

Can S'pore remain pragmatic in policies, yet idealistic in vision?

As the future of liberal democracy is debated, Singaporeans should remember that the kind of political system they live under is less important than the quality of governance. The real challenge is whether policies can adapt and remain effective.

Ho Kwon Ping

Russian President Vladimir Putin made headlines recently when he loudly and proudly declared that liberalism is, in his words, obsolete. He would have been soundly ridiculed if he had said this at the end of the Cold War 30 years ago. However, the fact that this remark created anxious, hand-wringing defensiveness on the part of Western liberal democrats illustrates how far democratic liberalism has fallen as an ideology since its heyday.

It is a fundamental tenet of democratic liberalism that as societies become richer, people will look beyond material needs and embrace democracy, individual freedoms, human rights, and so forth. That was what Western liberal democrats predicted would happen with supposedly authoritarian regimes such as China. Give them enough time, the thinking went, and their own repressive regimes will collapse and they will become like us.

That has, to put it mildly, not come about. Instead, the very foundations of democratic liberalism such as Europe and the United States have witnessed severe political stress and even aggressively anti-liberal protests, even though they remain the world's wealthiest countries. China continues to power ahead towards global economic supremacy with an authoritarian leadership and single-party political system, and with the broad mass of the Chinese people seemingly quite content with their lack of Western-style freedoms.

The notion that with growth, countries would enjoy less economic inequality and elitism would give way to egalitarianism is now empirically disproven. Indeed, there is nothing directly causal or deterministic between economic growth and liberal democracy.

On the contrary, it is the complex and dynamic interplay between elitism, egalitarianism and inequality that can, depending on the specific mix of circumstances, make societies more cohesive or more fractious regardless of their state of economic development. Particular political systems such as liberal democracy have little to do with it.

GAP BETWEEN ASPIRATION AND REALITY CAUSES SOCIETAL DISSONANCE

For example, a highly elitist and unequal society, which has little egalitarian social values, can exist undisturbed for a long time because reality and aspirations do not result in any societal dissonance. This probably describes the situation in quite a few developing countries with traditions of rigid hierarchies,

On the other hand, a society with low levels of elitism and inequality and a high level of egalitarianism, but which experiences rapid increases in elitism and inequality, is likely to see social unrest. This describes the current situation in many generally affluent Western countries, which has led in particular to anti-establishment, populist political parties and leaders.

In other words, it is not so much the static quantum of elitism or inequality that causes social unrest but the speed and extent of a growing disparity between reality and aspiration.

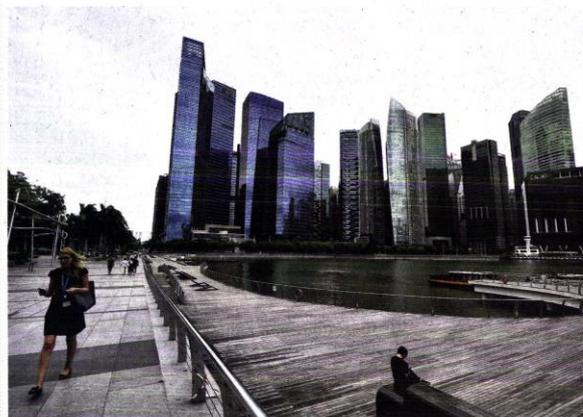
In particular, it is the self-perception by groups that feel left behind while others see their lives improve, which is critical in determining the extent of societal dissonance. Farmers and steel mill workers in the US are far richer than their counterparts in a developing country, but they may feel more unhappy because their relative economic status within their own society has declined. Furthermore, they live in a culture of egalitarianism where the right to be equal to others is their cultural norm, compared to many developing countries where such values are weaker.

Contrary to the common notion of democratic liberalism that economic progress inevitably prompts a yearning towards free markets and freer societies, history has ironically shown that at the inflection point of the greatest socio-economic progress, societal dissonance can be greatest.

CHALLENGE POSED BY GLOBALISATION

And when does that happen? Let me now introduce that big fat buzzword: globalisation. Globalisation creates inequality because of its disruptive, accelerative impact on economic progress; much like a shift in tectonic plates produces earthquakes and tsunamis. Globalisation accelerates natural movements of people – migration – and accentuates natural income or wealth disparities, largely because the disruptive event, usually technology, is multiplied exponentially via unusually broad geographic impact and increases in productivity.

The most recent phase of globalisation was in the late 19th century when the simultaneous impact of transport and communications technologies led to huge economic productivities resulting in the industrial revolution. However, its impact across the non-European world, largely through colonialism, was not so beneficial to the colonised. All this is challenging the very foundations of the ideology of democratic liberalism. The notion that free markets combined with free elections would transform all of humankind into a homogeneous semi-utopia, to the extent that one writer even breathlessly heralded what he called the End of History (because utopia has arrived with the global spread of democratic



Singapore has prospered despite Western criticisms, says the writer. He believes most people are less concerned about the specific model of political governance they live under, than with simply good governance. ST PHOTO: LIM YAOHUI

struggles by the victims of global imperialism.

