

19/04/1997

Co-existence key to stability in Asean

Lee Poh Ping

ASEAN has the distinction of having a population that is one of the most heterogeneous in the world. Almost every conceivable distinction of mankind, ranging from religion to regionalism is found within the states of Asean.

Yet, in recent years, the Asean countries have managed to govern their multicultural population with a reasonable amount of stability.

To be sure, ethnic and tribal conflicts still occur as happened recently in Indonesia (the wonder is that a country like Indonesia with a population approaching 200 million of such heterogenous origin and spread far and wide has not experienced even more clashes than now) but the Asean countries have in most cases managed to put behind them cultural or ethnic conflicts that threaten the integrity of the state or the basic stability of their societies.

Malaysia, for example, has put behind the May 1969 racial riots which could have broken up the nation while the Philippines is solving the problem of the Moro rebellion in the south.

One should not of course underestimate the seriousness of the clashes now occurring or the potential for further cultural strife in Asean countries but, given proper management, these could be contained.

I want to point to three factors that have been important in the relative success of Asean countries in bringing about peaceful coexistence.

The first is the practice of a policy best summed up in the Indonesian words of "Bhineka Tunggal Ika" or "Unity in Diversity". Essentially, this means the attempt to achieve nationhood out of diverse peoples in a state without the basic sacrifice of the cultural or economic identity of the minority groups within it unless these minority groups acquiesced.

The second factor is a policy of economic development whereby economically disadvantaged groups can prosper without harming the basic economic interests of the advantaged groups.

The third is a political leadership that can stick to these two policies.

Unity in Diversity

When the Asean countries obtained their independence from their western colonial masters, they had to face the serious problem of creating a united nation from the diverse populations within their states.

Malaysia had a population divided along ethnic lines, with the Malays and the Chinese constituting the dominant ethnic groups.

Indonesia was a vast archipelago with Javanese and non-Javanese, Muslim and Christian, non-tribal people and tribal people like the Dayaks and so on.

There were initial problems of maintaining the integrity of the state and societal stability. Examples of a challenge to the latter consisted of the PRRI rebellion and of a threat to the former in the 1969 riots.

These and other clashes, most of which are isolated, aside, Asean societies have managed to live together relatively peacefully.

There are two ingredients in such success.

The first is the fostering of a sense of nationhood among people of different cultures in one nation, not an aggressive nationalism that forces the assimilation of minority groups into the dominant culture of the majority group but of nationalism that starts with the assumption that

everyone is part of one nation.

In other words, minority groups together with the majority group have a right to citizenship in the nation so long as they fulfil the criteria for such citizenship.

Such criteria could be basically determined by the majority group or thrashed out from bargaining between majority and minority groups.

In addition to this there must be some vision, like Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's Vision 2020 in Malaysia, or a goal in that nation that posits in some future date a nation where ascriptive criteria becomes less important than achievement criteria.

The second ingredient is that such nationalism should not be at the expense of the cultural or religious identity of the minority groups unless these groups are willing to give up their identity.

Thus in Indonesia, there is official tolerance of minority religions like Christianity and other non-Muslim religions despite a population that is primarily Muslim. Such tolerance is enshrined in their national ideology of Pancasila.

Similarly, there is religious tolerance in Malaysia. Malaysia also goes one step further in tolerating non-Malay schools among the Chinese and Indian communities. There is thus no forced cultural or religious assimilation in Malaysia even if what may be called the national culture is Malay defined.

Economic Development

A very important factor in creating peaceful coexistence is economic development. All Asean societies, like any other society have wealth that is unevenly distributed. If it is too unevenly distributed, it can destabilise even a society that is ethnically homogeneous.

It becomes more so when, as in the case of many Asean societies, uneven wealth distribution is reinforced by ethnic cleavages like, for example, the greater wealth possessed by ethnic Chinese compared with those held by indigenous Southeast Asians.

If the Asean countries resorted to the outright nationalisation of the assets of these wealthy minorities, the consequences would be instability and the impoverishment of that Asean country that did it.

The comparative example of Uganda in Africa can be seen. There, under the regime of Idi Amin, the assets of people of Indian origin, who were a resident minority, were expropriated. Also many of this minority were expelled. The consequence was of course instability and impoverishment of the Ugandan economy which has lasted up to now.

The Asean countries, however, since the 1970s, have essentially eschewed such a policy.

They and the other Southeast Asian countries did play around with nationalisation policies, as Indonesia did in the 50s and Myanmar since its independence, but such policies only impoverished those Southeast Asian countries that practised them.

