

BY INVITATION

Prepare for a political crisis

Singapore's public intellectual continues his series on Big Ideas to shape the country's future.

By Kishore Mahbubani, For The Straits Times

Big Idea No. 4 is a difficult one: Prepare for a political crisis. To avoid causing any unnecessary alarm, let me emphasise at the outset that I am not suggesting that a political crisis is imminent. Indeed, given Singapore's recent track record, it is probable that Singapore will not have a political crisis any time in the near future.

Yet there is another equally important track record we have to bear in mind. Any political scientist will tell you that it is "normal" for most states in the world to have a political crisis every few decades. By not having a political crisis for several decades, Singapore has demonstrated that it is not keeping within statistical norms. If over time we conform to statistical norms, the laws of statistical probability will kick in and we will inevitably have a political crisis.

Let me share a good recent example of the laws of statistical probability to drive home this point. A few weeks before the Little India riot on Dec 8 last year, one of my colleagues at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, Dr Paul Cheung (who was also the former chief statistician of Singapore and of the United Nations), told a senior member of the Singapore establishment that when groups of foreign workers congregate together in big crowds in a confined space with easy access to alcohol, there is a high statistical probability of a riot happening (not unlike football hooliganism in England).

Dr Cheung did not know it was going to happen in a few weeks. He only knew of the statistical probability and likelihood. Similarly, there is a statistical probability that normal states go through political crisis every few decades. This is the reason why we should prepare for one, even if none appears imminent at this stage.

It would be foolish to try to predict how or when such a political crisis could emerge. An Arab proverb wisely says that he who speaks about the future lies, even when he tells the truth. However, we can start working on the elements that will help to mitigate the negative consequences of such a crisis.

Institution-building

THE importance of strong institutions was demonstrated clearly when the United States experienced one of its major political crises in recent times. The results of the 2000 presidential election were bitterly disputed for several weeks between the Al Gore and George W. Bush camps. The nation became hugely divided. Emotions ran high. Yet there was no danger of civil war or a resort to violence because the American people had faith in their institutions, especially in the Supreme Court of the United States.

Similarly, in Singapore, we should cultivate the same faith in our key institutions, especially the judiciary and the Civil Service. None of these institutions can be built overnight. Indeed, it takes years of both wise leadership and careful selection to fill their ranks. Fortunately, we have been doing this over the years. The judiciary has also demonstrated its clear independence in recent judgments it has passed. We are on a good track.

Yet it is also clear that we have a dangerous culture of cynicism that runs down our institutions. It is normal in any society to have political disagreements. However, the difference between a strong society and a weak society is the way it manages these differences. If we can have a civilised dialogue and agree that, despite our political differences, we have a common interest in building and strengthening strong institutions, we would have created a political ecosystem that is more likely to

survive such a crisis.

Strengthen social cohesion

LET me begin with an impressive story of social cohesion in a crisis. In World War II, it is well-known that nearly 2.7 million Jews were murdered by Hitler in "killing centres." Many had lived in civilised European countries for centuries but under Nazi occupation they were betrayed by friends and neighbours. In a crisis, people take care of their own communities, not others.

However, there was one major exception to this sad European story. In Denmark, 99 per cent of Danish Jews survived.

Why? A recent book by Mr Bo Lidegaard demonstrates that one critical reason for this was the social solidarity of the Danes, who reacted almost unanimously against the persecution of minorities. In a review of this book in *Foreign Affairs*, Professor Andrew Moravcsik writes: "This intelligent and uplifting tale reminds readers that a tight sense of community and identity can be a force for progressive tolerance in the modern world."

The obvious question we have to ask ourselves is this: How tight is our sense of community and identity? How much will we protect Singaporeans of another race in a crisis? The Institute of Policy Studies has produced several studies that show the degree of integration among ethnic communities in Singapore. The overwhelming majority of respondents were comfortable with interacting with different racial groups in the public sphere and less so in the private sphere but overall still quite comfortable.

