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www.straitstimes.com

Published on Apr 13, 2013

BY INVITATION

Singapore's biggest blessing: Safety

Trust in public institutions like the police is not a given and needs to be nurtured. Will the blogosphere choose cynicism, or seek common ground to protect public institutions?

By Kishore Mahbubani For The Straits Times

As Singapore undergoes its mighty, irresistible metamorphosis over this coming decade, it is vital for it to ensure that it does not lose some painfully acquired blessings in the process.

In my previous column For The Straits Times, I had asked readers to share their views on my thoughts about Singapore's metamorphosis. I had said the soul of Singapore is being redefined, and that Singaporean society can either emerge as a happy butterfly, flitting around in a garden city, or as a lonely frog, croaking away unhappily in a little well.

I am grateful for the over 50 readers who responded and for their comments. They have helped shape my thinking for this column, and provided food for thought for future ones.

One of the biggest blessings Singapore has is that it is one of the safest cities in the world.

The level of safety we enjoy is a true miracle. Switzerland enjoys the same level of public safety. But it is surrounded by Europe. When you cross the border out of Switzerland, you continue to experience the same level of safety. But when you cross out of the border of Singapore, you may not. In short, we have to work extremely hard to preserve this cocoon of extraordinary public safety.

Some of it is clearly due to the very successful Singapore Police Force (SPF) we have. But the SPF is only one unit within an ecosystem of excellent public institutions delivering this high level of safety. The social trust that Singaporeans and Singapore residents have in this ecosystem is one key reason why our city is safe.

Worrying cynicism

THIS is why I am extremely worried about the cynicism that the Singaporean blogosphere is developing towards these public institutions. Over time this cynicism could act like an acid that erodes the valuable social trust accumulated. Yes, let me concede that some of the online criticisms are justified. For example, the escape of Mas Selamat Kastari was a major failure.

Against this backdrop, I watched carefully the reaction of the blogosphere to the Shane Todd affair. Dr Todd, 31, an American researcher, was found hanged in his apartment here last June after he quit the Institute of Microelectronics (IME) which is part of the Agency for Science, Technology and Research.

We will have to await the outcome of the coroner's inquiry to find out what really happened.

This is why I was appalled that US Senator Max Baucus jumped the gun and tried to pressure Singapore by forcing Singapore to give the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) oversight of the case before the Coroner's Court had completed its inquiry.

This goes against all international laws and norms. The United States would never allow a foreign police force to oversee an FBI investigation. Nor would it allow any foreign intervention into its judicial inquiry process.

What makes this even more absurd is that any objective investigation will show that the SPF is at least

as competent, if not more competent, than the FBI.

Why do I say this? Having lived in the US for over 10 years, I have observed that while Singapore has moved from Third World to First World in its public institutions, many of America's public institutions are going in the opposite direction.

The best minds in America do not go into lifetime public service careers. The best minds in Singapore do. This is why the trust and confidence in Singapore's public institutions remain high overall.

Kudos to blogosphere

I WAS therefore heartened to see that the Singapore blogosphere did not unthinkingly support the American position. Some of the more popular blogs were pretty hostile to the idea of the FBI interfering in a domestic investigation. This has given me some hope that we can try and find some middle ground between the mainstream media and the blogosphere.

In this middle ground, we should reach clear agreement that some of Singapore's painfully developed public institutions should be protected and strengthened, like the SPF.

If we don't develop this middle ground and if a significant percentage of Singaporeans begin to demonstrate a lack of trust in our public institutions, trouble may begin brewing around the corner. This lack of trust can suddenly manifest itself in different ways.

Let me suggest one hypothetical scenario.

We have had quite a few MRT breakdowns in recent years. Thousands of people were inconvenienced. Fortunately, each incident passed peacefully. The peaceful outcomes reflected the high level of trust that Singaporeans have in their public institutions. They saw each incident as an aberration - not indicating the emergence of a new pattern of decline. But this perception could well change if MRT disruptions persist.

Clearly, the public standing of train operator SMRT has been declining. When I served as Singapore's Ambassador to the United Nations from 1984 to 1989, my American counterpart was the legendary Ambassador Vernon Walters. His hobby was to visit and investigate every MRT system in the world. He proudly told me that having done so, he could confidently say the Singapore MRT system was the best in the world.

I asked why. He said it was the only MRT system in the world that had been built ahead of schedule, below cost and functioned smoothly.

Clearly this is no longer the case. The big question is: what went wrong? Was it a mistake to emphasise the short-term private sector profits rather than the long-term public good that the SMRT is supposed to provide?

All this brings me to the hypothetical scenario. If we have another major MRT breakdown, combined with declining trust in public institutions, we may have the perfect combination for a riot or two. We have been free from riots for almost 40 years. The reasons were simple: rising living standards and rising trust in public institutions. But if this trust becomes a declining commodity and if a major public service performs badly, it would be unwise to expect the same level of social harmony.

In short, it would be a mistake to take our high level of public safety for granted. It is the result of a very complex ecosystem of public institutions that still enjoys a high level of trust among Singaporeans.

However, if the blogosphere and the mainstream media cannot agree on a core consensus of preserving and supporting key public institutions, we could end up with a messier Singapore, becoming an unhappy frog rather than a happy butterfly.

stopinion@sph.com.sg

To read Prof Mahbubani's previous column, [click here](#).

The writer is Dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore.

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