

## COMMENT

# Heeding socio-political speed limits

## WHERE WE ARE:

Political and social positions are trending in different directions, inclusive on one hand and exclusive to the other

**I**N many respects, Malaysia's socio-political conditions act as a national speed limit to how fast and far the country can advance. Most of us are more used to thinking that economic growth and development dictates how well we lead our lives but the opposite is true as well.

So, what determines our socio-political state of affairs? It may be useful to think of, first, global megatrends or changes sweeping across national borders and, second, those occurring within specific national contexts. At the end of the day, few countries are completely identical but neither are they totally unlike.

One global trend affecting all

countries, from the biggest to the smallest, is globalisation itself. The economic and technological effects of globalisation have received the greatest attention but in varying degrees to our socio-cultural values as well. This is apparent not just in the form of "decadent Western values" but jihadist Middle Eastern ones as well.

Globalisation, however, is creating opposing resistance and small but powerful groups in countries like ours are demanding that the power to control be reclaimed. This is creating a creeping sense of unease. Driving all of this are not mere ethereal feelings of helplessness and otherness but real hard divisions. And, nowhere are they "real-er" or harder than in the economic and social realm. The phenomena of grim neediness amidst almost frivolous plenty is not restricted to far flung dictatorships but present in our most vibrant democracies.

Economies are less able to recalibrate themselves when facing rising income and wealth disparities. In the past, countries could

vote in, almost alternately, populist and often spendthrift governments and then conservative and frugal ones. In countries where there was no democracy or democracy did not work, this matter was settled through coup d'états or revolutions.

Today, governments are busy falling all over themselves to secure markets, investments, jobs and technology. Most are unlikely to drive away capital and business or take their countries offline as they used to do. Some are talking up their deter-

mination to change things but whether this is just rhetoric or will actually bear fruit remains to be seen. Even as politics has to be more populist in nature, the catchword being "inclusive", social values and belief systems are increasingly elitist and exclusionary. This is leading to extraordinary contradictions, tensions and polarisation (or loss of moderating middle ground influences).

Not surprisingly, conflicts become more apparent both in violent and non-violent forms. Non-violent conflicts happen where

states forcefully suppress largely peaceful protests at the expense of institutional integrity, public legitimacy and foreign opinion.

Adjustment and accommodation, though possible with charismatic, firm and, at the same time, affirming leadership, is rare.

On the national stage, changing demographics, together with urbanisation, education and technology have meant that the ways of the past are no longer acceptable, much to the chagrin of the old guard and religious orthodoxy.

The latter become active reactionaries in avoiding adjustment and change. Despite declining support, their hardened policy and social-cultural identity positions attract many of the angry and insecure and their actions can be quite astonishing aberrations.

Difficulty and, often times, frustration, in imposing social control leads to varying degrees of state suppression, ranging from severe to nuanced. This may be termed the "iron glove, velvet glove" syndrome. But if they are vocal, mobilised and combative, so too is civil society. While the latter do not have levers of power, they do have a great say in determining political legitimacy and support than ever before.

Economics is no longer the sole criteria in performance legitimacy. In addition to delivering ever-higher standards of living, the urban population, as that elsewhere, demand recognition of their civil liberties and standards of behaviour.

With the national mood uncompromising as it is, and with socio-political dynamics ironically leading to disappearance of middle ground, the space for much-needed reforms and changes is constricted. Governance becomes increasingly more fractious, tenuous and erratic.

In short, political and social positions are trending in different directions: inclusive on the one hand and exclusive on other. Loss of moderating societal stabilisers lead to frictions and difficulties to erratic and inconsistent governance. Far from being appreciated, acting in an economically responsible manner further adds to policy conundrums as the burden falls mainly on middle- and working-classes.

There are no easy textbook/arm-chair/rhetorical solutions except gradual, phased-in and consistent change led by a firm hand at the rudder.

steve@isis.org.my



**Datuk Steven Wong** is Deputy Chief Executive, ISIS Malaysia