

Beyond The Riot: 5 Questions

Insight

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The Dec 8 riot in Little India was quelled within hours. By 6.45am the next day, roads where the violence - the worst in Singapore in more than 40 years - broke out were open to traffic. A national inquiry was convened almost immediately, and cooling measures such as a ban on public consumption and sale of alcohol were introduced. The Committee of Inquiry has now submitted its report, and eight recommendations on how to prevent a repeat of the incident have been accepted by the Government and debated in Parliament. Yet even as the dust settles, Insight's Hoe Pei Shan, Nur Asyiqin Mohamad Salleh and Walter Sim ask: Are there issues that linger?

Are There Enough Police Officers?

THAT is a question that has kept coming up in the seven months since the Dec 8 riot.

The issue came to the fore at the Committee of Inquiry (COI) hearings earlier this year, after Police Commissioner Ng Joo Hee told the committee that he would need 1,000 more officers.

The extra manpower, he said, would allow him to raise additional troops specialised in tackling riots, as well as beef up patrol teams that police hot spots and neighbourhoods.

Two MPs raised his request in Parliament on Monday, after Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean announced plans to add 300 men to anti-riot troops in the Special Operations Command (SOC).

One was Bishan-Toa Payoh GRC's Hri Kumar Nair, who wondered how the force would recruit the 1,000 given the tight labour market, while opposition MP Sylvia Lim asked if there was a "serious under-resource problem".

There is, however, no magic number when it comes to the strength of a police force, said security expert Kumar Ramakrishna, head of the Centre of Excellence for National Security here. "Too many and accusations of 'police state' may be heard. Too few... and public anxiety may spike."

But the decision to reinforce the SOC troops is a step in the right direction, he added.

DPM Teo also said on Monday that the Gurkha Contingent - and if necessary, the Singapore Armed Forces - can be tapped if a large public order incident occurs.

Case in point: Army reinforcements were activated to support the police during the manhunt for terrorist leader Mas Selamat Kastari after he escaped from detention in February 2008.

It was also after the debacle that year when the Ministry of Home Affairs said it was stepping up recruitment. This after it announced a study on its workload in Parliament earlier, said Ms Lim.

"But as the riot shows, the extent of the problem is still serious after six years." She said more officers are now needed to fill positions for community policing, as well as to police, among other things, emerging threats such as transnational and organised crime.

As of last year, there were just under 8,800 regular police officers. This means a ratio of one officer to 614 residents. The force, however, is supported by about 3,700 full-time police national servicemen and 2,000 volunteer officers.

London, Tokyo, Hong Kong and New York, however, have police strength two to three times that of Singapore's, said Mr Ng.

He also told the COI that the Singapore Police Force has been kept compact in line with public service restraints.

Insight understands the police saw job cuts across its divisions, including the SOC, as part of a public sector-wide drive to shave 9 per cent of its workforce over three years from 2004.

Mr Nair, however, said Singapore's low crime rate - compared to other major cities - means "we are not too off the mark".

The numbers alone are also not a true indication of police capability, especially when new technology allows the officers here to do more with less, he said.

Still, DPM Teo told Parliament that between 2008 and 2014, more than 1,000 new posts have been added for initiatives such as the Community Policing System - almost all of which have been filled. The force has also increased its headcount by about 15 per cent in the past 10 years.

This despite recruitment challenges beyond the tight labour market. For instance, potential recruits would need to satisfy stringent requirements. Also, like most forces around the world, foreigners - unless they are permanent residents - need not apply.

Ms Lim suggested that the Government strengthen its mechanisms to regularly assess and detect whether operational capabilities are being compromised, without needing major incidents to show up the problems.

Mr Nair said that with the additional officers for the SOC in the next two to three years, DPM Teo has made it clear that the focus, for now, is on building up the SOC. "And he was confident that could be achieved in the short-term, so that gives a measure of assurance."

Are Police Ready For Security Crises?

IN PEACEFUL Singapore, where a riot lasting a few hours made its mark as the worst public disorder incident in four decades, questions have lingered over the preparedness of the police.

This was brought up again in Parliament on Monday by opposition MP Sylvia Lim, who asked Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean if the police lacked "actual practice" in dealing with public order incidents such as the Little India riot. She even went as far as to suggest that the Government "allow more peaceful protests" so that the police can "test their policing capabilities". It was a suggestion shot down by DPM Teo.

