

More important, the State has worked with religious leaders to tackle common problems through organisations such as the IRO and the Inter-Racial and Religious Confidence Circles (IRCC), a local level inter-faith platform formed in every electoral constituency to promote racial and religious harmony.

These interactions have enabled the Government to work with religious leaders to tackle serious problems such as self-radicalisation of individuals by extremist groups, and more mundane municipal issues such as the use of public spaces for funeral rites, the wearing of religious attire and symbols and the conduct of religious processions outdoors.

These discussions do much to build trust and understanding between the various stakeholders and among leaders of the different religions.

A Challenging Future

Two challenges will test this peaceful state of affairs.

First, the ease with which fake news and hate speech can be propagated online will make it harder to insulate Singapore and Singaporeans from outside influence. Much of this is organised by extremist groups across national boundaries.

While many governments including Singapore are planning new laws to protect their societies, there are no easy solutions. Indeed, the problem is expected to get worse because there is popular distrust worldwide of governments which are perceived as elitist and detached from the citizenry.

When economic and social challenges are not addressed, vulnerable people are most susceptible to false claims and radicalisation. Singapore will not be immune to this problem.

The second inter-faith challenge is internal and concerns the strength of its social cohesion. Is it based on mere tolerance of each other or is there deep and genuine understanding? The question has often been raised, including as far back as in 1972 by the late President Benjamin Shears:

"Tolerance can be based on ignorance and lack of faith. But active tolerance seeks what there is in common…"

Almost 50 years later, the issue is still, if not even more, relevant. A society overly dependent on tough laws and an over-active Government can breed apathy and complacency.

Such a people when truly tested, for example in a terror attack claiming many lives, may not have truly developed the instinct to come together and overcome their prejudices. With the increasing number of incidents worldwide involving attacks on religious groups, including the latest in Sri Lanka where more than 350 were killed, the work to strengthen resilience and social cohesion has become more urgent.

For Singapore, as Mr Lee put it, it is ultimately about what defines a Singaporean.

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