Instead, the Asean countries chose to focus on economic growth as a means of redistributing wealth. They would not rob Peter to pay Paul.

They would instead focus on expanding the pie so that everybody would get a slice. They believed in the words reportedly said by the late President Kennedy that a rising tide lifts all boats. The ingredients of such a policy consisted of the following:

The first was to ensure the fruits of economic growth were used to help the economically disadvantaged. Some Asean countries like Malaysia employed the machinery of government, at least in the beginning to help redistribute this increased wealth. This involved governmental participation in the economy or some form of "administrative guidance" to business so as to ensure there would be something for the economically

disadvantaged.

Second, it was important that the basic assets of the economically advantaged groups were not touched. If it was necessary that some of such assets had to be redistributed (as this might happen even in an expanding pie policy), the owners should be fairly compensated.

The third ingredient consisted of the fostering of inter-ethnic partnerships in business, ie the encouragement of business links between economically advantaged ethnic groups with the less economically advantaged ethnic groups.

What has happened so far in the Asean countries is for ethnic Chinese businessmen to seek indigenous partners with political influence. This has worked so far but it may not be entirely satisfactory.

What should be aimed for are genuine partnerships between ethnic Chinese businessmen and indigenous businessmen.

All these, however, would not be possible without the adoption of proper economic policies.

To this end, Asean countries realise they have to gear their economies to the rigours of the international economy. Not only do their economies have to be export-oriented but to be efficaciously so. In other words, where once they could achieve economic growth by primarily exporting commodities, they have now to be geared towards exporting manufactures in order to adapt to the changing dictates of comparative advantage.

In addition, sound economic policies which encourage high savings, educational and infrastructural expansion and so on have also to be practised.

Political Leadership

Which leads me to the third factor, political leadership. While the policies mentioned are necessary for peaceful co-existence, it is not easy to implement them.

For example, what constitutes the establishment of unity without destroying the cultural identity of a minority group? How does one maintain a policy of economic growth for redistribution that does not also affect the basic assets of the economically advantaged group? Or conversely, is too much cultural autonomy given to minority groups at the expense of national cohesion? Or is redistribution fast or equitable enough to satisfy the economically disadvantaged group? The management of such depends basically on political leadership, and this in turn rests on the following ingredients.

Whatever the political leadership, that leadership must essentially be committed to maintaining what I would call the fundamentals of the two factors, unity in diversity and redistribution without expropriation. If they depart from such then peaceful coexistence would be threatened.

In this connection, the Asean countries have been fortunate. Indonesia had a leader in Suharto who, despite what pressures he may have faced, had stuck throughout to the principles of unity in diversity that formed the foundation of the Indonesian state. And Malaysia had a succession of four Prime Ministers who, whatever their social origins, stood their ground as far as the maintenance of a multiracial Malaysian society was concerned.

And Singapore, despite having a big majority Chinese population, had a leadership that was always very careful about ensuring the multiracial basis of their society.

The second ingredient is that this political leadership must be secure or strong. They must have credibility first of all with the majority group from which they invariably spring from, and also at least acquiescence, if not support from the minority groups.

A weak leadership would not be able to resist chauvinistic pressures from the majority group while a leadership totally oblivious to minority

group aspirations would be perceived by the latter as tyrannous.

Again Asean, particularly Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore, were blessed with strong political leadership in the last 25 years or so. Lee Kuan Yew and Suharto were strong leaders and so were the Prime Ministers of Malaysia.

Even if the personalities of the Prime Ministers in Malaysia may vary, they nevertheless were in command of a strong ruling party. I would not involve myself in the debate as to whether such strong political leadership arose from democratic systems defined by Western liberals or from authoritarian traditions. Suffice to say all three countries have leadership that are elected.

Finally, the last ingredient is political flexibility. This is probably the most difficult characteristic to describe. Yet it is very important in the management of multicultural societies.

Too strong a leadership without flexibility may lead to, as mentioned just now, a tyrannous government that might lead to revolt from minority groups. The trick is to know when the emphasis must be put on placating that ethnic group which feels most threatened, and then having placating this group begin to be more sensitive to the other ethnic groups.

In this connection, the Malaysian political leadership had shown skilful flexibility in the political arena. After May 1969 when the Malays felt threatened, the political leadership went out of the way to reassure them but without fundamentally affecting the interests of other ethnic groups. And having succeeded somewhat, the political leadership became more liberal and adopted a policy that gave scope to the cultural and educational aspirations of the non-Malay groups as to greatly reduce the tension that is the inevitable result of putting the emphasis on placating one particular ethnic group. This is what is meant by political flexibility.

University Malaya

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