Beyond the suggestion she made, her question mirrored the unease some felt after watching footage of the violence that unfolded in Little India on Dec 8. Some of those clips were presented as evidence during the public hearings but many, recorded with smartphones, were also uploaded online by netizens.

One video clip showing a group of auxiliary police and Home Team officers running out of an ambulance as the mob turned on the vehicle was highlighted by the COI as an act that emboldened the rioters. The decision of the police ground commander to hold their ground instead of confronting rioters was also questioned by the committee members.

DPM Teo, however, defended the officers, saying he had not found them wanting. But he acknowledged that there were "lessons learnt from this incident", and these would be taken into account in the review of training doctrines and the equipping of front-line officers.

Another aspect that drew criticism from the COI was the delay in activating anti-riot troops from the Special Operations Command (SOC) to the scene.

Mr Charles Heal, a United States-based law enforcement analyst, tells Insight: "The criticism of too slow a response would seem valid and any steps to expedite the process will serve to make interventions more effective in future incidents."

However, the retired commander from the Los Angeles Sheriff's Department, notes that the police response had demonstrated its "ability to effectively intervene".

"That the Government had a well-trained and equipped force capable of responding to riots despite the fact that they had had no serious problems in the last 40 years speaks volumes," he adds.

Security expert Kumar Ramakrishna, who heads the Centre of Excellence for National Security here, says "in general, the police are prepared", but the riot did shed light on where improvements could be made.

"Perhaps the capacity for more finely grained situational awareness, as well as a more streamlined procedure for activating quick-response tactical forces were also needed that night," says Associate Professor Kumar.

What most quarters seem to agree on is that the implementation of the COI's recommendations, which includes building up Home Team capabilities to better respond to public order incidents, would improve police response in the future.

For instance, DPM Teo announced in Parliament earlier this week that the SOC's strength would be doubled to 600 over the next two to three years, allowing for "a more capable, flexible and faster response capability".

The police have also cut short the process for SOC activation, now giving land division commanders the authority to call on anti-riot troops without having to first seek the approval of the director for police operations.

Mr Heal notes: "The recommendations in (the COI) report are sound and will have the intended effect when implemented. The fact that the response was not perfect is not unexpected.

"I will tell you that, in spite of the best efforts, the next one will not be either. Based upon what I've read and seen so far, I will say, however, that the next response will be better."

Did Govt Agencies Take Holistic Approach?

WITH rampant drinking and large crowds of up to 100,000 on some Sundays, Little India was a "bomb waiting to explode", said COI chairman G. Pannir Selvam.

Indeed, the flashpoint of the violence was a confluence of long-brewing factors - all of which come under the purview of different government agencies.

These include the sheer number of liquor stores in the area, which relates to the issue of alcohol licensing, and which the police administer; and chaotic road conditions which could have been dealt with by the Land Transport Authority (LTA).

Then there is the issue of chronic overcrowding, apparently due to a shortage of recreational spots for foreign workers, which comes under the Manpower Ministry.

Some steps, such as the setting up of an inter-agency taskforce to improve infrastructure in the area, were already being taken before the Dec 8 incident.

That it took a riot to accelerate a raft of reforms, however, raises the crucial question of whether there can be better coordination among the various agencies, says Singapore Management University law don Eugene Tan.

"The big picture was missing... Each agency sought to do well for what is under its jurisdiction, but did not pay enough attention to the ripple effects of what is done and what is not done," he says.

The LTA, for instance, may have thought bussing workers to Little India from their dormitories would ease the strain on the public transport system. But that led to overcrowding, bringing with it law and order issues, which is why he says agencies have to look "beyond their navels".

Sociologist Paulin Straughan agrees that government agencies should keep abreast of issues outside their jurisdiction, so they don't get "blindsided", which "can destabilise a small nation like Singapore".

And grassroots leaders and MPs - who Prof Tan says are not appreciated enough - should be more intimately involved, sitting on inter-agency committees.

MPs watching over hot spots like Little India and Geylang have said residents' concerns were not addressed quickly enough by the authorities. Marine Parade GRC MP Fatimah Lateef, who looks after Geylang, wrote on her Facebook page in March that "hundreds of hours" of meeting agencies to clean up the area were met with a lack of concrete action.