But prior to that, historians have recorded multiple globalisation events from more distant history, such as the so-called Silk Road Centuries when massive and unprecedented interaction between the two worlds of Europe and Asia created enormous disruptions, both positive and negative.

Globalisation and inequality as two sides of the same coin may seem counter-intuitive initially but upon examination, makes perfect sense. The irony in today's globalisation, in contrast with the age of global imperialism, is that the shoe is now on the other foot.

Globalisation has largely benefited the developing, former colonial world, but the richer, developed countries have been unable to deal with the ramifications of globalisation – massive human migration, increasing relative deprivation by less productive and competitive work forces, the rapid rise of the flagrantly indecent rich, to name just a few. This is now causing the radical misalignment between elitism, inequality and egalitarianism.

This misalignment is now playing out virtually in every developed Western nation with a familiar script in which Mr Donald Trump is only the most larger-than-life actor; others strut across the political stage as their own dispossessed or discontented followers or opponents battle it out. All the while, the social fabric continues to fray and the social contract is being torn to pieces.

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liberalism), now seems hopelessly naive.

This is a fascinating and ongoing debate that will play itself out over the next few decades as the developed Western world confronts its biggest existential dilemma since the end of the Cold War. Personally I would not write off democratic liberalism so easily and I believe its potency will return. But it is not the inevitable outcome of economic growth. There are clearly alternative roads to good governance.

ASIA'S UNSTOPPABLE RISE

Asia is on an unstoppable, sustainable path towards economic parity with the West. According to traditional democratic liberalism, Asian societies should all, with increasing wealth and expanding middle classes, be overthrowing their dictators and clamouring for political diversity and freedom of speech and individual rights. They should, in short, follow the examples of Western Europe and the US.

The fact that they have not, and that China continues to prosper despite ignoring all notions of liberal democracy, is not only deeply insulting and aggravating to Western critics, but also baffling. I do not intend to defend either the Chinese road to prosperity or Western democratic liberalism.

My point here is that if Asian societies, including Singapore, are to avoid the problems of globalisation that the West has experienced, we have to look far beyond the question of political systems, and into managing what I have posited as the complex interplay between elitism, inequality and egalitarianism in order to mitigate any dramatic misalignments.

SINGAPORE'S CHOICES

What about Singapore in all this? Singapore has prospered for decades despite Western criticisms, with a single dominant party political system that is

perhaps halfway between Westminster and Beijing's Zhongnanhai. Its political culture and attitudes towards individual human rights are probably also between Shanghai and San Francisco. For such a small nation, we continue to be studied for the unnatural social cohesion that we enjoy, largely due to the pragmatic and tough wisdom of our political founders.

I have argued in my lecture series The Ocean In A Drop – as the inaugural IPS-Nathan Fellow for the Study of Singapore – as well as in my book Asking Why, that the political challenge for Singapore's People's Action Party, as for China's Communist Party, is how they can retain their dominance into the next few decades without succumbing to the worst evil of complacency: corruption.

I believe that most people, including in the West, are less

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concerned about the specific model of political governance they live under, than with simply good governance.

Credibility, accountability and incorruptibility are the three most important elements of good governance. Where it is eroded or does not exist, a government cannot last no matter what political system it has. This is the lesson for Singapore.

Credibility is not competence. People are quite willing to forgive examples – hopefully not continual – of political incompetence if they believe that their political leadership speaks the truth, makes decisions truly for the larger good, and is genuinely devoted to their well-being.

In Mao Zedong's famous words posted on every wall: Serve the People. How real that slogan truly is, most people can judge for themselves and that is how credibility erodes.

Accountability presumably exists in two-party pendulum democracies such as the US and the United Kingdom. But how accountable they have truly been in the past few years is now being questioned. Whether accountability is greater in single-party states is equally questionable.

But any leadership, whether an elected president or an ancient Chinese emperor, who feels accountable to his citizens and displays that accountability clearly and transparently, has generally survived the wrath of the people. Chinese history has shown that elections notwithstanding, the Chinese people over 5,000 years have held their leaders accountable and are quite quick to overthrow dynasties if they do not display accountability.

As for incorruptibility, this is the cancer that kills a body politic when it rots from within. This is probably one of the reasons – getting rid of opponents is of course a convenient by-product – behind China's ferocious anti-corruption drive. More than any other factor, rampant, unbridled corruption within all ranks of the Chinese Communist Party will destroy it quickly. In this respect, we in Singapore should be thankful that the fiercely intolerant attitude towards corruption by Mr Lee Kuan Yew has become a core value of our society.

The lessons for Singapore into the next century is to preserve the same pragmatically idiosyncratic approach to policies but with a profoundly idealistic vision of our society, which our political founders possessed. Mr Lee and his colleagues rejected the dogmas of both unbridled capitalism and constructive socialism, and adopted policies that worked and often created innovative new policies, some of which failed, some of which hurt people unnecessarily, but most of which worked for the greater good.

Rather than worry about formal political systems, we need to constantly study the dynamically changing interplay between elitism, inequality and egalitarianism in our society so that they all align to create a cohesive society for the future.

The danger is to follow a playbook that worked but is no longer relevant. The challenge for our next generation leadership is to retain the vision but to change strategies as the world itself changes.

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