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Tan K. B. EUGENE

Singapore Management University, eugene@smu.edu.sg

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2016 – A tumultuous year of revolt against the elites

To bring trust back into the relationship between those in power and masses, governments need to purposefully deal with people's resentments, fury and fears. BY EUGENE KB TAN

IN the annals of history, 2016 will probably be remembered as the year of the populist revolt against the elites, against the backdrop of bewildering disruptions and an abiding sense of displacement and control accentuated by technological advancements.

Anti-establishment figures and movements have triumphed over the establishment and the elites (notwithstanding that "elites" and "establishment" can be lazy labels as they generalise and stereotype complex situations into simplistic categories); consider Britain's vote to leave the European Union or Brexit, Rodrigo Duterte's election as the Philippines' president and Donald Trump's election as America's 45th president.

The critical challenge is to bring trust back into the core of the relationship between those in power and the masses. The gradual erosion of trust and confidence between the government and the people is often insidious, culminating in a democratic revolt through the ballot boxes.

Adroitly identifying the genuine concerns and to purposefully deal with the angst, anger and anxieties is a key task of governance in such unsettling times.

At one level, this entails that governments ensure that the markers of globalisation – such as open markets, immigration, and trade and investment policies – not only work but are also shown to work for the benefit of the masses. This requires that the benefits of globalisation be shared as widely and as equitably as possible.

In addition, the downsides of globalisation, whether it's income and wealth inequality, wage stagnation, job insecurity and loss of jobs, are minimised and mitigated where possible.

Mr Trump's election is perhaps the loudest wake-up call to right-thinking governments and politicians the world over to ponder how governance and politics can bring out the best in people rather than eliciting visceral reactions, such as xenophobia, racism and misogyny, among the population.

Instead of being the vanguard of democratic governance, American politics is gridlocked, rendered dysfunctional through zero sum ideological battles. To compound matters, politics is populated by a coterie of elites and uber-rich who seem bent on self-preservation and furthering vested interests, undermining the fragile social compact that binds American society.

Although Singaporeans can take comfort that our domestic context is very different from that of many liberal democracies, we are by no means immune from such divisive forces, which can easily spiral out of control once unleashed.

Singapore is a poster child of globalisation. There is no alternative to making globalisation work for us. Our geopolitical fate compels us to be an open economy, with trade, foreign investments and immigration as essentials.

Yet, the vagaries and sharp end of globalisation – including that not everyone is able to benefit from globalisation to the same extent – dictate that we should not take it for granted that public sentiment would not turn against globalisation, even if that amounts to cutting off one's nose to spite one's face.

We have seen pockets of xenophobia in recent years, particularly over concerns on immigration, national identity and belonging, and the socio-economic divide. Even if the unhappiness appears shortlived, we ignore them to our collective detriment. Often, the unhappiness points to festering grievances, fears and angst among those who feel that the success and wealth of the country have passed them by.

Such unhappiness should not be simply brushed aside as coming from a disgruntled



For Singapore, there is no alternative to making globalisation work for it. Yet, it should not take it for granted that public sentiment would not turn against globalisation. FILE PHOTO

minority on the fringes. Given that Singaporeans have known only one government since 1959, the odds are that any unhappiness would – fairly or otherwise – be pinned on the ruling party, the institutions, the elites and their erstwhile policies. Singapore has not had a prolonged economic downturn nor a crisis thus far. For a relatively sheltered and depoliticised polity, how would we fare in a severe test of wills?

For many economies, dealing with the income and wealth inequality is critical in avoiding a deep divide between the haves and the have-nots, the elites and the non-elites, the establishment and the masses. The aim is to prevent a widespread sense of dispossession, disenfranchisement and despondency from developing that would ultimately result in an "us versus them" mindset within societies, even those with long histories.

The establishment and the elites constitute a minority in any society. As such, how a society remains cohesive even as the benefits of globalisation accrue unevenly across a population is the critical challenge for governance. Governments need to be sensitive and responsive to the concerns of the average citizen, particularly when the latter encounters doldrums in their economic livelihoods.

POLICY ALTERNATIVES

How a government and the politicians across the political spectrum respond to the exacting challenges and bring the nation together will be a crucial determinant of whether social cohesion is enhanced or undermined. Scapegoating is a common tactic in the quest for power, and so are solutions that focus on the short-term but are not viable and detrimental in the long-term.

Would governments and politicians indulge in populism – with vanity, hate, arrogance, disregard for the truth and fair play, and recklessness – to expediently win the protest vote? Or would they take the moral high ground and bring people together by appealing to and attracting political support based on the strength of cogent and persuasive policy alternatives in the marketplace of policy ideas and outcomes?

Given the seduction of power and position, temptations abound for politicians to engage in a race to the bottom by leveraging the electorate's unhappiness with promises of quick-fix political salvation. When their backs are against the wall, people can behave foolishly, recklessly and self-destructively in the aggregate, just as they can individually, even at the ballot boxes.

Governance for the benefit of the people needs to be brought back as the *raison d'être* of political, economic and corporate leadership. There is also the urgent need to nurture a discerning electorate so that the forces of nativism, authoritarianism, misogyny and racism will not rear their ugly heads when times are bad.

Hard times there will be but it is crucial for any system of governance to purposefully deal with the people's resentments, fury and fears. When societal fissures deepen and widen over time, the terrain becomes fertile for political entrepreneurs to tap the power of masses with the promise of a break with the discredited status quo. The perception of being marginalised is often compelling enough to be an effective platform of resentment and short-term thinking even in a democracy.

All that is needed then is a demagogue of sufficient cunning, who reads well the waves of resentment and stokes them instrumentally before riding them to victory.

Such is the power – whether popular or populist – of the ballot boxes.

To counter any potential backlash against globalisation, governments have to sensitively right-size their social compacts and ensure that laws, institutions, policies and fiscal measures contribute towards shared, equitable economic growth while also endowing people with an adequate sense of control over their individual destinies.

It is ironic that US President Barack Obama in his final speech at the United Nations General Assembly in September this year said "those trumpeting the benefits of globalisation have ignored inequality". The path forward "starts with making the global economy work better for all people and not just for those at the top".

Amid the keen contestation for power, politics must also be the central means to solve problems, prepare a society for future challenges and build a cohesive nation. This requires that trust be the currency of politics, and the heart and soul of political leadership must be to steadfastly uphold the onerous responsibility of serving for the greater good.

Unless those virtues are imbibed and manifested, democratic politics and elections can easily degenerate into demagoguery with profound consequences for elites and non-elites alike.

■ The writer is associate professor of law at the Singapore Management University School of Law.