Close ✕

Go to Singapore Law Watch   ✉ Tell A Friend

Why S'pore enjoys a low crime rate: Review [2009] 15 Jul_ST

Title: Why S'pore enjoys a low crime rate: Review
Source: Straits Times
Author: Kishore Mahbubani

Legal News Archive

I was almost mugged in Switzerland recently. On a bright day last month, I was walking along the beautiful shore of the lake in Lausanne around noon. Just in front of the famous Olympics Museum, a foreign tourist stopped me. In broken English, he asked if I could take a photo of him. I agreed.

First he wanted to take a photo of himself along the lake shore. Then we crossed the road to get a photo in front of the museum. Then he took me deeper into the park around the museum.

Suddenly, two tall gentlemen emerged in dark suits. Both flaunted their badges indicating they were policemen and asked for our IDs. We showed ours. Then they grilled us. They asked if we had foreign currency to change. I became suspicious. I asked to see their IDs again and began challenging them aggressively. (In retrospect it was a foolish thing to do). As suddenly as they came, they disappeared. Only then did I realise that the foreign tourist was bait to lure me into the park.

All this could happen anywhere. I have come across a Latin American bag-snatching team in a Singapore restaurant. Similarly, I was almost mugged in New York City. Yet, it is clear that Singaporeans experience an unusually high degree of personal security. This is a remarkable blessing we should never take for granted.

No single policy explains Singapore's safe environment. Western analysts get it wrong when they attribute it to an authoritarian government. Actually, the government created an 'ecosystem' that resulted in this high level of personal safety.

One essential element of this 'ecosystem' is the absence of desperate poverty. When I visited Sao Paolo in 1992, I was advised to get an official driver to receive me at the airport. I was warned that a random taxi driver could drive me straight into the slums, from which I might never appear again alive. Unfortunately, when I arrived in Sao Paolo, my official driver did not appear. So I took a random taxi. Fortunately, I got an honest taxi driver.

I should emphasise though that poverty does not automatically lead to crime. Last year, my son and I took a walk through the Dharavi slum in Mumbai that was featured in Slumdog Millionaire. When we emerged, I was amazed to realise how safe I had felt throughout the walk.

The eradication of poverty in Singapore is a result of a combination of many policies: economic growth and development, universal education and health care, formal and informal social safety nets. All these policies have to work together. Fortunately they do.

Certainly, Singapore's tough attitudes on law and order matters also explain the relatively low levels of crime here. We have tough criminal detention laws. They protect society from hardened criminals. Our laws adopt a particularly hard-line approach to crimes that are especially disruptive to the fabric of our society.

Two other factors that are equally important are the highly professional and clean police force and the strong public support for what it does. About 40 per cent of all major crimes are solved with the public's assistance. This high level of trust between the police force and the population is an asset we should retain. It is one reason we have a lower police-to-population ratio than most major cities but a significantly lower crime rate. And to top this, we have one of the lowest recidivism rates in the world for criminal offenders - about 25 per cent. In short, we have an enviable virtuous loop.

Most visitors to Singapore are surprised by the 'light touch' adopted by the Singapore Police Force (SPF). Few police officers are seen on the street. The SPF is successful because it is able to attract talent. Because of its ability to learn and adapt, Dr Peter Senge has called SPF one of the few public organisations that have developed as a 'learning organisation'. The SPF also maintains high standards of discipline and physical fitness. By contrast, when I was in London earlier this month, a senior member of Britain's Conservative Party complained to me of how 'fat' British constables had become.

Yet, despite all these successes, we should not be complacent. The odds are actually stacked against Singapore maintaining a low crime rate. Our port and airport are among the busiest in the world. It is only natural that a high number of potential criminals pass through Singapore. If we were an isolated island in the South Pacific, we could create an idyllic domestic environment. But we are not.

To ensure that we maintain a low crime rate, we should be aware of all the elements of the 'ecosystem' that have made Singapore one of the safest cities in the world. Indeed, the best way to sustain an 'ecosystem' is to get the population to feel a sense of ownership of the system. For example, there is a need to develop community-based conflict resolution capacities to deal with problems like noise pollution and the tensions of living in a dense urban environment, rather than relying on the police.

Probably, the greatest danger Singapore faces is that a large chunk of its population could choose to become 'free riders' on Singapore's ecosystem of personal safety. They would like to enjoy all of its benefits without taking any personal responsibility for it. This is why I am deeply troubled by the attitude of Singaporeans towards litter. Each time I run in East Coast Park after a weekend, I am shocked by the amount of litter. People assume that an army of foreign workers will clean up the mess.

If the population can become free riders on keeping Singapore clean, they can also become free riders on keeping Singapore safe, taking our low crime rate for granted without making any contribution towards it.

But how can the population contribute? Simple! Each well-off Singaporean should make a personal contribution towards helping one less-well-off Singaporean, directly or indirectly. In short, we should strive to create the most compassionate and inclusive society in human history. Believe it or not, this goal is actually achievable.

Amazingly, on the day I finished writing this article - Saturday - the doorbell rang. I walked to the gate. A Singaporean lady begged for $3 to take a bus home. This is the first time ever that a beggar has appeared on my doorstep - an omen, perhaps, that all is not

well with our ecosystem.

The writer is the dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore. Think-Tank is a weekly column rotated among eight leading figures in Singapore's tertiary and research institutions.

Source: Straits Times © Singapore Press Holdings Ltd. Permission required for reproduction.