



All Hands on Deck Amid Storms of Conflict and Change

Warren Fernandez



RSIS Commentary is a platform to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy-relevant commentary and analysis of topical and contemporary issues. The authors' views are their own and do not represent the official position of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced with prior permission from RSIS and due credit to the author(s) and RSIS. Please email to Editor RSIS Commentary at RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg.

All Hands on Deck Amid Storms of Conflict and Change

By Warren Fernandez

SYNOPSIS

Delegates to the third International Conference on Cohesive Societies (ICCS), organised by the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, spent three days sharing experiences on their work to forge robust and resilient communities. In these days of conflict and change, with societies increasingly divided and polarised, it would take collaborative efforts across the public, private, and people sectors to foster cohesion, from the ground up, with everyone pitching in to play their part, they concluded.

COMMENTARY

Stepping up to greet the waiting crowds gathered at the Vatican Square in May, the newly elected Pope Leo XIV cried out simply: "Peace be with you all!"

As the crowd cheered, he explained that he had chosen those words to mirror the greeting that the risen Jesus Christ is said to have extended to his distraught and anxious disciples: "Peace be with you."

This yearning for peace is universal.

Muslims greet each other with the traditional Arabic salutation, *as-salamu-alyakum*, which similarly means "Peace be with you". Jews say "*shalom*", for peace, harmony and well-being.

In Confucian philosophy, *ren* – benevolence and compassion is considered the way to harmony, peace and understanding in a community, and cultivating this is considered the highest virtue. In similar vein, the Japanese concept of "*wa*" extols the virtue of social harmony and consensus.

There were many such greetings around the Raffles City Convention Centre last week, among more than 1,100 delegates from 50 countries at the third International Conference on Cohesive Societies, organised by the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, supported by Singapore's Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth.

The brainchild of former President Halimah Yacob, the forum was first launched in 2019 to bring together community and faith leaders, scholars and academics, to delve into the challenges of building cohesive societies.

The irony of such a gathering taking place in these troubled times was not lost on participants, who saw news updates of conflicts raging in the Middle East and Ukraine flash on their mobile phones even as speeches on fostering peace were being made.

Not one to sidestep issues, President Tharman Shanmugaratnam noted in his opening address: "Around the world, multiculturalism is in retreat and social cohesion weakening in too many societies."

He cited the Edelman Trust Barometer, an annual survey, which found that more than half of all respondents globally felt that their societies were more divided than ever before.

"Only 20 per cent of respondents said they would live near someone who had different views from them. Just think about that," he said.

Cohesive societies, he added, could only be sustained if people have a sense of shared hopes and purpose.

"History has shown us that these attributes do not come by chance. And where they have arrived, they can also fade. We have to develop these attributes through the active weaving together of multiculturalism, the active weaving by government, civil society, educationists, religious and community leaders, the media, and of course, citizens themselves."

Aristotle Meets Dolly Parton

This theme was taken up by Perak's Sultan Nazrin Shah, when he alluded to the "paradox of digital societies". Billions of people were now connected through the Internet and social media, yet the world was increasingly divided and polarised.

"Our information ecosystems have become battlegrounds...This results in fragmentation, a kind of online tribalism. Information, while accessible, is becoming decentralised. Online hate rises, as does the spread of conspiracy theories, the propagation of extremist ideologies, and even violence. And with truth itself now up for grabs, with the rise of fake news, trust in institutions and in each other breaks down."

Like President Tharman, he called for more collaborative efforts across society, noting that "social cohesion is built from the ground up".

“It starts small, with everyday interactions: the friendly word, the favour offered, the meal shared...I believe, a core foundation of social cohesion is to be a good neighbour.

“As a Malaysian, I am proud to call Singapore my neighbour, and I value the close bond that we share. Yet elsewhere in the world, at this very moment, countries are turning on their neighbours.”

He was cheered, however, by the findings of an RSIS report in 2022, which showed that social cohesion in Southeast Asian countries was robust. An update on this Social Cohesion Radar report, unveiled last Wednesday, had similar findings. Notably, 7 in 10 of those surveyed across the region considered social cohesion in their country to be strong. People in these countries shared an appreciation for diversity among religious, ethnic, and linguistic groups.

