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Trust is vital in efforts to counter terrorism

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EUGENE K B TAN



It is a sign of the times. Inter-faith ties in many parts of the world are visibly under stress. Minority communities increasingly find themselves under a pall of suspicion, distrust and danger. Too often, moral panic and probing questions have been raised over the viability of multiculturalism as the integrative social glue in diverse societies.

It is in such trying times that pluralistic societies are put through the litmus test: How resilient are they in coping and adapting to the increased diversity and complexity against the changing faith and security landscapes?

Yet, trust is non-negotiable, more so in trying times. In the aftermath of a terrorist attack, especially by home-grown perpetrators, the primary concern — for policymakers and the man on the street alike — is whether the delicate social fabric unravels.

In an age where faith-inspired, violent extremism is a real and potent national security concern, public policy and legislation in a multi-religious society have to be inclusive, with no particular set of religious beliefs discriminated against or preferred.

This entails the state remaining steadfastly neutral in a multi-religious polity. The regulatory challenge lies in the state regulating the religious realm, and acting as a mediator and adjudicator where needed.

Because the end goal of terrorists is to inflict paranoia, terror and division on a community, a society's resilience and cohesion are vital. While the use of coercive hard law is necessary in the face of clear and present danger, hard law is not designed to align the hearts and minds of a community under strain.

A muscular and legalistic approach to countering terrorism is counter-productive. Given the nature of the terrorist threat as both existential and ideational, the use of hard law is not only reactionary but also grossly inadequate in protecting a society from visceral fears, as it does not engender a resilient society.

Instead, the various communities have to be consciously inducted and involved to maintain and enhance cohesion and religious harmony, and avoid the destructive spiral of incivility in which distrust, fear and moral panic feed the breakdown of the social fabric.

USE OF 'SOFT LAWS', COMMUNITY-CENTRED APPROACHES NEEDED

Trust is vital in efforts to counter terrorism



Hence, there is increasing use of non-enforceable "soft law" (such as codes of conduct) by the authorities in seeking a shift in majority-minority societal relations. These ideals embody the rules, institutions and norms to self-regulate behaviour at the individual and community levels. In Singapore, they include the Declaration on Religious Harmony and the 10 desired attributes of the Muslim community in socio-religious life.

In countering the terrorist threat, the approach has to evolve rapidly from a whole-of-government to a whole-of-society approach. This underscores a significant recognition that the security of the state, government and society are intimately connected and indivisible.

Further, the terrorism threat requires more than just a security response. A regulatory framework that seeks to prevent a multiracial, multi-religious society from imploding after a terrorist attack has to emphasise and nurture a cooperative values-based culture, comprising norms that instill ethical conduct of the masses, grounded in self-regulation, civic responsibility and social resilience.

The intent is to build understanding, confidence and trust. Although soft law is no panacea, it can help develop normative consensus and have communities internalise the values necessary to hold society together —

Policemen taking down a 'gunman' while others tend to the 'injured' in a counter-terrorism scenario during the Keat Hong Emergency Preparedness Day held next to Choa Chu Kang MRT station in March. The terrorism threat requires more than just a security response — it also needs a regulatory framework that seeks to prevent a multiracial, multi-religious society from imploding after a terrorist attack.

TODAY FILE PHOTO

● Eugene K B Tan is associate professor at the School of Law, Singapore Management University.

one that seeks to align the hearts and minds buttressed by trust and peaceful understanding even when a society is under siege.

Trust has to remain a fundamental attribute in the meaningful regulation of religious anxieties and in the state's response to the terrorist threat. Moreover, if trust between communities is to prevail in hard times, the capacity of civil society to decisively thwart the terror threat patently needs to be conscientiously developed bottom-up.

Given that suicidal terrorists are unlikely to be deterred by coercive hard law or by persuasive soft law, tackling the isolated, misled variants of every faith and the fallout after a terrorist attack will require more soft power than hard power, more community-centred approaches than coercive security measures.

Terrorism is not unique to any faith community; it is a tactic to foment hatred, exclusion and demonisation of others, especially after a terrorist attack. The actions of a minority adopting violent and extremist interpretations of Islam have led to expectations that Muslim communities globally take the lead in active community policing to counter the ideological traction of extremism and the glorified use of violence.

Those who have imbibed the desired values and norms that soft law instruments seek to engender will rec-

ognise their responsibility to alert the authorities when their loved ones have gone astray and engage in activities that can undermine societal harmony.

Yet, how community policing is done makes the crucial difference. Such efforts must not foster the cynical view that community policing is abetting the surveillance and suppression of the religious sphere or of specific communities. Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's caution this week that "Islamophobia is as bad and as unacceptable as extremist radical terrorism" is timely. He added: "It's not just the Malay-Muslim community, but it's also how the other communities react to this, and respond to the Muslims in Singapore."

Confidence-building becomes viable and sustainable only through the joint efforts of Muslims and non-Muslims as full citizens. Societies need to calibrate their counter-terrorism approach in a manner that delicately balances vigilance and surveillance, long-term resilience and hard security measures against clear and present dangers, and vigorous law enforcement and durable social cohesion. The fight against terrorism cannot be only about hard-nosed security measures.

The well-being of multi-faith societies will also have to cohere around the substantive acceptance of multiple identities at one level and, at another level, through a balanced approach of two realms that are important in the life of faith communities: The transnational and the national.

Too much of the former will heighten secular anxieties and raise questions about their loyalty and commitment to secular universal values. Too much emphasis of the latter could be perceived by a faith community as requiring it to dissociate from their religious moorings and core beliefs.

A balanced approach ensures the meaningful participation of faith believers in all facets of national life as full-fledged citizens.

In Singapore's context, this commitment to and acceptance of multiple identities and national values is a necessary pathway for all Singaporeans to fulfil their secular duties without sacrificing their religious values.

Governments do not defeat terrorism on their own. Instead, societies defeat terrorism by nurturing from the ground up an effective and sustainable bulwark against violent extremism and the divisive forces that seek to destroy our way of life and our common humanity. Trust is essential and has to be the foundational ethos in all that we do against an existential threat.