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Demography-Religion Nexus: Tipping Point for Societal Norms

By Mohammad Alami Musa

SYNOPSIS

The recent debate about repealing Section 377A that criminalises sex between men assumes a high signature because it may lead to a social change in Singapore. It can potentially bring a largely conservative Singaporean society to a tipping point where many of its traditional pro-family norms may be undermined, even replaced with secular-liberal norms, leading to a decline in religion. This is not a conjecture. Some countries in the West have crossed such a tipping point.



A happy family — Religion fortifies family values. WEF picture.

COMMENTARY

DEMOGRAPHICALLY THE Census of Population 2020 showed that Singapore's population still grew – from 3.23 million in 2010 to 3.52 million in 2020. This population growth is the outcome of efforts to get society to embrace pro-family norms. These norms are believed to be mainly associated with religious traditions.

Religious institutions encouraged their flocks to preserve pro-family norms like upholding the institutions of marriage (between man and woman) as well as of family; having babies; and promoting women's role to pro-create and discouraging behaviour that does not result in reproduction. Traditional pro-family norms and lifestyles are still strong in Singapore. Emphasising pro-family norms has the natural effect of preserving the importance of religion. Hence, for as long as Singapore preserves traditional pro-family norms, the decline of religion is unlikely to be significant or even to occur.

Counter-Trends: Less Conservative, Less Pro-Family Society

Nevertheless, there are counter-trends. Census 2020 also found the number of married Singaporeans to have slightly dipped by 0.6%; the number divorced or separated increased slightly by 1.0% and a larger group of married women (40-49 years) have never given birth.

These counter-trends show that more Singaporeans are exercising their individual choices (i) not to get married; (ii) that if they do get married, not to have children; and (iii) to end their marriages through divorce or separation. The embrace of such individual choice norms is showing an uptrend.

Besides the continued rise of the above counter-trends, Singaporean society has also embraced for a long time other individual choice norms like accepting abortion as an option and use of contraception as well as forms of sexual behaviour not linked to reproduction.

In addition, figures from an IPS 2019 survey also show Singaporeans are more open to homosexuality. These all point to the uptrend of individual choice norms in Singapore which, according to the late American political scientist Ronald Inglehart, may have the effect of weakening traditional pro-family norms and consequently leading to a decline of religion.

Has Singapore Crossed the Tipping Point?

Some decline of religion, though insignificant, is already showing up in the Census 2020 data. More residents (aged 15 years and above, across most types of educational qualifications as well as age groups) have no religious affiliation. Their number has increased from 15% in 2000 to 17% in 2010 and finally to 20% in 2020.

This decline in the number of people with religion may be insignificant when compared to the larger declines seen in many other developed countries. The question is whether such decline is due to a waning of pro-family norms and a strengthening of individual choice norms, as advocated by Inglehart?

Has there been a fundamental shift that transforms Singaporean society from one that preserves pro-family norms to one that has started to significantly embrace individual choice norms? In other words, has Singapore crossed the tipping point?

The answer is found in the findings of the World Values Survey that Ronald Inglehart conducted over two time periods from 1980 to 2007 and again from 2007 to 2020. The survey involved 112 countries which covered 90% of the world's population. Singapore was one of the countries Inglehart studied.

His study found that Singapore was just above the line dividing the countries that showed rising support for individual choice norms and those that showed falling support. This means that Singapore experienced a weak shift over the two time periods and this indicates that Singaporean society does show a little more accommodation for individual choice norms, but the change is not transformational. Singapore has not crossed the tipping point.

Therefore, Singapore essentially retains its traditional pro-family norms character and this accounts for the continued emphasis on religion. Religion has remained strong in Singapore, notwithstanding the Census 2020 results that show the falling number of people with religion.

Will Singapore Cross the Tipping Point over 377A?

Singapore has neither reached nor crossed the tipping point from pro-family to individual choice norms, even though there has been a slight shift, as the Inglehart study and the Census data showed.

Ronald Inglehart's study found that countries will cross the tipping point when their societies accept same sex marriage and same sex relationships as these are deemed as critical markers to indicate the dominance of individual choice norms. Singapore has not reached this stage. Once it does, many pro-family norms will weaken or disappear and religion will lose its social significance, as observed in many developed countries.

Therefore, the debate about Section 377A of the Penal Code which criminalises sex between consenting male adults is not merely to determine a position but more importantly the nature of Singaporean society. The anxiety that exists is the fear that repealing the law may imply the opening of the flood gate. It will mean Singapore may go down the path trodden by the Nordic and other Western countries that had reached the tipping point and crossed it.

As a religious society, Singaporeans by and large try their best to resist the movement towards the tipping point, to safeguard pro-family norms and to protect the significance of religion in the country. In short, repealing Section 377A may be the much-dreaded tipping point that may transform Singapore.

Inglehart's massive work unearthing an abundance of data from the World Value Survey conducted from 1980 to 2020 shows that a lever like 377A may trigger a social transformation of sorts. Singaporeans therefore need to decide on the kind of society they desire.

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