Demonstrators clashing with police officers during an anti-immigration protest in Rotherham, England, on Aug 4. While Singapore's context differs significantly from that of Britain, the underlying forces that fuelled recent riots there – racism, extremism, populism and deep-seated xenophobia – are universal dangers that we cannot afford to ignore, the writers say. PHOTO: REUTERS

Harmony in the cross hairs: Lessons for S'pore from UK riots

Far-right violence unravelling the UK's multicultural society is a cautionary tale on the need to actively address the roots of extremism and xenophobia.

Mathew Mathews and Melvin Tay

The recent riots in the UK, marked by a surge of white nationalist violence and targeted attacks on minority communities, are a stark warning of how quickly societal fault lines can fracture into chaos.

While Singapore may seem worlds apart from these tensions, the underlying forces that fuelled these riots – racism, extremism, populism and deep-seated xenophobia – are universal dangers that we cannot afford to ignore.

For a country known to have one of the most welcoming attitudes towards immigration in Europe, the recent events in the UK serve as a cautionary tale for multicultural Singapore that prides itself on social harmony.

THE ROOTS OF THE RIOTS

Disinformation about a stabbing attack on July 29 that left three children dead – amplified by influencers and even some UK politicians on social media – engendered the initial protests.

The ensuing violence is deeply rooted in the UK's long and complex history with immigration, marked by recurring tensions and divisive rhetoric.

Post-war immigration from Commonwealth countries brought significant demographic changes, but also sparked racial conflicts, such as the 1958 Notting Hill riots.

A decade later, the Conservative British politician Enoch Powell's "Rivers of Blood" speech further inflamed anxieties about immigration. This was followed by the rise of far-right movements in the 1970s and 1980s with further polarisation of public opinion.

More recently, the 2016 Brexit referendum, driven in part by fears of uncontrolled immigration, once again exposed deep societal divisions.

Tensions were exacerbated during the Covid-19 pandemic, leading to a resurgence in anti-immigrant and racist sentiments and hate crimes.

These events, fuelled by populist rhetoric, have created a volatile environment simmering with ill-will, racism and longstanding anxieties about immigration.

This reflects Britain's ongoing struggle with its multicultural identity.

POPULISM, XENOPHOBIA AND THEIR ECHOES IN SINGAPORE

Singapore's context differs significantly from that of the UK. The city-state's independence was largely grounded on its desire to forge a path distinct from its colonial legacies, and on its rejection of identity or race-based politics.

Unlike the UK's pluralistic and adversarial political system which often allows populist and far-right rhetoric to gain traction, Singapore's dominant-party system has maintained a strong hold on governance since 1965.

Singapore's demographics are also carefully managed with strategic immigration and integration policies, in contrast with the more organic shifts seen in the UK.

These factors have thus far allowed the Government to proactively shape public discourse and swiftly address divisive rhetoric before it takes root.

But there are concerning signs that similar forces of populism and xenophobia could take root here if left unchecked.

While the political landscape here is more controlled and less susceptible to the dramatic shifts seen in more liberal democracies, there have been a number of instances where such populist rhetoric has crept into public discourse.

Since the 2011 General Election, there has been a noticeable increase in anti-immigrant sentiment, driven by concerns over the number of foreign workers and the perceived strain on public services and infrastructure.

Some political parties and candidates that tapped into these anxieties, promising to prioritise "Singaporeans first", gained significant traction, reflecting a growing undercurrent of nativism.

In 2021, a political party was called out for "race-baiting" over its stance on the Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement, or Ceca, between Singapore and India. The party firmly rejected this accusation, asserting that its concerns were focused solely on the economic and employment impacts of the agreement.

More recently, another local politician's remarks about the nationality of a young girl featured on a National Day banner were followed by a barrage of online vitriol from netizens.

Xenophobia in Singapore, meanwhile, manifests itself in more subtle but pervasive ways, affecting the daily interactions and perceptions of foreigners within the community.

This latent prejudice becomes most apparent during contentious incidents or online, particularly on forums and social media.

It might come as a surprise, but in Singapore, concerns regarding immigration appear more pronounced compared with the UK.

According to the latest World Values Survey, a global study exploring the values and beliefs of citizens across more than 80 countries, only 41.2 per cent of Singapore residents felt that the impact of immigrants on the country's development was "quite good" or "very good", compared with 56 per cent in the UK.

Moreover, while 71.1 per cent of UK residents agreed that immigration strengthened cultural diversity, only 48.1 per cent of Singapore residents shared this view. Additionally, 43.2 per cent of residents here believed that immigration increases unemployment, a stark contrast to 20.8 per cent of their UK counterparts.

