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Forging Cohesive Societies

Harmonious Co-Existence: What Can Governments Do?

By Jeanne Conceicao

SYNOPSIS

The past few months have witnessed more tragedy and violence as extremists continued to target places of worship around the world. Several governments have taken constructive steps to strengthen societal bonds and social cohesion. But in a world of growing diversity and tension, what more can governments do to bridge the divisions within societies?

COMMENTARY

OVER THE past few months, extremists have targeted places of worship around the world – mosques, churches and synagogues. In March 2019, mass shootings at two New Zealand mosques saw over 50 people die at the hands of a lone white supremacist. This was followed closely by a series of bombings in churches and hotels in Sri Lanka on Easter Sunday with more than 250 dead. A week later, on 28 April 2019, a gunman opened fire in a synagogue in California killing one (earlier in October last year, 11 worshippers died in a mass shooting in a synagogue in Pittsburgh).

In the aftermath of such violence, the very best of humanity was on display, manifested in the outpouring of assistance and compassion for those who were injured and for the loved ones of those killed. There was universal condemnation of the attacks and the racial and religious hatred that spawned them. These events also caused disquiet around the world on what appears to be emerging trends within countries.

Attitudes towards Racial, Religious, and Cultural Differences

Countering the white supremacist far-right and Islamist extremists must be a major

priority of all governments. Politicians from the left and right of the political spectrum play an important role in promoting peace and harmony between different social and ethnic groups.

Unfortunately, some have acted indifferently, even irresponsibly, towards the increasingly apparent racial, religious, and cultural divisions within their borders. Instead of attempting to bridge such divides, these politicians deepen the chasms with divisive rhetoric and hate speech.

In Europe and elsewhere, some politicians have increasingly given voice to extremist rhetoric in their quest for votes and popular support. Such tactics are cause for alarm, especially since studies have shown that leaders have a direct impact on setting the political tone for the country (and sometimes the world) and implementing policies on race and religion.

Some countries have taken an exclusive approach towards the minority groups within their territories, instead of being inclusive and culturally sensitive to them. As a result, some who feel marginalised and discriminated leave the country to support extremist causes.

Many governments also struggle with the proliferation of hate speech on the Internet on platforms such as Facebook.

Bridging Racial and Cultural Divides

What can governments do to create a more harmonious coexistence in our increasingly heterogeneous societies? Harmonious coexistence may have been a given in societies that for generations were largely homogeneous, whether for reasons of ethnicity, such as in the countries of East Asia or Scandinavia, or for reasons of beliefs, such as in the United States or Europe.

But homogeneity may be a thing of the past.

In today's globalised setting, homogeneity is progressively giving way to plurality as a result of increased people-to-people exchanges, immigration, and digital technology. The resultant greater diversity of peoples, beliefs, and opinions can easily become a crucible for racial, religious, and cultural tensions and divisions, if not managed carefully.

As such, harmonious coexistence is no longer a luxury but a necessity, and one that must be consistently embraced by the highest levels of government and across every sector of the population. If we want a garden to be filled with healthy plants, we have to tend it with deliberate love and care.

Singapore's Potential Role as Bridge Builder

Singapore is an interesting case study for the fostering of harmonious coexistence -- one of the fundamental guiding principles of the country's governance is respect for pluralism and diversity of race, religion and culture. This cardinal principle has been followed through in law, policy and practice since the country's independence.

The government has secured common spaces for all religious and non-religious groups to coexist and flourish. To protect the sanctity of this negotiated space, special laws have been enacted against hate and attempts to incite enmity and ill-will between different racial and religious groups. This is extended to the online world.

Singapore's multi-cultural efforts have been recognised. In March 2019, the Appeal of Conscience Foundation, a US-based inter-faith group announced that Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong will receive the 2019 World Statesman Award for "fostering a society that embraces multiculturalism in which communities maintain their unique way of life at the same time living harmoniously".

What More Can Be Done

So what more can governments do?

There are many constructive steps governments can take to strengthen societal bonds and social cohesion. They include encouraging politicians to refrain from using divisive rhetoric, promoting greater dialogue and interaction between different racial and religious groups to foster mutual respect and understanding, nurturing shared values across communities, and working with Big Tech to better regulate social media and remove postings advocating hate and violence.

There are other innovative ways to work more positively towards long-term harmonious co-existence, not just within but also across borders. "People all over the world think of themselves as peace loving and tolerant of other groups, yet enmities and conflict exist. There is an urgent need for better communication and dialogue among different communities," said Singapore President Halimah Yacob in an interview on 14 May 2019 in Beijing where she was to deliver a speech at the inaugural Conference on Dialogue of Asian Civilisations.

To this end, President Halimah announced that the first International Conference on Cohesive Societies will be held in Singapore from 19-21 June 2019.

The conference will serve as a platform to bring together local and international thought leaders to share their experiences and ideas on how to encourage collective action to bridge the widening divides within societies and strengthen social cohesion.

The Need to Act

Cross-border influences are likely to grow as the world becomes more interconnected, thanks to technology and the movement of peoples across borders. At the same time, according to the 2018 Report by the Centre for Strategic and International Studies, instances of xenophobia, intolerance, and terrorism are on the rise, with right-wing violent attacks in Europe increasing at least three-fold in four years.

Governments have to be vigilant and take serious note of such phenomenon. Some governments are already dealing with it through policy, legislation and community efforts. The exploitation of race and religion may be politically expedient, but it also encourages dangerous sentiments that can lead to conflict and chaos.

There has to be an acknowledgement by governments that societies today are under extreme pressure from centrifugal forces. Unless decisive action is taken to encourage tolerance and cohesion within societies, these forces can tear societies apart. It is therefore imperative that governments take active measures to promote harmonious relations between racial, religious and cultural groups to ensure a peaceful and better future for all.

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