

Culture of respect: Why it's important and how we can sustain it

Mudslinging detracts from serious debate over policies that matter to society and deters good people from seeking or remaining in public office



Terence Ho

In May, stand-up comedian Li Haoshi drew the ire of Chinese officials for a quip deemed disrespectful to the People's Liberation Army during a live comedy show in Beijing. The authorities' response was swift and severe: The entertainment company that represents Li was fined close to US\$2 million (S\$2.7 million) and suspended from holding performances.

While many, especially in the West, may balk at the harshness of the penalty and its chilling effect on freedom of expression, it could be argued that many liberal democracies have gone too far in the other direction in allowing or even encouraging the lampooning of political leaders and institutions.

For instance, United States President Joe Biden's political opponents have mocked him as "Sleepy Joe" or a "grandpa" past his prime. Beyond unflattering caricatures and nicknames, public figures have also been subject to rampant abuse. For instance, a BBC investigation in 2022 found that more than 3,000 offensive tweets were sent to British Members of Parliament every day.

DISRESPECT MAY HAVE SERIOUS CONSEQUENCES

The loss of respect for authority figures should be cause for consternation in any society. Bullying of public figures, whether in mainstream or social media, may deter good people

from seeking or remaining in public office. For instance, political commentators have suggested that personal attacks and constant vilification may have contributed to Ms Jacinda Ardern's decision to resign as New Zealand's prime minister.

It would be a huge loss if politics were to be left to narcissists who thrive on controversy, or just the few decent people who are somehow impervious to personal attacks. Unfettered mudslinging also detracts from serious debate over policies that matter to society. Where it is more rewarding to throw shade at political opponents rather than engage in serious debate, the quality of political discourse will surely suffer.

More insidiously, a lack of respect erodes the mutual responsibility citizens have towards one another. After all, we rely on institutions and leaders to arbitrate among competing interests and forge national consensus to take the country forward. If they are not accorded basic respect, this crucial role of coordination and leadership is undermined.

EARNING RESPECT THROUGH ACCOUNTABILITY

Respect, however, must be earned. It stems not just from competence, but from accountability as well. Without the latter, it is difficult for any institution or leader to be respected.

When errors or misdeeds have been committed, some governments may choose to hide the truth or even clamp down on whistleblowers. Such actions will eventually erode public trust, and may necessitate an escalating cycle of obfuscation or repression. It is much better if leaders have the political incentive to come clean and rectify shortcomings – whether it be in response to data leaks in public agencies, improper infection control in hospitals or erroneous payments.

Where allegations of official impropriety arise, it is important to address them squarely and



US President Joe Biden in Washington on Friday. Public figures in many liberal democracies face rampant abuse, says the writer, noting how opponents have called Mr Biden "Sleepy Joe" and a "grandpa" past his prime. PHOTO: NYTIMES

transparently. Fortunately, this has been the case in Singapore. Recently, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong tasked the Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau (CPIB) as well as Senior Minister Teo Chee Hean to look into the rental of state-owned properties by two Cabinet ministers when questions arose regarding the propriety of these transactions. The reports by CPIB and SM Teo, which found no evidence of wrongdoing, will be published and tabled in Parliament.

Whether from the ruling party or opposition, no one should be given a free pass from scrutiny. In 2022, the Committee of Privileges, chaired by Speaker of Parliament Tan Chuan-Jin, was convened to look into a complaint that then Workers' Party MP Raeesah Khan had lied in Parliament. This resulted in a recommended \$35,000 fine for Ms Khan for abuse of parliamentary privilege.

PARTISAN EXCESSES CAN UNDERMINE BOTH ACCOUNTABILITY AND RESPECT

Sadly, it is all too easy for partisan interests to colour judgment of what is acceptable behaviour on the part of political leaders. Consider the political drama

unfolding in the United States, where former president Donald Trump is facing serious charges of mishandling classified documents. The American public's reaction to Trump's indictment has been more or less polarised along party lines. Many who identify as Republicans have slammed the charges as a "witch hunt" without precedent, while the vast majority of Democrats believe that the indictment is justified.

When a political leader flouts norms of propriety, this raises the question of whether it is right to accord respect to the office but not its occupant. In an era of personality politics, however, respect for both office and occupant often goes out the window.

RESPECT DOESN'T MEAN UNQUESTIONING ACCEPTANCE OF THE STATUS QUO

Respect, however, does not mean slavish devotion towards authority or unquestioning acceptance of government policies. Members of society should not be respectful to the point where they feel unable to raise difficult issues or compelled to toe the official line. This would only hamper progress beyond the status quo even when a country's

circumstances and needs have changed.

Rather, in a mature society, it should be possible to express disagreement in a civil and respectful manner. In fact, respect is the foundation for civilised social intercourse, enabling rather than impeding difficult conversations that are necessary for societal progress. Within a culture of respect, there should be space for stakeholders such as non-governmental organisations, academics and concerned citizens to advocate for social change and make their case to policymakers and the public.

SETTING AND SUSTAINING THE TONE FOR SOCIETY

Political leaders themselves can play a big part by encouraging informed debate and avoiding the temptation to denigrate their rivals, bearing in mind that invective is often reciprocated and can easily escalate. On a recent visit to the US, Indian politician Rahul Gandhi said there were people who think they knew better than God, and called Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi "one such specimen". A senior member of Mr Modi's party, in turn, labelled Mr Gandhi "a fake Gandhi" whose words tarnished India's image abroad. Criticism, even if justified, should be based on substance rather than mere rhetoric.

The mass media also bears responsibility for setting the tone of public debate in how it reports and analyses issues. It should be a conduit for the respectful airing of different views, rather than an outlet for those seeking to disparage or humiliate others.

While the law may be used to tackle defamation and falsehoods, it is an inadequate defence against a culture of disrespect. It is the collective responsibility of all members of society to uphold decorum in public debate, and to help shape social norms of what is acceptable and what is not.

It is important to recognise that common courtesy for fellow citizens, institutions and those in authority is a *sine qua non* for the success of any society, and should not be sacrificed on the altar of freedom of expression. Non-profit organisation Honour Singapore has a point in averring that honour and mutual respect are enablers of constructive public debate, and vital for Singapore's future.

As political contestation in Singapore intensifies, I hope Singaporeans will continue to respect one another regardless of political persuasion or affiliation, regarding each other as fellow citizens on the same team who are working together for the betterment of society.

• Terence Ho is an associate professor in practice at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore. He is the author of *Governing Well: Reflections On Singapore And Beyond* (World Scientific, 2023).