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Managing the tensions of tribal politics: Lawrence Wong

At the IPS-RSIS conference yesterday, Finance Minister Lawrence Wong focused on the threat posed by new forms of tribalism and identity politics and how Singapore can meet the challenges they pose. Here are edited excerpts from his speech.

Finance Minister Lawrence Wong said that while the Government may not always arrive at a perfect solution, it will never let any group feel unheard, ignored or excluded. All must feel that they are part of the Singapore family, he added.
PHOTO: IPS

The natural instinct of humans is to look out for those who are most like us. Around the world, we see the rise of what we might call a "new tribalism" in politics, or "identity politics" as it is commonly described. What does all this mean for Singapore, and how should we respond?

IDENTITY POLITICS IN MODERN SOCIETY

The age-old conflict between national and tribal identities remains one of the most potent driving forces of violence within and between nations.

A military historian Victor Davis Hanson likened tribalism to an "ancient narcotic". As he puts it, once tribalism takes hold, it's "almost impossible... to prevent it from destroying the much harder work of establishing multiracial nationhood and citizenship" because it is an "ancient narcotic".

"Tribe" is not just a matter of ethnicity. There are other identity markers that are driving what we might call "the new tribalism" of the modern era. For example, the culture wars that we now see in the West cut across a huge swathe of issues – from abortion rights to voting rights; from woke culture to even vaccinations and mask wearing. These encompass many ethnicities and religious groups.

In the United States... despite its long-cherished melting-pot ethos, we see the rise of tribalism and identity politics. The once accepted political arguments for a racially diverse citizenry united by a common past and shared loyalties to the Constitution in the US are now eroding.

Why is it despite nationalism, despite the spread of democracy, despite efforts to forge commonalities across tribes, races and religions that we continue to live under the shadow of tribalism?

Part of the explanation lies in how many societies have evolved over the last few decades.

Consider how life was like in the 1950s or 60s: There were many problems, but societies everywhere were generally more cohesive, and people were more connected and more active in their respective communities. In Singapore, we call this the "kampung spirit".

Over the last few decades, there has been a greater emphasis on the culture of self. It's all about how "I want to be free to be myself". We see this most prominently in the US and parts of Europe, but it permeates societies everywhere.

To be clear, the focus on the individual has brought about a lot of progress in many areas. But as the New York Times' columnist David Brooks has noted, when the sense of self is inflated, at the expense of community, individualism becomes the reigning ethos, and the connections between people get weakened. This leads to loneliness and isolation. And when people feel lonely and alienated, they fall back on defences that are perhaps primeval in our species – we revert to tribes.

Tribalism may feel like community. But the two are not the same. Community is about inclusive connections, and it's based on mutual affection. Tribalism is inherently exclusionary, and it's based on mutual hate: "us" versus "them", "friend" versus "foe".

Once this sort of tribal identity takes root, it becomes difficult to achieve any compromise.

IDENTITY POLITICS IN SINGAPORE

We see these trends happening in many first-world democracies. Fortunately we are in a better position in Singapore. But we cannot assume that the harmony we now enjoy is solid, let alone permanent.

Singapore has always been a mix of tribal identities. We are a diverse racial mix from three major Asian civilisational complexes – China, India and South-east Asia. Yet we have none of their long history or indigenous cultures to hold us together.

Indeed, it is worth reminding ourselves how divided we were barely a century or two ago. Even seemingly stable identities that we now take for granted – Chinese, Malay, Indian; let alone Singaporean – were not stable at all.

To illustrate, let me ask a question: what do you think was the worst ethnic disturbance in Singapore's history?

Many would say the race riots of 1964, which resulted in 36 deaths and about 560 injuries. But, in fact, a far more violent conflict took place between Hokkiens and Teochews in May 1854. The riots lasted for more than 10 days, leaving 400 or more people killed, a great many wounded, and about 300 houses burned.

According to the historical record, the background to the conflict was the refusal of the Hokkiens "to join in a subscription to assist the rebels who had been driven from Amoy by the Imperial China troops".

It seems astounding to us today, but barely 150 years ago, tribal (or more accurately "dialect") identities among Chinese here in Singapore (as well as in China too) trumped their racial, cultural or national identity as Chinese.

Or consider this: Singapore nationalism (and Malayan nationalism that preceded it) had its inspiration in the separate nationalisms of Singapore's component races. If there had been no Chinese Revolutions (of 1911 and 1949); if there had been no Indian national movement which culminated in the independence of India and Pakistan in 1947; if there had been no Indonesian Revolution leading to its independence in 1948 – no Singaporean (Chinese, Malay or Indian) would have conceived it possible to have a Singaporean nationalism.