A separate Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) report on national identity in 2021 also found that 53.3 per cent of about 2,000 Singapore residents felt that the Government spends too much money assisting immigrants.

TINDERBOXES OF RACISM AND EXTREMISM

Racism and extremism are potent forces that have the potential to unravel the fabric of any society, as seen in the recent events in the UK.

For decades, Singapore has been proactive in preventing the formation of racial enclaves through policies like the Ethnic Integration Policy in public housing and efforts to promote multiracialism in schools.

Such measures have been instrumental in fostering a sense of shared identity among Singaporeans, regardless of their ethnic background. However, the mere presence of such policies is not enough to eradicate deeply ingrained prejudices.

A 2022 IPS report on race relations, which surveyed 2,000-odd Singapore residents, found that about one-fifth of minority-race respondents reported experiencing unfair treatment at work due to their race.

Racism in Singapore may also often manifest itself in subtler forms, such as microaggressions or exclusionary practices, which can contribute to a climate of alienation and distrust.

Online platforms, in particular, have become breeding grounds for racially charged rhetoric, where bigoted views are amplified and normalised.

Furthermore, discussions around nationality and citizenship here are all too often conflated with race, particularly in the context of Chinese nationals from mainland China or Indian nationals from India.

This conflation feeds xenophobic sentiments that blur the lines between legitimate concerns over immigration and outright racism.

For instance, criticism directed at immigrants or migrant workers can quickly morph into racially charged rhetoric, with specific ethnic groups being unfairly targeted. This creates a toxic environment where both foreign nationals and local citizens of similar ethnic backgrounds feel alienated and marginalised.

Moreover, Singapore is not immune to the threat of extremism. While the overall level of such threats remains low, there is a persistent undercurrent that cannot be ignored.

The Internal Security Department has periodically issued press releases detailing the detention of individuals who were radicalised and preparing to act violently. These cases serve as a stark reminder that the seeds of extremism can take root even in a society as carefully regulated as Singapore's.

The Government's vigilance in monitoring and addressing these threats is crucial, but so too is the need for community resilience and proactive measures to prevent such ideologies from gaining a foothold.

THE WAY FORWARD

At the heart of the UK's turmoil is its failure to address the socio-economic issues that have bred resentment and division.

In Singapore, similar concerns about immigration often stem from anxieties related to the cost of living, employment opportunities and infrastructural strain. If these underlying issues are not proactively managed, they can easily become fertile ground for xenophobic sentiments.

The Government must remain vigilant, ensuring that policies related to housing and employment are robust and inclusive, addressing the pressures that often lead to feelings of being "crowded out". By doing so, we can prevent xenophobic and populist rhetoric from gaining traction in the mainstream.

Legislative muscle also plays a role in discouraging nefarious actors from sowing discord; Singapore's strict laws regulating public gatherings and free speech have been instrumental in maintaining social order.

For instance, the Public Order Act requires permits for public assemblies, while the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act and the proposed Maintenance of Racial Harmony Bill would allow the swift correction of misinformation that could incite unrest.

This discerning approach to freedom of expression and assembly will seem restrictive to some, but it serves as a strategic check against the kind of inflammatory rhetoric that has stoked tensions elsewhere.

However, as prevailing research suggests, regulation alone is insufficient.

There is also a pressing need for public education to promote media literacy, empower citizens to critically evaluate the content they consume, and guard against the dangers of disinformation.

Additionally, to sustain the peace, it is crucial to cultivate spaces where differing perspectives can be shared in a constructive manner.

One approach is through supporting structured in-person platforms for open dialogue, such as the IPS workshops on Race, Religion and Intergroup Cohesion emphasising awareness and competence in discussing sensitive issues.

These will not only allow citizens to air their views but also encourage discernment and responsibility, ensuring that conversations remain constructive while avoiding the divisive rhetoric seen in other contexts.

Such efforts shift the narrative from division to empathy and understanding.

Singapore's future depends on its ability to navigate these complex dynamics with wisdom and foresight.

By addressing the root causes of social tensions, promoting constructive dialogue and empowering citizens to think critically, we can safeguard our nation's harmony and ensure that it remains resilient in the face of global challenges.

The stakes are high, the challenges are real, and the time to act is now.

At the heart of the UK's turmoil is its failure to address the socio-economic issues that have bred resentment and division. In Singapore, similar concerns about immigration often stem from anxieties related to the cost of living, employment opportunities and infrastructural strain. If these underlying issues are not proactively managed, they can easily become fertile ground for xenophobic sentiments.

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