There were also signs of fragility. The study found a growing sense of disconnect in societies, with a decline in trust in leaders and a diminished sense that the system was fair. Indeed, over six in 10 of respondents in a separate study by Edelman harboured a sense of grievance, a gnawing concern that societies favoured elites, harmed their interests, and helped the rich get richer.

Noting that the current global storm was not a passing squall, the Sultan added: “Uncertainty is here to stay, but allow me to close with a popular saying of enduring wisdom, ambitiously attributed to Aristotle (d. 322 BC), and, I am told, also to Dolly Parton: “You cannot change the wind, but you can adjust the sails.”

All Hands on Deck

Indeed, societies would have to ride the winds and tack their sails, as the waves of change gather pace, he noted, a view shared by several other speakers.

One of them, former head of Singapore’s civil service, Mr Peter Ho, now a senior advisor to the Centre for Strategic Futures, pointed to how social media has given rise to Kpop fan clubs and TikTok groups, able to co-ordinate actions and create “imagined communities” across state boundaries, beyond the reach of governments, which often lagged in their legal responses to technological change.

“Many young people even relate more to their online identities than their real world identities, leading to greater complexity,” he noted.

Taking up the point, fellow panelist Mr Fadi Chehade, a digital entrepreneur and former president of ICANN, noted that distinctions between digital and physical spaces were disappearing in an emerging “hybrid” world. Over the next five years, people could find themselves interacting with over 100 billion AI agents, which could “hyper-personalise” content, including misinformation.

This raised some profound questions: Who will provide governance in such a hybrid world? Should tech platforms hold such vast, unchecked power? Who would oversee the training of AI models? Would these reflect the world’s cultural diversity? How would cultural norms be set? Or would a hyper-personalised world become more atomised?

Addressing these tricky challenges calls for collaboration, across public, private and people sectors, he said. Drawing an analogy to desert settlements, which were often either fortresses, walled off to try to shield those inside, or oases, which were open, adaptive and welcoming of all, so long as they recognised the need to safeguard the shared space.

“Between the two, I have always believed it is better to be an oasis,” he said, hailing Singapore an oasis of multiculturalism, and a “beacon of hope” for what might be possible in a troubled world.

It Starts With You and Me

There were several such moments during the conference, when Singapore’s efforts, such as to integrate its housing programme or empower its people with education, were cited as role models for others. But officials and speakers from Singapore mostly demurred, insisting that this tiny island state harboured no delusions of a “Singapore way”. On the contrary, as it marked 60 years of independence this year, ever mindful of its fragility, it was eager to seek out experiences from elsewhere that might make its disparate society more resilient.

President Tharman had pointed to, for example, Sultan Nazrin Shah’s account of how leaders of a mosque and temple in Malaysia had come together to help the victims of a fire, offering shelter and support, with the temple opening its grounds for Muslims to pray.

Over the course of three days of discussions, the broad consensus that emerged was this: fostering cohesive and resilient communities was the work of many hands, requiring active and sustained effort, from the ground up, starting with you and me.

As President Tharman put it: “We have to develop a culture of respect and solidarity, through actions in everyday life...It requires everyone to pitch in, it’s not just a job for governments, but requires civil society, educators, the media, the religious and community leaders and individuals too...Everyday deeds and actions matter, because when they’re done frequently enough, and people see that they are done, they cascade. And when they cascade, they create norms, and create a culture.”

Respect, he noted, engenders trust, fosters unity, and inspires hope. “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’s how we rise together.”

These sentiments were catching, even reassuring, in these baleful times of hateful conflicts. So, as I left the conference, these words of the 1912 Peace Prayer came to mind: “Make me an instrument of your peace. Where there is hatred, let me sow love. Where there is injury, pardon. Where there is doubt, faith. Where there is despair, hope. Where there is darkness, light. Where there is sadness, joy.”

Or, more simply, peace be with you.

Warren Fernandez is a Senior Fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), and head of its National Security Studies Programme.

S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU Singapore
Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798

Please share this publication with your friends. They can subscribe to RSIS publications by scanning the QR Code below.