Our very claim of a national identity was prompted, if not inspired, by the tribal nationalisms of our various ethnic groups. Can we then really be sure, with the rise of China, India and South-east Asia, that Singaporean nationalism will not deconstruct again into Chinese, Indian and Malay nationalisms?

Our racial diversity is surpassed by our religious diversity: Muslims, Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, Taoists and many more. By some measure, Singapore is the most religiously diverse place in the world.

Our experience of racial and religious riots in the 1950s and 1960s underlined clearly the potential for sectarian clash. We also saw how such differences could be politicised when we were part of Malaysia. Never again, our founding leaders decided and declared.

Still, after our independence in 1965, many doubted if a small island-state, made up of people speaking dozens of languages and dialects, and surrounded by much larger neighbours, could hold together for long. Nevertheless, against the odds, we managed to avoid serious conflict.

This did not happen by chance. Our founding leaders went to great lengths to put in place measures to safeguard our racial and religious harmony. They took tough but necessary action. They invoked the Internal Security Act against chauvinists of all ilks. They introduced what were in the short-term unpopular policies – like making English the main medium of instruction in our schools, and later the Ethnic Integration Programme for public housing – to create more common spaces among the different racial and religious groups.

All of these moves were only possible because generations of Singaporeans believed that what Singapore stood for as a nation exceeded the pull of their own tribal instincts and feelings. Imagine what would have happened if our founding leaders had pursued race-based politics; or if the majority Chinese in Singapore had insisted on Mandarin as our working language; or if we had allowed ethnic enclaves to form all over Singapore.

There would not have been a Singaporean Singapore, and no Singaporean identity to speak of. At best, we would be a loose confederation of tribes, one conflict away from splintering.

But because Singaporeans made the improbable choice, we are one of the few places in the world today where – despite the many imperfections; despite lingering prejudices; despite warts and all – people of different tribes have lived peacefully together for more than half a century here.

This harmonious state of affairs will always be on a knife-edge; so it needs constant attention and careful management. In the hyper-connected world that we live in, the culture wars that began in the West will not be confined there. They have already created new forms of identity politics here, beyond our familiar divides of race and religion.

If we are not careful, this new tribalism can easily take root here, and our politics can become defined by new identity issues too.

Managing these new tensions doesn't mean that we pretend that differences do not exist.

For example, France has tried to deal with the issue of race by banning the collection of race-based data. But the problem has not gone away. Instead France has seen a surge of racial protests in recent years, with many minority groups calling for the government to collect race-based data so as to better inform policymaking.

The lesson is this: simply ignoring identities and tribes does not mean they no longer exist.

Instead, as a starting point, we must recognise that the pull of identity politics arises from the real differences in lived realities. Different segments of our population will have their own real and valid concerns and anxieties.

For example, women continue to bear a disproportionate share of housework and receive less recognition at work compared to their male counterparts. Another example: People with disabilities are not able to participate as fully in our society as they would like to. And yet another, more contested, example: LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer) persons feeling that society does not accept them – or even recognise them as different.

These are important concerns. One cannot say to any of these groups that their concerns are illegitimate or exaggerated. If we are to live up to the founding ethos of Singapore, every Singaporean deserves a place in our society, regardless of his or her background, status or racial or cultural identity.

This is what a fair and just society must mean. And we cannot – in the name of avoiding the dangers of identity politics – deny the rights of a variety of groups to organise themselves, so as to gain recognition for their concerns, or seek to improve their conditions and well-being.

The challenge is to acknowledge and do our best to address the legitimate concerns of every "tribe", without allowing our politics to be based exclusively on identities or tribal allegiances.

OUR WAY FORWARD

Before, in the aftermath of the 1964 race riots, we took pains to minimise our differences. Today we have a more diverse society, but we also have much more in common, and the Singaporean identity has become stronger.

So how can we balance the competing demands of diverse identity groups while maintaining a cohesive and harmonious society? How can we build a society, where everyone is equal and everyone has a place, regardless of their backgrounds?

These are difficult questions and I don't have full answers. But I would like to raise a few possible approaches.

First, to tackle tribalism and identity politics, we should strengthen our human relationships.

This starts with strengthening the spirit of reciprocity and kinship at the daily level. We must be good friends, good neighbours, good Samaritans. Having such human relationships ultimately helps to strengthen the trust we have in one another, and this is the elemental task of every society. Because when people lose faith in one another, things will fall apart very quickly.

