

# Integration, Singapore style: A mix of laws and social norms

One month after the Paris killings of staff at Charlie Hebdo magazine, the writer traces Singapore's own journey in integrating minority communities.

**BY CHAN HENG CHEE, FOR THE STRAITS TIMES**

The massacre of cartoonists, editors, writers and staff of Charlie Hebdo, and the subsequent targeted killings in the kosher supermarket and of police officers caused me to think hard about managing diversity in general and Singapore in particular.

What happened in the office of satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo on Jan 7 triggered off heated discussions in Europe, the United States, and elsewhere.

Yes, they were terrible murderous acts of terrorists in the name of religion, and as acts of terrorism must be condemned and are condemned. Many Muslims reiterate that this is not what Islam teaches or represents. They are deeply dismayed and angry at the repeated insults of their Prophet and religion.

How should one think about the Charlie Hebdo incident? What is the issue at stake here? In the multitude of articles that were published in the following weeks, there were broadly two kinds of reactions.

The first says: The issue is about free speech and free speech is an absolute right.

This is what democracy is about. The unity march of millions in Paris joined by world leaders was a demonstration that people who espouse this view, uphold the principle unequivocally.

But I suspect a few of the leaders who marched were taking a stand against terrorism rather than free speech, in effect suggesting that no matter how insulting the message, it did not justify the violent and brutal attacks.

The second type of reaction says: While free speech is an important right, respect for the religion of others is a no less important virtue.

In fact, if a democracy believes in freedom of religion, that freedom must be supported by respect for the religion of others and tolerance. It follows that there

must be some reasonable constraints on free speech, such as not wilfully mocking, insulting or humiliating another religion.

In the United States, there is greater sensitivity about political correctness in universities and in the media. This puts a curb on absolute free speech. Respected New York Times columnist David Brooks wrote that a satirical magazine like Charlie Hebdo would never be published on any American university campus. On US campuses where political correctness reigns, anti-Semitic, racist, and anti-black comments are not just frowned upon, speakers can be shouted out of a classroom.

One has to be careful with sexist remarks about women too, which is a good thing. Professors and journalists have lost jobs for uttering the inappropriate statement. Professor Larry Summers had to step down from his post as president of Harvard after making remarks at a Boston conference in 2005 that suggested under-representation of women in science was due to "innate differences" between men and women. His remarks triggered a firestorm. Social norms set the constraints.

The Financial Times interviewed nine Muslim-French people from the Paris and Lyon region recently and found them hurt, depressed and resigned about their situation and future. There are media reports that as many as 10,000 French Jews are expected to leave for Israel this year, many citing rising anti-Semitism in Europe.

What is the impact of Charlie Hebdo in Singapore?

### **Response in Singapore**

MY OWN sense is that with the majority of the population, there was shock at the terrorist murders, but not much discussion.

Among the Singapore Muslim population, there was a great deal of discussion in the mosques and on social media, which is still ongoing. Singapore Muslims are angry at the utter disrespect for the religion of others demonstrated in Charlie Hebdo and the double standards of the West. They are quite disturbed that another cartoon was published again of the Prophet which was just as unacceptable.

On the scale of one to 10, the few Muslim leaders I spoke to rated the anger of the community as eight. They liked what Pope Francis said (that one cannot provoke

and insult the faith of others) because he showed understanding. The Muslim leaders I spoke to said Muslims wanted to express their anger in the open but did not do so because they did not want to be misunderstood by Singaporeans or the authorities.

Reflecting on the fragility of religious and ethnic relations in France today, I have always held the view that integration is not a condition one can take for granted. It is not as if a society can cross the bar to become an integrated society, and then that integration cannot be undone or frayed. A society or country can become more integrated or less integrated depending on the circumstances and context. Integration is something that must be worked on continuously.

Singapore adopted the right strategy from the start when our leaders declared we would treat every race, language and religion as equal. This is independent Singapore's founding principle. We opted for integration of the different ethnic and religious groups.

## **Laws and norms**

- **Ethnic quota in housing**

In the early days fresh on the heels of the race riots of 1964, the People's Action Party government opted to break up ethnic ghettos. This policy was not popular at the time with the minorities. All Housing Board estates had to have a mix of races within each block. There would be no all-Chinese blocks or all-Malay blocks or all-Indian blocks. This prevented the development of ethnic ghettos where exclusiveness and alienation could be reinforced.

- **Presidential Council for Minority Rights**

In response to the tense racial atmosphere in the regional neighbourhood triggered off by the May 1969 racial riots in Malaysia, Singapore established the Presidential Council for Minority Rights in 1970 to provide greater reassurance to its population.

Its function was and is to scrutinise legislation to ensure there is no discrimination against any ethnic minority. Its members are representative of the racial and religious mix of Singapore.

- **Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act**

Again sensing the rise in religious fervour worldwide and religious groups becoming more assertive and competitive for followers than ever before, to pre-empt inter-religious conflict and misunderstanding, the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act was introduced in 1990.

This Act set up the Presidential Council for Religious Harmony whose members include leaders of different religions. This Act allows the Government to issue a restraining order against a religious leader who chooses to instigate religious enmity and hatred. In 2007, 17 years after the Act was introduced, then Minister for Home Affairs Wong Kan Seng told Parliament that no restraining order had been issued so far. The Act also addresses the issue that religion and politics should be kept apart.

Older Singaporeans remember full well that Salman Rushdie's Satanic Verses was "disallowed" in Singapore because of religious sensitivities. A movie based on The Last Temptation Of Christ by Nikos Kazantzakis was "disallowed" because of the strong reactions expressed.

Other integrative steps were further introduced.

- **GRCs**

The Group Representation Constituencies (GRCs) introduced in 1988 require political parties to include a minority race candidate in the slate of three candidates fielded for election to ensure minority representation. The average number of MPs in each GRC has since gone up to five.

At the time it was introduced, detractors declared it to be a political ploy to disadvantage the opposition; in hindsight, it is a very good move to ensure ethnic representation into the future, which was what it was advocated to be in the first place.

- **Sedition Act**

Finally, with the arrival of the Internet which, in the anonymity of cyberspace, encourages the most extreme of remarks, the Sedition Act, which has been around since 1948, was updated. It can be used to order online users to take down racist and hate-mongering posts and websites.

Legislation is important to protect ethnic, racial and religious harmony, especially in a new nation. It is a necessary but not sufficient safeguard in itself.

In the end, it will be the social norms we develop as a country that will ensure if we live in an integrated society that respects each other's rights and space, race and religion - or not.

We should also be serious about making friends across racial and religious lines, so we can sit down to tea or coffee to talk to each other, and learn about each other. As a society we do well in race relations and inter-religious tolerance, globally compared. But in the area of rights and tolerance, every country can always improve.

I came across a Straits Times report last year of a group of neighbours in Block 827, Woodlands Street 81. A few of them get together to jam with guitars and keyboards once a month, sometimes joined by their teenage children. They hold potluck parties to celebrate Hari Raya, Deepavali, Chinese New Year and Christmas at the lift landing on their floor.

According to the report: "The neighbours share a close friendship and mutual trust. They leave their doors open, exercise and go on holiday together, share extra food, hold on to one another's spare keys and feed the pets of those who are away."

This is the way to go to build community and to foster integration, through a sincere, ground-up friendly approach to neighbours and friends.

stopinion@sph.com.sg

**The writer was Singapore's ambassador to the United States from 1996 to 2012. She now chairs the Lee Kuan Yew Centre for Innovative Cities at the Singapore University of Technology and Design.**

#### BACKGROUND STORY

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