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Towards ICCS 2022

Bridging Troubled Waters: Forging Cohesion in Divided Societies

By Chaiwat Satha-Anand

SYNOPSIS

In an era of social tension and conflict, building bridges to foster cohesion has become critical. As the classic song “Bridge Over Troubled Water” reminds us, we should not ignore the troubled waters under the bridges that we are building.

COMMENTARY

AT THE inaugural International Conference on Cohesive Societies (ICCS) in Singapore in June 2019, President Halimah Yacob called on countries and societies to build bridges, not walls, across increasingly identitarian divides. At the same event, Dr. Ali Al Nuaimi from the United Arab Emirates’ Hidayah International Centre of Excellence for Countering Violent Extremism reinforced this message by pointing out that we are in “an era of building bridges, not wars”.

When building bridges in the context of deeply divided societies, it is important to understand the troubled water under them. Three guiding questions could help elucidate the kind of “troubled water” challenging bridge builders as they try to foster social cohesion today: (1) Where could the rifts be found; (2) how deep are such rifts currently in contemporary societies; and (3) why is it so difficult to deal with such rifts?

Erosion of Civil Religion

In coming to terms with divided societies through the first question on where the rifts could be found, it is wise to note what [Robert Bellah](#) wrote half a century ago. He said that people were connected in a cohesive society because of the strength of a

collection of beliefs, symbols, and rituals with respect to sacred things institutionalised in a collectivity.

These beliefs, symbols and rituals give definition to a nation, not unlike the power a religion holds over its believers and followers -- hence the term “civil religion”. It is the strength of civil religion that holds people of differences in a cohesive collective that could place trust in institutions such as the police, the court, or the media.

Judging from what has recently transpired in highly polarised societies such as the United States and Thailand, trust in the electoral process has been eroding in the former, while issues pertaining to monarchical institutional reform -- unthinkable in the past -- has seemingly torn the traditional fabric of society asunder in the latter.

Polarisation is also tearing at the seams of democratic institutions and practices around the world, from Bangladesh, Brazil and India to Kenya and Poland, among others. Perhaps, “civil religion” that once held these societies in cohesion is now fracturing, if not already broken down in some cases.

Gravity of “Ordinary Virtue”

How deep is the fracture threatening civil religion that has held societies together for so long? I think the cohesive quality of civil religion has been put through a vigorous test when the “universal” language of rights and liberty that reverberates well with liberals -- both people and societies -- is contested by the moral language used by ordinary people in their everyday virtues.

In Ordinary Virtues, Ignatieff maintains that it is these ordinary virtues -- trust and tolerance among others -- which serve as the “moral operating system” guiding people through competing ideas and demands.

For ordinary virtues, the key moral distinction is self/other and citizen/stranger. Assuming the stranger is “the other”, race, religion, gender, and nationality are then primary for the self/citizen, while common humanity becomes secondary.

Consider the issue of tolerance believed to be crucial for social cohesion as an example. In ordinary virtues, tolerance is not an obligation, but a gift from the citizen; the state as sovereign defines who gets the gift. Citizens give the gift of tolerance to the strangers on condition that the strangers accept their “moral operating system”. Tolerance will be denied if the stranger insists that it is his/her rights.

Ignatieff further observes that while different groups can live in the same societies, *they do so apart rather than together*. While ordinary virtues can sometimes unite us, at other times they divide. On one hand, they are the key to healing, reconciliation, and solidarity.

On the other, they could be easily exploited in the name of “politics of fear and exclusion” as one’s own group is privileged over others. It is perhaps how existing political discourse could empower or confiscate the ordinary virtues in this heightened “politics of fear and exclusion” that makes the water under the bridge extremely dangerous at present.

The Football Stadium Ecosystem

Why has it become increasing difficult to build bridges to foster social cohesion in the context of heightened “politics of fear and exclusion”? Many have identified the influence of online communication, its nature and speed, as the main problems.

Others engage in the “war” against “fake news” with their versions of “true” accounts, not realising, perhaps, that the notion of “truth” itself has become increasingly problematic.

In my view, one of the best answers can be found in [Zeynep Tufekci's MIT Technology Review article](#). She suggests that to understand the destructive tendency of digital technology, one must look beyond the technologies themselves towards its ecosystem.

She explains that when “we encounter opposing views in the age and context of social media, it’s not like reading them in a newspaper while sitting alone, … (but) hearing them from the opposing team while sitting with our fellow fans in a football stadium”.

In an ecosystem where the sense of identity conflict is all-consuming, “belonging is stronger than facts”. Within this ecosystem, where facts are almost relegated to insignificance, a petrified sense of belonging poses a severe threat to a cohesive society that aims to cut across identitarian differences.

The Necessity of Building Bridges

Since working towards social cohesion in divided societies is so important currently, there is a dire need to try to understand the locations and depth of rifts threatening cohesion, as well as the condition that makes it difficult to work towards realising a healthy cohesive society.

Only by critically identifying the elemental conditions that constitute the troubled waters under the bridge -- civil religion, ordinary virtues, and ecosystem -- and then confronting these realities, could bridge-building be realistically attempted and meaningful social cohesion possible.

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