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Little India riot: The dog that did not bark

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TIME TO DEAL WITH 'BROADER QUESTIONS' RAISED

Little India riot: The dog that did not bark

TODAY FILE PHOTO

EUGENE K B TAN



In the aftermath of the Little India riot, the focus and dominant narrative, unsurprisingly, have been on law and order issues.

The Government's narrative is that the riot was a "one-off" spontaneous mayhem; the proximate cause being the inebriated state of some foreign workers reacting angrily and violently to a fatal accident involving one of their own.

Yet, the law and order narrative does not sit well with the long-standing issues in Little India, such as the easy availability of alcohol, jaywalking, littering and other public nuisances, as well as overcrowding.

Prior to that fateful Sunday, more than 20,000 foreign workers were bussed into Little India every Sunday, adding significantly to the human and vehicular congestion there.

It is a small miracle that Little India had coped all these years until the

unfortunate events of Dec 8. Did the authorities do enough to better manage the lived and troubling realities in Little India?

It is hard to comprehend how the authorities could have issued some 400 liquor licences within a 1.1 sq km area in Little India where alcohol, until recently, could be purchased and consumed at will.

THE 'OTHER' 40 PER CENT

The Government is also emphatic that the riot did not signal local-foreign resentment. Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong had said that "there is no tension ... no sense of grievances or hardship or injustice".

Foreign labour comprises almost 40 per cent of our 3.45 million workforce. Singapore continues to need migrant workers and their numbers will remain substantial with a thriving economy and even as we restructure our economy.

Hence, it is imperative that we work resolutely towards enhancing the working and living conditions for migrant workers, including the regu-

latory environment that governs them.

The labour movement must step up its game and do more to better represent and protect foreign workers. With the November 2012 SMRT bus strike still fresh on our minds, the bifurcated regime in the representation of Singaporean and non-Singaporean workers leaves much to be desired.

Given its terms of reference, the Committee of Inquiry may not concern itself with the underlying issues and unhappiness, if any, which could have added fuel to the volatile mix of lawlessness, violence and chaos on that fateful Dec 8 evening.

Even then, let us not forget the proverbial dog that did not bark, which PM Lee may have alluded to last week as the "broader questions for our society".

We should not shy away from an honest appraisal of these questions even as we attend to the first order of business in the aftermath of the riot.

A failure to do so might result in us merely tackling the symptoms, and not the causes, of the problems associated with the significantly large migrant worker population here.

WHO SHOULDERS THE COSTS?

What might be some of the broader questions? Let me offer two. The first is whether our heavy reliance on cheap, transient foreign labour is a sustainable economic formula.

Even if it is, we need to consider whether we are prepared to shoulder more of the costs of having a large foreign labour force, and also whether such costs have been properly allocated among the stakeholders.

An immediate cutback to the size of the foreign workforce is a simplistic, knee-jerk response, and certainly not the solution. Reducing our reliance on foreign workers overnight is not something that can be achieved without significant impact to our lives.

But it is abundantly clear that the days of sustained rapid migration are over. There is a limit to securing economic gains (clearest in the short run) at the expense of the fabric of our society (social effects are often clearer in the long run).

Let us assume that our economic formula, requiring large inputs of labour, is sustainable.

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Are the benefits of such a policy largely privatised while the costs socialised? At another level, are we as a society prepared to shoulder more of the costs?

We need to provide adequate decent dormitories and amenities, share open and public spaces with the foreign workers who, like Singaporeans, seek dignity in work.

More needs to be done to enable the foreign workers to socialise and gather on weekends without imposing disproportionately on a local community and testing each other's tolerance.

Or do we, instead, create gated communities designed either to largely confine foreign workers to their dormitories or living quarters on their days off, or to keep them away from our living spaces?

We cannot continue to reap the benefits of a still open immigration regime while not shouldering the costs that come with it. The trade-offs must be recognised and be borne equitably by the Government, employers and Singaporeans, and between Singaporeans and the migrant workers.

XENOPHOBIA

It is now a bigger policy challenge to maintain the large foreign workforce even with the flurry of stringent law and order measures in Little India. If we do not have or are not prepared to provide necessary dormitories, facilities and amenities, we will just have to bite the bullet and make do with a much smaller foreign workforce.

To be sure, the riot cannot be justified. Similarly, the online vitriol — bordering on xenophobia and racism — in the aftermath of the riot is worrying given that immigration, short-term and long-term, are policy imperatives for Singapore.

The basis of xenophobia is ultimately fear, including the fear that migration threatens our well-being; the fear of being overwhelmed by foreign values, cultures and influences; and the fear that Singapore's identity, integrity and innocence are under siege.

These fears may well stem from ignorance, stereotypes and close-mindedness. But they conspire and feed into the growing doubt of some Singaporeans towards immigration. Such negative sentiments are infectious and counter-productive.

Once immigration is largely equated with an existential threat, then the essence of an openness of mind, spirit and heart — so vital in an immigrant society like ours — will certainly be crushed by growing angst, anger and anxiety among Singaporeans and migrants alike.

BIGGER IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE

Why is it important to engage the "broader questions" promptly, purposefully and honestly? At the core, these questions concern the kind of society that we aspire towards and, more importantly, how we get there. What are the values that will shepherd and discipline our common destiny?



We cannot continue to reap the benefits of a still open immigration regime while not shouldering the costs that come with it. The trade-offs must be recognised and be borne equitably by the Government, employers and Singaporeans, and between Singaporeans and the migrant workers.

In turn, they impinge intimately on whether Singapore will remain an attractive destination for both short- and long-term migration with the attendant economic, social and political consequences.

At the heart of these broader questions is the viability of our immigration policy and our economic formula. Coming on the back of the bruising Population White Paper controversy earlier this year, the riot has cast further shadows over the year-2030 plan-

ning parameter of 6.9 million people in Singapore.

Can the Government secure a strong buy-in from Singaporeans for its immigration policy embodied in the White Paper that seeks to grow the population and economy in light of the demographic challenges?

That the "one-off", almost deadly, riot did take place is disconcerting and troubling enough.

The Government has assiduously sought to manage adroitly public opin-

ion and festering emotions seared by the images of the riot that have offended our sensitivities and sense of well-being.

However, it would be a larger tragedy if we only dealt with the riot as a law and order issue, but did not engage the broader questions raised — especially the urgency of right-sizing the benefits and costs of our economic and immigration policies.

That is our foremost challenge for 2014 and beyond.