It takes effort and time to get to know those around us and build trust. This is not something that we can compel or do at scale; relationships have to be built one at a time.

What we can scale are our social norms. So we should work hard to strengthen the norms that bring us closer together – norms like caring for others, kindness, graciousness.

We have seen many good examples of such norms throughout this pandemic. The countless healthcare workers who went beyond their call of duty to care for our Covid-19 patients, or the numerous examples of front-line workers – from taxi drivers to cleaners to food delivery riders – who toiled silently to keep our society going.

These examples represent the best of us, and we should recognise the values they embody. Second, let us avoid stereotyping groups of people or assuming that each community is monolithic or homogeneous.

For instance, a female Chinese from a poor background would have a vastly different lived experience compared with a male Chinese from a wealthy family.

"Chinese privilege" is not the only such stereotype. Many of us may hold preconceived notions about each other's ethnicity, gender, religion, or political allegiance. Minorities especially are subject to such prejudices; so all of us must be more conscious of the stereotypes we might harbour.

We must avoid reducing our understanding of each other to a single dimension. This hardens our views of those who are different from us, and, over time, we see all issues through that lens. It will become increasingly difficult to find common ground, or solutions that benefit all groups.

Conversely, we should be mindful of breaking society into ever smaller boxes. This is what we've seen in some places – for instance, black feminists not seeing eye to eye with white feminists; or one minority feeling it has to be more aggrieved than another; and so on.

We must fight the instinct to set ourselves apart and pigeonhole others, and instead be willing to build understanding and commonality across identity lines.

The reality is that all of us have multiple identities. Being a Singaporean should never mean having to give up any of our other identities. So we may be Chinese, Malay, Indian, Eurasian or any other race. But we are first and foremost Singaporeans. Likewise, regardless of our gender or sexual orientations, regardless of the cause we champion, we are all Singaporeans, first and foremost.

If we uphold this idea – that being Singaporean is a matter of conviction and choice, and that it takes priority over our other identities and affiliations – that would give all of us one important commonality around which to build understanding and trust; to negotiate our differences and find common ground on difficult issues; and then we can continually look for ways to move forward together.

Third, let us draw on the better angels of our nature. Humans are tribalists, but we are also traders by nature. Throughout history, humanity has thrived because of our instinctive desire to explore the unknown, and to meet new people, among whom we can live with, trade with and learn from. In fact these trader instincts are an integral part of who we are as Singaporeans because Singapore started as an entrepot trading hub. Trade is in our blood.

Trade is not just about making economic transactions. Trade is grounded on norms of reciprocity, trust and mutual benefit. The foundation of all successful trades lies in the willingness to exchange and cooperate. This same trading instinct is crucial in setting the tone of our society.

From the beginning, our forefathers knew the importance of compromises and striking a fair deal for all. We must continue in this vein – continue to engage with one another, cooperate and work towards mutual benefit. We must do so not only with those outside Singapore, but also between different segments of Singaporeans as well. Fourth, as a society, we must continue to give all Singaporeans reason to hope and a fair chance to have a good life.

The rise of extreme politics in many advanced economies is in large part related to their economic woes. The middle-class in many Western countries has been steadily losing ground not just for years, but for several decades. The typical households face stagnating incomes, with children faring less well than their parents. We must never allow this to happen in Singapore. So we will continue to work hard to promote inclusive growth, and to ensure that all Singaporeans can succeed in their pursuits.

This is how we break out of a zero-sum mindset, where certain groups feel like others' success must have come at their own expense, or feel that every "tribal" setback is a major grievance.

When it comes to social programmes, we will do our best to avoid such invidious comparisons by balancing targeted support with universal coverage for essential items.

In short, we will do everything we can to make sure that the Singapore dream remains alive and well for every Singaporean.

On top of all this, the Government must and will always be a fair and honest broker. Despite our best attempts, we might not always succeed in establishing a consensus on especially controversial issues.

In such cases, the Government will do our utmost to recognise the challenges and needs of different groups, decide on the appropriate policy, and convince the rest of society that this is a fair way to move forward.

We have done so for the Ethnic Integration Policy in our HDB flats. We have done so for Special Assistance Plan in our schools. We will continue to do so on other issues.

We may not always arrive at a perfect solution. But we will never let any group feel unheard, ignored or excluded. We will never let any group feel boxed in or ostracised. All must feel that they are part of the Singapore conversation; all must feel that they are part of the Singapore family; all must feel there is hope for the future.