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Towards ICCS 2022

Cohesive Societies, Shared Humanity: Looking Back, Moving Forward

By Norman Vasu

SYNOPSIS

The inaugural International Conference on Cohesive Societies (ICCS) hosted by Singapore in June 2019 brought together a diversity of faiths and perspectives on religion's role in contributing to social harmony and cohesion. With ICCS 2022 on the horizon, how can this conference maintain its relevance and strengthen trust across a very diverse global community? This essay kicks off a special series in RSIS Commentary to explore the theme.

COMMENTARY

DIVERSITY OF faiths and traditions, of ethnicities and identities, and of ideas and perspectives exists throughout human history. While maintaining peaceful intercommunal relations can be challenging for diverse societies, understanding and accepting diversity allows for the flourishing of harmonious co-existence.

In Southeast Asia, the Malacca Sultanate in the Malay Peninsula of the 15th century is a sterling example of well-managed societal diversity. The Muslim rulers of Malacca welcomed peoples of all backgrounds and religions to live and work peacefully in their territories, and many of them inter-married and exchanged cultures. The rich heritage of the Peranakan and the Chetti Melaka communities in Malaysia and Singapore as well as parts of Indonesia are the legacies of these marital unions.

Religion as a Force for Good

Today, the global community faces significant challenges as competitive dynamics

across a wide spectrum emerge to dominate human and socio-cultural development, international relations, and economic and technological advancement. Within this competitive context, it often seems that there is an increasing exclusion of the “other” and violent attacks have been perpetuated against those who are different.

The inaugural [International Conference on Cohesive Societies \(ICCS\)](#) hosted by Singapore in June 2019 brought together 1,100 academics, government officials, representatives of religious organisations and groups, and members of civil society from 40 countries to reiterate the imperative of continuing dialogue, mutual learning, and co-existence for a secure future.

The maiden ICCS pushed against the misleading causal narrative that religious differences are either a necessary or sufficient condition for conflict and sought to not miss the forest for the trees – religions can and do work together for the betterment of all of society.

Looking Back: Faith, Identity & Cohesion

ICCS discussions were divided into three broad themes: faith; identity; and cohesion. First, through the lens of faith, it was established that what ultimately unites all religions is the acknowledgement of the fragility of the human condition and the need to care for the other (otherwise known as the Golden Rule). Human beings, regardless of cultural traditions and religious beliefs share the same desires and aspirations: safety, a sense of community, and belonging.

Second, through the theme of identity, the dangers of operating with stereotypes and a monolithic group identity were highlighted. The loudest most extreme fringe should not be treated as representative of any community. Intra-communal and intra-religious differences are the norm, and the majority in each population is more moderate than the minority.

Third, by discussing cohesion, there was broad consensus that the goal of social cohesion requires all of society to work together. Social cohesion will not be achieved either solely through a top-down governmental approach or will it be accomplished purely via the energy of the grassroots. Moreover, and importantly, it was established that there is no terminus for a state of social cohesion – it is a constant work in progress.

Looking Forward: The Elephant in the Room

With these take-aways from the first ICCS, there is a need to address the big elephant in the room: how does a global conference on the nexus between religion and social cohesion contribute further to the collective responsibility in calming and conciliating conflicted situations without going over familiar ground?

The widening of diversity in every social form represented at the 2019 ICCS is the key to avoiding it being another stop on the inter-religious circuit where the converted are preached to. To modify a particular parlance of our times, the need here is to “go wide or go home”.

The sharing of more diverse experiences, challenges, ideas, and solutions is undoubtedly the manner further utility may be attained from such a conference as entrenched positions are jolted, transferability of solutions discovered, and commonality uncovered.

Diversity, often derided as a liability for organisations and communities, is instead a strength. As seen in the boardrooms of multinational companies and in governance, the embrace and incorporation of diversity is an important strategy for success. The key is to manage the differences and innovate on the practical side at every level: put words into action; rely on the individual initiative.

What is Diversity?

Diversity here should not be understood purely as religious diversity. If the next conference is to build on what came before it, diversity should be understood in the broadest terms. This mindset should inform invitations for both participants and speakers alike. Furthermore, much can be gained from appreciating the intersectionality of the lived experience.

For example, one is not merely a Catholic but may also be female and a refugee or a Muslim, male, and of a particular ethnicity or nationality. The youth, the digitally connected (that is, both the young and the senior citizens), the less privileged and the business entrepreneurs: everyone can play a part. The intersections of these very different but very real concurrently existing experiences cannot be ignored.

There is also profit from discussing the diversity of challenges. While the world is currently experiencing the common challenge of COVID-19 pandemic, the other challenges posed by issues such as climate change, uneven economic development, poverty, the 4th Industrial Revolution, and racism, must be attended to.

There is a transferability here on how different groups – religious or otherwise – respond to such challenges; success derived by working together on one issue may offer insight into how another issue may be tackled.

Finally, the diversity of opinion on social media and the negative implications of individuals finding comfort in echo chambers is often seen as an unfortunate consequence of having a marketplace of ideas. However, this diversity should not be exclusively considered in a negative manner. Social media has been harnessed as a tool through which the better sharing of knowledge and the deepening of relationships can be realised.

Thinking Through the Way Ahead

How is success of another ICCS to be measured? The feedback from the participants of the inaugural ICCS provides a useful guide. Youth and civic groups are collaborating across borders and communities, individuals and organisations have continued their dialogues and mutual learning, and narratives online and in the traditional media have become more aware of the “potholes” in the journey of shared humanity.

Trust between groups is growing as a common purpose is being established. Putting

the question another way, what is the detrimental effect of not having continuing dialogue? If talk and interaction do not worsen a situation, can keep the situation constant, or better it, there is little reason not to carry on carrying on.

One of the many positives of the first ICCS was the ability for reflection: to think through the way ahead. One such [essay](#) at its crux emphasised how every individual has a role in maintaining social cohesion while [another](#) article stressed how diversity need not be divisive. The underlying spirit in these articulations is a commitment to a future in unity and mutual respect, not division and stereotypes.

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