Moulmein-Kallang GRC MP Denise Phua, who oversees part of Little India, acknowledges some measures were in place before the riot - with auxiliary police officers deployed since 2009 to manage issues such as littering, and drunkards urinating or sleeping at void decks of HDB blocks.

However, alcohol was not an issue addressed then, says Ms Phua, who has long called for the Government to restrict alcohol consumption and sale in the area.

Liaison officers from key agencies already sit in at grassroots meetings, but a way to cut red tape is to set up a unit that deals with inter-agency issues identified by MPs and is led by officers senior enough to push for changes, she adds.

When it comes to getting different agencies to work together, says sociologist Tan Ern Ser, it depends on who sounds the alarm. "Like it or not, hierarchy matters in a bureaucracy," he says, which makes it important for there to be proper channels to help MPs bring up concerns to higher authorities.

And the quality of feedback from the ground should be good, otherwise the Government will be weighed down by complaints.

But, says political scientist Reuben Wong, there is a need to look beyond government agencies, or else "deeper" issues could get missed out. "We need whole-of-society participation and solutions... not just a whole-of-government approach," he says.

"The Government needs to work more closely with civil society, like NGOs, rights groups, in addition to listening to local representatives like MPs."

Can S'pore Be More Friendly To Foreigners?

SOME quarters were quick to link the Dec 8 riot to an uncorking of simmering fury among discriminated-against foreign workers.

The Committee of Inquiry into the fracas, however, found no "systemic dissatisfaction" among the workers.

Even so, it called for more sensitivity to create a "friendlier environment for foreign workers", urging those who interact with transient workers to be given some basic cultural training. Such training could include basic or key words in native languages, which could dissolve barriers.

This is an area Singapore has not been proactive in, and it has taken its transient workforce largely for granted, say observers.

Sociologist Paulin Straughan, a National University of Singapore associate professor, says there have been "telltale signs" over the years, resulting in the need to mandate safety rules for lorries ferrying workers, as well as a day off for domestic workers.

"In a capitalist society, we tend to attach a dollar value to output. And when it's low, there is a mistaken impression that their work is not important," she adds.

Singapore Kindness Movement chief William Wan says Singaporeans could be more appreciative and treat foreigners "the way we would like to be treated".

Meanwhile, Ms Braema Mathi, president of human rights group Maruah calls for workplace sensitivity classes and school workshops on inclusion. These are crucial to "forge a value system" on how foreign workers are treated here, she says, adding that Singapore has been "slow on the uptake". About 30 per cent of its 5.4 million people are foreigners.

Despite a surge of anti-foreigner sentiment online linking social ills to migrants, observers say it would be "over-simplistic" to attribute this to deep-seated xenophobia or racism.

Mr Mersole Mellejor, Consul of the Philippine Embassy in Singapore, tells Insight that in spite of recent online protests targeting the Filipino population here, "we believe that Singapore is not a xenophobic country". "Filipinos remain relatively safe in the country and relations between Filipinos and Singaporeans are warm and outstanding," he says.

He holds this view, even after plans to hold a Philippine Independence Day celebration at Ngee Ann City were met with protest by a small group of netizens.

Sociologist Mathew Mathews of the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) says Singaporeans "don't really have the propensity to be xenophobic" and accept foreigners on the basis that they will uphold certain norms and contribute.

But Singaporeans have not been quick to adapt to changing winds, and the Chinese-Malay-Indian-Other (CMIO) dictum has left some "flat-footed" in dealing with diversity, says Ms Mathi.

That can be dangerous, says Aware's senior manager for programmes and communications, Ms Jolene Tan. "People judge whether others are 'Singaporean' enough based on prejudices on features such as accent," she said.

The issue has been compounded by anxieties about job competition, rising property prices and strains on the public transport system. This has elevated the "us versus them" mentality, leading to ugly invective online.

Dr Carol Soon and Mr Tan Tarn How of the IPS wrote in a recent paper that online users, perceiving anonymity, "often underestimate the scale and speed of information-sharing facilitated by social media".

Ms Mathi says: "These reactions do not always come from a place of mean-spiritedness... (But) some of us are in self-preservation mode and wish to alienate other communities that fall outside the CMIO model."

