How multicultural cohesion can survive

History shows how countries can advance economically while regressing socially. Avoiding this is a key challenge.

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To sustain multicultural togetherness, we need more than the acceptance of different races, religions and cultures within society. More than "live and let live", or even the celebration of diversity.

Cohesive societies can last – and diversity remain a strength – only if people have shared hopes, and a sense of shared endeavour and purpose. We can achieve this only if our lives are intertwined, starting with how kids grow up. And by developing respect for each other along the way – not only the respect for differences but also for the contributions that we all bring to the table.

Unfortunately, history shows that these attributes do not come naturally. Even once achieved, they may later recede. A large-scale international survey two years ago in fact revealed a startling picture of social cohesion in retreat. More than half of all respondents believe their societies are more divided than at any time in living memory. While no more than a third feel that way in a handful of nations like Singapore, the majority in most nations believe that divisions had never been worse.

The loss of cohesion reflects several trends, besides a waning enthusiasm for multiculturalism. Politics has become more polarised, weakening the moderate middle ground. The social and political divides between those with a college education and the rest have widened sharply in most advanced nations. And so too between those who live in the cities with vibrant economies and those in declining towns and the countryside.

FROM EXTREME TO MAINSTREAM

But what is most worrying is how culture and identity have been injected into economic grievances, adding emotional virulence to the political debate. It has come together with the rise of extreme right parties in most of advanced democracies, each in different ways preaching the exclusion of the "other" – other races, religions or nationalities. A survey of eight countries across the Atlantic found that the single best way to know if people were likely to vote for a right-wing nationalist party was if they believed that minorities had better access to jobs than white people.

The Overton Window – the range of views and statements deemed acceptable by the mainstream – has hence shifted. Radical right, exclusionary agendas are entering the mainstream. In many developing countries too, culture and religion have become a more prevalent feature of politics, along with a rise in anti-minority speech.

WHAT WENT WRONG?

The causes are not recent. Nor do they lie simply in economic forces – such as the loss of jobs to global competition, which has been relatively small in most economies.

One factor, particularly relevant to Europe, has been the failure to manage immigration and integrate immigrants. Whether they live in mixed neighbourhoods and towns or in places where there is a heavy concentration of immigrants, makes a difference. It also matters whether they are integrated in the workforce and are seen to be contributing actively to society.

A second factor has been the fragmentation of the media landscape and the rise of tech companies' social media algorithms in deciding who sees what information and opinions. The social media empowers many more voices. Critically too, it has brought news and analysis into the global public square from places such as today's conflict zones where normal media reporting has been severely restricted or disallowed.

We have to retain the democratising effect of the social media, but curtail how the tech companies' algorithms take people to different and often opposing public squares, which entrenches divisions. The companies' aim is to hook people onto their platforms rather than to divide society. But as experts find, their algorithms tend to exacerbate polarisation over time, by funnelling people into echo chambers of similar views or partisan ideologies, and amplifying sensational content and disinformation.

They also add to the broader fragmentation of the news media in some democracies, that results in citizens no longer sharing a common reality of facts. It could get worse. AI-driven search and chatbots may soon flood the online space, introducing synthetic media of dubious provenance.

A third shift lies in the more isolated way in which people are carrying out life, especially in some of the most digitally advanced countries. Studies show that they have become more likely to work, shop, eat takeaways, be entertained, and even worship at home. Young people are not hanging out as much with their friends, let alone going on dates.

When people have fewer face-to-face interactions with those who live in the same neighbourhood or town, it has consequences for society. These were the regular interactions so essential to how people came to understand differences, and accept those who disagree with them.

MORE THAN A QUILT

How do we ensure that as societies advance economically, they do not regress socially? How do we restore trust in one another, and build that sense of shared purpose in multicultural societies?

No political system, democracies included, can assure that moderation and inclusiveness will prevail. And identity-based, exclusionary views are never far below the surface.

Multicultural societies must therefore be actively woven, not left to chance. In many cases, that has meant weaving a patchwork quilt – different patches, each with its own design or motif, often beautiful when stitched together. But in times of economic insecurity, or when polarising forces come to the surface, the stitching weakens and gradually falls apart.