Notably, however, most were uncomfortable with interacting with new Singaporeans from China, India and Malaysia in both the public and private spheres.

Should we allow the degree of integration to improve naturally and organically or should we intervene from time to time to accelerate and deepen the integration? Since social integration is vital for Singapore's long-term survival, I believe in intervention.

The reason we have to work hard to strengthen our multiracial fabric and make it resilient is that one of the most likely areas where a political crisis could emerge would be through an incident involving a clash between two ethnic groups. If such an incident happens, will we rally together as fellow Singaporeans and say that any such clash is unacceptable? Or will we identify with our ethnic group and its narrow sectoral interests?

Love Singapore

THE third and arguably best way to pre-empt any political crisis from erupting is to inculcate the most powerful force in the human universe: the four-letter word "love". We do things for love that we would not do for money. We would dash in front of a moving train to save our child. But we wouldn't do it for a billion dollars. Love trumps money. The best way to protect Singapore in a political crisis is to persuade our people to love Singapore more than their political or sectoral interests.

Why do I say this? Ten years ago, if you had asked me which was the most politically stable country in South-east Asia, I would have said Thailand. Why? When the European colonial powers entered South-east Asia in force, all the South-east Asian countries were colonised except one: Thailand.

Similarly, during the Cold War and subsequently, while its neighbours in Indonesia and Myanmar were mired in conflict, Thailand continued to grow and prosper despite occasional coups. This is why the current massive political crisis in Thailand has come as a big shock to me. There are two bitterly divided camps who love their own political or sectoral interests more than they love Thailand. Even elections cannot solve the problem. Thailand could slide into a dangerous downward spiral through continuing political divisions.

If this can happen to Thailand, it could happen to any country in South-east Asia. Thailand is doing its fellow Asean countries a favour by providing a daily living laboratory of what can go wrong in a country if sectoral interests trump national interests. Today, the prospects of this happening to Singapore are practically inconceivable. Yet it was equally inconceivable in Thailand 10 years ago. The inconceivable can happen anywhere.

So how do we foster love for Singapore? That could be a subject for another long essay, but let me suggest a few low-hanging fruit we could pick. Let's work out a list of places that Singaporeans love

and declare them as national shrines. The list could include the Botanic Gardens, East Coast Park, the old (demolished) National Library, Bukit Brown cemetery, the old Bukit Timah campus of National University of Singapore (and it was sadly unwise to return only 40 per cent of these hallowed grounds to NUS), the old Chinatown, and I could go on.

Fortunately, Professor Joel Kotkin, a renowned urban development expert, came to Singapore recently and gave a speech, which he then expanded into a working paper. He asked a simple question: What is a city for? Prof Kotkin suggests that "from their origins, cities have relied on three great characteristics - what I call the sacred, the safe and the busy". Singapore has succeeded in the last two, security and commerce, more than perhaps any other country in the world, yet Singaporeans are still among the most pessimistic societies on earth.

After noting this, Prof Kotkin goes on to advise that Singapore should pay more attention to the "sacred." He provides good examples of what are considered "sacred" places. In his words, a "sacred place" can be defined as any unique institution or place "that (makes) one feel an irrational commitment to a place".

These could include places like Times Square in New York, Trafalgar Square in London or the ring of mountains surrounding the great cities of the American West.

Prof Kotkin concludes his essay by noting that there could be two paths for Singapore to choose from: Singapore could search for and nurture its Singaporean-ness, or become "Hotel Singapore, a place of transit for a nomadic global population".

He acknowledges that, "to be sure, such nomads are necessary, particularly, in a global hub. But, it is one thing to accommodate this class; it is another to allow this kind of person to dominate the urban landscape".

Let me therefore end with an obvious observation. None of us would give up our lives to defend a hotel we live in. But we would readily do so to defend our home. And we defend our home because it has many sacred objects and sacred memories.

Can we make 2015 the year of defining and expanding sacred objects and places in Singapore?

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