Dr Mathew adds: "Once emotions are raised on these issues and emotions constantly fuelled, it is hard for people to really be rational about how they view the foreigner issue."

And so xenophobia could take root if more is not done, and if the line between feeling threatened and outright hatred is crossed.

Associate Professor Straughan says: "We need to break down a lot of barriers, prejudices and worries that Singaporeans have. Singapore is a very small country, and we should be displaying more community spirit."

Alcohol crackdown a policy overshoot?

CRITICS of the temporary restrictions and security measures implemented in Little India soon after the riot have been quick to accuse the Government of overreacting.

The alcohol prohibitions under the Public Order (Additional Temporary Measures) Act, for instance, drew cries of "policy overshooting".

The Government's reaction appears excessive, said several business owners in Little India and some MPs, with some noting that the alcohol prohibitions were introduced months before the COI released its report.

Under the Act, which was passed in February and is valid for a year starting from April this year, alcohol consumption in public places is prohibited during weekends, from 6am on Saturday to 6am on Monday.

The prohibition also applies from 6am on the eve of public holidays to 6am on the day after the holiday. It is also now an offence to sell or supply alcohol at any premises in a special zone, with exceptions for certain circumstances such as for restaurants holding public house and beer house licences. These can continue their business by allowing the sale and consumption of alcohol in their premises.

Among the first to cry foul were liquor licence holders.

Mr Rajakumar Chandra, chairman of the Little India Shopkeepers and Heritage Association, tells Insight: "Before the riot, there were no such restrictions. The merchants said these impositions made them lose their main source of livelihood, and were an overreaction from the Government."

Nine MPs also rose in Parliament in February to criticise the Act when it was introduced as a Bill, with six opposing it altogether. Among the latter were members from the Workers' Party (WP), which took a party stance against the Bill.

WP chairman Sylvia Lim (Aljunied GRC) called the introduction of the Bill "hasty" and "a knee-jerk reaction".

But others, such as MP Denise Phua (Moulmein-Kallang GRC), found the restrictions to have been a long time coming.

She tells Insight that she and her residents in Little India "are generally satisfied with the post-riot measures".

"Many of them have called for the strict measures on alcohol sale and consumption in public places to remain on a permanent basis," she says. "Whether it is 'policy overshooting' or not, depends on who you speak with. To the residents who live in Little India, the general mood is to be safe than sorry."

Second Minister for Home Affairs S. Iswaran told Parliament on Feb 18, as the House debated the Bill's passage, that there was good reason that the new law appears to be alcohol-centric. "This is because we do not have provisions in our laws for such measures."

Mr Iswaran noted that "some have asked if we are jumping the gun", but said "the Bill introduces, out of necessity, targeted and temporary powers to restrict the sale, supply and consumption of alcohol".

Dr Tan Ern Ser, a sociology professor at the Institute of Policy Studies, notes the difficulty in trying to evaluate if the new policies amount to "an overkill" without conducting prolonged experiments testing variations of alcohol restrictions and their outcomes.

"In the absence of empirical data, it would seem logical to impose restrictions during known peak periods," says Dr Tan. "However, this should not prevent the authorities from making further adjustments, whether to reduce or increase the duration of restrictions in future."

Singapore Management University associate law professor Eugene Tan points out that it is easier to dial the restrictions "downwards following public feedback and debate", than to attempt to tighten them further after they are introduced.

The disparity between the policies pre-riot and post-riot may have also led some to perceive the new alcohol restrictions as "overshooting".

"That said, however, I do think that the Government views the post-riot alcoholic sale and consumption restrictions made for a necessary and proportionate response, considering the significance of alcohol as a contributory factor to the riot's escalation, as well as the longstanding social disamenities prior to the riot," he adds.

Dr Tan, on the other hand, is of the opinion that the Government "tends to be quite cautious in its approach, and its policies may sometimes come across as 'overshooting', especially in hindsight". But it is also "prepared to make adjustments in response to feedback".

On whether the restrictions were an overreaction or not, Dr Eduardo Araral, an assistant professor at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, says: "I understand the critics: shopkeepers will lose some business; some people prefer less restrictions; others would say it's not the alcohol that caused the riot.

"Civil servants might say it's easy to criticise policies if you are not on the receiving end of accountability. All of these are a healthy part of public discourse."