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Towards ICCS 2022

Social Cohesion: Adapting Secularism and Multiculturalism

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SYNOPSIS

Secularism and multi-culturalism in modern societies are not the simple answer to mitigate the divisiveness of a plurality of beliefs and practices. Singapore's experience shows that nuancing and contextualising secularism and multi-culturalism in a constructive way works better in achieving a cohesive society.

COMMENTARY

SINGAPORE GAINED its self-governing status in 1959 against the backdrop of receding colonialism and the emergence of new nationalisms driven by the concept of mono-culturalism. As Singapore was located within the Malay Archipelago, the dominance of the Malay race, conflated with Islam, was significant as a backdrop to its own debates over national identity. When Singapore gained its independence from Malaysia in 1965, the then Law Minister, E.W. Barker, expressed the concern of Singapore's founding generation of political leaders in Parliament in December 1965:

"... in an area where new nationalisms are seeking to assert themselves in the place of the old European empires in Asia, ... a nation based on one race, one language and one religion, when its peoples are multi-racial, is one doomed for destruction."

Secularism and Multi-Racial Approach

Singapore's political leaders in 1965 realised how the conflation of political, racial, and religious conflicts could tear nations apart. They employed the Enlightenment values

of rationalism, humanism, and materialism to neutralise the dominance of culture and religion in governance.

With 75% of the population having Chinese ancestry, majoritarian politics was an attractive option for Singapore. Nonetheless, the nation's founders were clear that a mono-cultural race and/or faith based politics could not work in multi-racial and multi-religious Singapore.

The founding Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew, reaffirmed his belief in secularism:

“Religion cannot be a force for national unity. Indeed, secularism is essential for inter-religious harmony for our multi-religious community.”

Unity, cohesion, and harmony are the essential pillars to build Singapore's nationhood. This was well-expressed by the first President of Singapore, Yusof bin Ishak, when he opened the first Parliament in December 1965:

“So, we must never allow ourselves the luxury of forgetting that survival depends upon rallying and strengthening the forces in the area who are for a secular, rational and multi-racial approach to the problems of economic backwardness and the legacy of unbalanced development in the colonial era.”

Race and Religion in the Modern State

This exemplifies that Singapore did not rely on religious texts or philosophy books to resolve the challenges of economic backwardness and unbalanced development. Singapore handled societal affairs through promoting human welfare by material means, without the distractions of philosophical and religious pressures. This is 'secularism' as defined by George Jacob Holyoake, the English newspaper editor and politician, who first coined the term 'secularism' in 1851.

However, race and religion are not insignificant in the modern state. A grave error in statecraft is the embrace of secularism imposed from the outside that disregards the religious and cultural traditions within a society.

Professor [Akeel Bilgrami](#), a philosopher from India who has taught for a long time at Columbia University in New York, argues that, in our modern world, “religion is not primarily a matter of belief and doctrine but about the sense of community and shared values it provides in contexts where other forms of solidarity... are missing.” Canadian [Philosopher Charles Taylor](#) explained that it is impossible to remove religion, a central dimension of culture.

Singapore's careful and sensitive treatment of religion is manifested in the words of Lee Kuan Yew:

“We must match our economic progress with advances in the moral, ethical and aesthetic dimensions of our life. The established religions have an important role to play in our moral and spiritual development.”

Singapore's Religion-Friendly Modernism

Singapore defies the [Modernisation Theory](#) because religious beliefs and cultural traits did not lose their social significance as the country pursued its pathway to modernisation. Despite its government being modern and staunchly secular, Singaporean society has remained religiously and culturally alive. The city-state's secular and multi-cultural governance did not destroy the social importance given to different religions and cultures.

The official Singapore has continued to engage the multiple religions and cultures in the country. It accommodates religious and cultural traits in common space. Nevertheless, the act of policing religion and cultural expressions in common space of a multi-religious and multi-cultural society can be complex as there are no well-defined lines of division between religion or cultural traits, and the affairs of the state and politics.

Hence, the practice of goodwill and a willingness to compromise would work better to overcome challenges than to apply rules of consistency and logic. The central question is where the lines need to be drawn.

It is reasonable to expect that the state, being the custodian of social peace and national cohesion, takes responsibility in constantly engaging, even in negotiation, with religions and cultures when defining the boundaries. Nevertheless, the ultimate responsibility will still fall on the state to decide the extent of incursion of religion or cultural traits allowed into common space.

Secularism and Multi-Culturalism as Operating Principles

Secularism and multi-culturalism have their downsides. For example, they entail that all religions, beliefs and cultural practices be equally respected and accepted. This ideal poses several challenges when communities invoke their rights to embrace unique practices even when these contravene basic norms of society such as the violation of women's rights.

Another challenge encountered, as evident in western societies, is the advantage of freedom and space that secularism and multi-culturalism provide to extremist and radical groups to assert their religious and cultural influences to oppose secular-modern ideals like democracy and capitalism.

British sociologist Grace Davie [argued](#) that despite their shortcomings, one must use positive lens to see the advantages of secularism and multi-culturalism. To mitigate the weaknesses, the acceptance of secularism and multi-culturalism should be contextualised to the needs of society and governing conditions set by the state.

In the case of Singapore, a modus vivendi has been established for citizens to embrace. It consists of two general principles: (i) protection of what are generally valuable to the larger society and putting aside exclusive or sectarian interests; and (ii) avoidance of pursuit of ultimate ideals (beliefs) that impinge on social order, peace, and security.

In conclusion, plural societies need to harness the benefits of secularism and multi-culturalism as operating principles in governing the state and to place high

expectations on the state to act fairly in preventing any attempt to abuse any loophole. It is important to adopt a constructive form of political secularism and political multiculturalism which gives states the authority to safeguard social cohesion.

In developing cohesive models in such contexts, events such as the International Conference on Cohesive Societies ([2019](#), [2022](#)) help play a key part in sharing best practices from different national models.

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