We have to weave a different fabric of society to sustain multiculturalism. We must weave threads of different colours and textures into a single tapestry – or as they do for batik, involve different artisans in crafting a single fabric. So that we create the larger motif of a nation, with many strands and many histories, but at one with itself.

It is a responsibility for educators, politicians and government, civil society, religious and community leaders, the media, and citizens themselves. Above all, it means creating opportunities for interaction, the interweaving of lives. But it also requires sensible guard rails to curb extremism and self-reinforcing polarisation, while enabling legitimate political expression and the differences of views that are inherent in democratic discourse.

Education is where it always starts. It is the most powerful tool a society has for integrating people. Bring children of all backgrounds together, particularly in public school systems, across ethnicities and social backgrounds. And keep them engaged together beyond classroom hours – sports, dance, music, creating their own hip hop moves.

Equally important is whether education is effective in uplifting people of all backgrounds. People must see that everyone is able to develop their strengths and can get ahead on their merit, with support from government and community schemes for those starting from behind. Without that assurance, it will be difficult to sustain a sense of togetherness. There's good reason why we have put great effort into this in Singapore.

A second important solution lies in urban design aimed at avoiding ethnic or social enclaves. Singapore's integrated public housing estates are well-known, and unique in their scale. But it's not just about housing. It is about having shared spaces for recreation, for learning, for interacting over morning qigong or on the futsal court – a whole estate built for social life and interaction.

Not every society can replicate what Singapore did; we started building public housing estates early, when we had far less proper housing to begin with. Many mature nations now face a difficult legacy of segregated housing neighbourhoods. Denmark is moving boldly to redevelop such neighbourhoods, replacing them with mixed neighbourhoods. It is at the same time, providing extra support to immigrant children starting from pre-school, so they can learn the language early and adapt to local mores.

Yet even while legacies remain, it remains important to create public spaces – athletic fields and courts, public swimming pools, libraries and squares for young people to hang out in. They are particularly important for disadvantaged youth, and play an essential role in an inclusive society.

A third area for creative public policy must involve curbing the risks posed by social media platforms, while preserving the inclusiveness of the digital public

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square. The European Union's new Digital Services Act holds social media platforms accountable for removing hate speech. We do essentially the same in Singapore and Australia, and a few other countries. The EU has also gone further to put the onus on the larger platforms to reduce the risks of algorithmic amplification of disinformation. It is more regulation than the big tech players are used to. One can debate the specific mechanisms, but an ungoverned media landscape will only see democracy gradually unravel.

Established news media will also have to respond to the challenge of a fragmenting landscape. By demonstrating journalism built on accuracy and transparency – reporting the world as it is, separating news from opinion, and presenting a range of perspectives for people to assess – they will help retain trust in their brands.

In our own case, citizens have access to many sources but choose to rely on Singapore's mainstream media as their main source of news. That's critical, because it sustains that common framework of facts that every democracy needs.

A COMMUNITY OF RESPECT

Finally, we have to build a community of respect in each of our societies, from the ground up. Eating together, regardless of backgrounds. Providing a friendly ear. Delving into each other's interests. Helping a neighbour's child. These everyday deeds and actions matter. When others observe them happening often enough, the habits cascade. When they cascade, they create a culture.

It goes to the heart of multiculturalism and social cohesion. Respect for all is a source of unity. But it is more than that. It is how we uplift ourselves as a society.

We uplift people not just by putting more financial resources into play to support the disadvantaged, and not just by opening up more opportunities. They both matter. But we also need something deeper, something more intrinsic to upliftment – the motivation that drives people to overcome difficulties, to strive, and to do their best.

And the respect we lend each other is a most powerful source of motivation. Knowing that others are backing you, and have hope in you. It is how you can do it. It's how we all do it. It's how we rise together.

• This is an abbreviated and edited transcript of a speech by President Tharman Shanmugaratnam on June 24 at the International Conference on Cohesive Societies.

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