

RSIS Commentary is a platform to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy-relevant commentary and analysis of topical and contemporary issues. The authors' views are their own and do not represent the official position of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced with prior permission from RSIS and due recognition to the author(s) and RSIS. Please email to Mr Yang Razali Kassim, Editor RSIS Commentary at RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg.

International Conference on Cohesive Societies

Tolerance and its Enemies: Three Observations

By Shashi Jayakumar

SYNOPSIS

Why is it that it feels like we are living in an increasingly tribalist age – one where it seems different peoples, separated by colour, religious creed, or political ideology, can no longer live together harmoniously? What can be done about it and where does Singapore stand?

COMMENTARY

IT SEEMS to be almost commonplace now, in various locations, for people to feel their nation or culture has somehow gone off the rails and they need to take steps to “protect” it – the feeling is that failure to act will lead to extinction of identity.

This in turn gives rise to a mental map which leaves little place for pluralism (or minorities). Demagogues in various locales find in this thinking a rich vein to tap into. They do not simply add to the persecution complex, but cement it by appealing to a particular kind of nostalgic impulse. Svetlana Boym, the late Russian-American philologist, described as a “restorative nostalgia” that “is at the core of recent national and religious revivals. It knows two main plots—the return to origins and the conspiracy [against it]”.

Three Observations

The resultant mood conducive to violence in the name of preserving “authentic” religion/nationality unleashes forces more powerful than voices of reason or moderation. The anthropologist Scott Atran has shown in his research that the existential willingness to fight and die for the values above, or to kill in the name of

God, is of far greater depth and intensity than (say) the willingness to die for democratic values. Three observations can be made:

The Constant Gardener

The first point concerns the argument – put forward by many at the recently-concluded International Conference on Cohesive Societies (ICCS) – that a more "muscular" defence of moderate values is required. What might this look like?

Here, it is worth recalling telling interventions at ICCS by experts who work at the frontlines of conflict. They observed that full-time activists of intolerance connect ideologues and their followers in theatres ranging from Europe (both the Far Right and Islamists) to Asia (in different places from various creeds). They work 24/7 to broaden networks and exchange notes. Those on the defence side are not nearly as well connected.

In this respect, the ICCS represents a useful beginning, in that it gathered thought leaders and the future leaders of tomorrow, which represents the coalescing of an important bulwark. Their task in coming years will be to bring in the unconverted and those who do not typically come for big grassroots-type events – lest those sitting in the middle of these debates get drawn in and contribute to the negative spiral of reciprocal radicalisation.

As one Canadian representative at the ICCS youth leaders' programme (one fashioned as a fluid and innovative "Unconference") observed, the constant tending to multiculturalism (or indeed, more broadly, tolerant societies) tends to go unobserved and underappreciated. In Singapore, we strive to go beyond respect for difference towards an empathy and understanding that should be the sine qua non of a truly harmonious society.

Yet cohesion and tolerance require constant gardeners; those who go about their work whether one is looking or not, tending values so deeply-rooted that they become part of the fabric of society, and indeed integral to individuals. Witness, for example, recent media reports concerning the village of Hedon Bet, in Punjab, where Sikh village elders have refused to allow the demolition of the local mosque – respecting it as a house of God – despite no Muslims having lived in the village for a generation.

"Heritage Skills"

The second observation pertains to what could broadly be called "Heritage Skills". This has two components: one from the past, and the other for the future. One former radical from the far right milieu, present at ICCS, gave powerful testimony of his own journey, which was far more effective than many official counter-narratives.

But just as important is the ability to uncover and recover lost stories that matter – reminders of what we really were. A poignant, almost unnoticed, example surfaced during ICCS concerning Bosnian Serbs who came together during World War II to save Muslims from their village, just a mile from where other Serbs were massacring Muslims.

It is generally known in Singapore that during the race riots in the 1960s, people came together to offer shelter to others of different races, or else united across communal lines to safeguard their kampungs. But this has never received a significant, rigorous study. The people involved and present need to have their stories told before they pass from living memory.

On the future: emerging academic work suggests that imbibing information via digital forms is by no means the same as with the traditional (or hardcopy) media, when it comes to absorbing information, deep thinking, and attention spans. Reading on screens means taking shortcuts – more time is spent browsing and scanning compared with people reading on paper.

Individuals imbibing information in digital form are more likely to read a document once, and only once. While studies are still emerging, it is no exaggeration to say that all this has serious implications for any would be SMART Nation.

Possibilities for the serious contemplation of issues and understanding of complex ideas, may well lie in print, and in the immersive experience of an old fashioned (hardcopy) text. Digital natives who (as studies suggest) skim especially when confronted by long chunks. This is inimical to the critical thinking skills that we as a society should be trying to build.

These skills facilitate and give texture to the intergroup contact and discourse that is the hallmark of all genuinely cohesive and tolerant societies. It might further be observed in this context that the much talked about "counter-narrative" (or indeed the exiting of individuals from extreme or intolerant points of view) is, when it succeeds, not an online mechanism. It is about face to face contact.

Singapore's Role

The final observation concerns the place and position of Singapore in the future defence of moderation and tolerant values.

Singapore policymakers should gird themselves. There is clearly tremendous interest in the "Singapore model". Singapore's approach in these matters has never been to preach, but to explain what works for Singapore to those interested, who may (or may not) find learning lessons. But one lesson from the ICCS is that Singapore seems to have answers, and it may well be that Singapore will increasingly come to be seen as a sort of beacon in this regard.

To be sure, managing expectations will be important, but calculating how to build on what has been achieved over the past week will be vital. Unforced ways should be found to maintain contacts with, and between, the Young Leaders, who will be ambassadors for the future.

In this way some small part of the Singapore DNA – which is the DNA of tolerance, plurality, and understanding – can be carried by those who wish to carry it, to those who choose to listen. And in encouraging this, we may well be indirectly playing a role in ensuring the continued preservation of the essence of what we are accustomed to and simultaneously hold dear in Singapore itself.

Shashi Jayakumar is Head, Centre of Excellence for National Security (CENS) and Executive Coordinator, Future Issues and Technology at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore. This is part of a series on the International Conference on Cohesive Societies in Singapore on 19-21 June 2019 organised by RSIS and supported by the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth (MCCY).

Nanyang Technological University

Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | www.rsis.edu.sg