

## The S'porean identity in a globalised era

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IN HIS book *Lexus And The Olive Tree*, New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman argues that there are two countervailing forces in globalisation.

On the one hand, there is 'Lexus', which stands for modernisation. And on the other, there is the 'olive tree', which represents the human need for identity and belonging.

Globalisation often introduces a sense of dislocation. The challenge is how these two countervailing forces can be balanced. Singapore has to balance its global city aspirations with its citizens' need for a sense of rootedness.

Singapore has opened its arms to globalisation. Many Singaporeans have ventured abroad and made successful careers for themselves. The country has also opened its doors to foreign talent, to address flagging birth rates and an ageing population. But many Singaporeans feel a sense of displacement as a result of the influx of foreigners, used as they are to being greeted by a familiar local face at the hawker centre or a familiar local accent at the supermarket.

The Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) conducted a survey in December 2009 to assess how Singapore citizens were coping with the economic recession. When asked to choose as many as they wished of the six social and psychological strategies of support listed in the survey, 53 per cent of respondents said they would lower their expectations, 48 per cent that they would change their mindsets, 32 per cent strengthen family bonds, and 12 per cent turn to religion. In the search for a sense of surety in the uncertain times brought on by globalisation, Singaporeans will turn to kith and kin and their religion.

Will the identity for Singaporeans change as globalisation continues? How will Singaporeans define themselves in terms of the communal, local or global?

On the level of the communal, it is a natural instinct of human beings to draw close to their ethnic, religious or familial community. There are signs indicating the continuing importance of racial and religious identity in the hearts and minds of Singaporeans.

Where religion is concerned, the evidence ranges from reports of Christian groups scrambling for worship space to the decision by Taoist leaders to conduct a census of their followers to register their growing membership. And where race is concerned, there was the campaign waged by bicultural Chinese against reducing the weightage of the mother tongue in the PSLE, and the concerns expressed by Malays that their community might be shrinking following the release of the advance census data.

Where the family is concerned, the conclusion of the 2009 State of the Family report by the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports and National Family Council suggests that most Singaporeans have strong family ties.

At the national level, the 2009 IPS National Orientations of Singaporeans Survey, which measured the emotional bonds of Singapore citizens, found healthy and stable levels of national pride and loyalty.

Singaporeans have managed to combine communal and national identities. The sense of racial and religious identity can in fact bolster the sense of nationhood. Thus, Singapore has so far successfully managed to subsume race and religion into its national identity. As such, there is largely no conflict between racial or religious identity and national identity.

Racial and religious ties build what Professor Robert Putnam of Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government calls 'bonding social capital' by bringing people together on the basis of similarity. There is also a need to build 'bridging social capital' - which in Singapore's case means fostering better ties between individuals from different racial and religious backgrounds.

The universal nature of music, sport and even food provides platforms for the building of bridging social capital. The gradual broadening of space for political and artistic expression bodes well for the development of other identities.

On the global level, Singaporeans are exposed to cultures outside their country - through the Internet, cable television and other media. But the same technologies provide also the means to build stronger communal and national ties. It is now easier to keep in touch with friends, family and the local scene while abroad. Lexus has provided a means for growing bigger and stronger olive trees.

There is no question that Singaporeans will find something to hold on to as globalisation advances. The long lines for auditions with South Korean talent management company JYP and outside mega-churches, as well as strong demand for National Day Parade tickets, suggest that Singaporeans have managed to find a balance among their communal, local and global identities. The future of the Singaporean identity hinges on the mix we choose for ourselves.

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