

9 June 2015

Realigning the social narrative



COUNTERING RADICALISATION: Society should be empowered to retell creatively what it means to be Malaysian



LAST week, in his keynote address at ISIS Malaysia's 29th Asia-Pacific Roundtable in Kuala Lumpur, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak alluded to both the history and future of the region. Before an audience of more than 300 thought leaders from Asia, Australia, New Zealand, the Americas and Europe, he spoke of change and stability in major power trajectories, of Asean's promise, and of the need for coordinated, collaborative and constructive approaches in managing increasingly non-conventional and cross-border security challenges.

One part of his address resonated as much to the domestic landscape as it did Southeast Asia's: "This region has, for centuries, been enriched by the assimilation and integration of different peoples, cultures, and tradition." The narrative of "moderation, tolerance and peace is not just a counter-narrative to extremism but, in fact, our heritage".

Through rote drilling, Malaysians have committed to memory how ports like George Town, Malacca and Aceh resulted in Southeast Asia becoming not only a marketplace of mercantilism, but also of cultures.

With the trade of silk, spice and natural resources came also the exchange of ideas, vocabulary, mores and people. The transient eventually became the permanent, and we welcomed into our historical fabric fusion communities like Peranakan, who represent a local-settler inter-marriage of cultures, languages and way of life.

This syncretism is also reflected in how faith and religion were preached and practised. Our textbooks tell us that unlike in other regions, Islam in Southeast Asia was spread through trade (negotiation and pragmatism), rather than the sword (imposition). Accommodation, tolerance and acceptance were de facto long before they became contemporarily cool or contrived.

Today, Southeast Asia remains a geostrategic crossroads of commerce and trade. Asean is the fourth-largest exporting bloc in the world, and the region's waterways form crucial passages connecting the East and West. The Straits of Malacca, which links the Indian and Pacific Oceans, is a conduit for a quarter of the world's trade, as well as a third of liquefied natural gas shipment. More than a third of the world's maritime traffic passes through the South China Sea, along with half of the world's annual merchant fleet tonnage.

As well, the region is increasingly becoming more technologically significant. Southeast Asians fare among the most active Internet users in the world, with average usage in the Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam, Indonesia and Malaysia spanning more than five hours a day.

Assuming greater land, air, maritime and digital connectivity in and around the region as planned, Southeast Asia should re-emerge as a network hotspot, connecting power hitters such as China, India, Japan and the United States through infrastructural partnerships and capacity-building initiatives.

The question, however, is whether the softer side of Southeast Asia can prevail as the number of ports, railroads, buildings and fibre optics multiply. Specifically, can the celebrated multiculturalism of Southeast Asia be preserved as identities become contested in a narrowing space?

The characteristic diversity that developed organically in the region with the flow of goods and people appears now to be on the defensive, as narratives of exclusion replace those of inclusion.

The irony of technology is that even as it has made the world a smaller place, it has, at the same time widened the chasms of ethnic and religious identities, so that the only cultural importation that is sought and absorbed is in furtherance of puritanical homogeneity.

It is this language of exclusion – of denigration and demonisation of the Other – that has contributed to the support of, and sympathy for, groups like the self-professed Islamic State among Southeast Asians.

Countering this radical or extreme narrative requires, first of all, recognising and reclaiming the story of the region, and in the Malaysian context, of this nation.

Because counter-radicalisation requires a multi-pronged and multi-stakeholder effort, the initiative must be both top-down and bottom-up. Because counter-radicalisation also requires for both message and messenger to be credible, reality must match rhetoric.

A rejection of extremism should be firmly demonstrated by our political leaders instead of simply being referenced in glibness, reticence or nostalgia. At the base, society should be empowered to

create and innovate content that will retell creatively what it means to be Malaysian and/or Southeast Asian; that is, to be part of a co-dependent community of many intertwining cultures.

In a region where more than half its population comprises individuals under 30, our narrative on- and offline should be informed by history, and led by technologically savvy youth piqued by intellectual curiosity and sharpened by critical analysis, able to question assertions and dogma without fearful repercussions.

After all, disagreements can be done without being disagreeable. and those that do follow the rich discursive tradition of great religions past.

Counter-radicalisation often focuses on the tactical: how to refine and reinterpret concepts, how to craft the messaging and how to effectively engage. A strategy that acknowledges the role of long-term, structural drivers by casting an eye back to history and another to the future – by assessing pedagogical methods in secular and religious education, for example – may well reduce the pool of fence-sitters, sympathisers and supporters of violent extremism. It would also recast the region's reputation as a 21st-century intersection of progressive cultural capital.

To get there, then, we must first ask ourselves difficult questions about how we do things now.

Elina Noor is director of foreign policy and security studies at ISIS Malaysia