

# Manoeuvring Malaysia's societal web

**SOCIAL COHESION:** Some of those holding power seek to manipulate the web so that it better serves their interests

**M**ALAYSIA is an all-encompassing web of societal relationships. From the moment we wake up, to when we go to sleep, these relationships are at work — whether we are aware of them or not, and whether we particularly treasure them or not.

It matters when we eat our meals and travel to work or place of study. It functions at work or our place of study, when engaged in recreational activities and even when we are completely alone.

Malaysia's network of collective relationships defines what it means to be a nation. When we talk of national unity, integration or social cohesion, we are, in fact, referring precisely to this web of relationships.

Most of us instinctively know that the better that our web performs, the better it is for us all. If we do not believe this, there are plenty of examples around the world where the web has broken down and countries have unravelled.

Many of us subconsciously recognise that pitching one component of our social web — be it a racial, class or gender group — against another does not improve the quality of our lives or increase the sense of security. Some of us see the extreme dangers of keeping apart and isolating individual components of the Malaysian web, and treating individual strands of relationships as illegitimate and dangerous.

Yet, those holding the reins of power, be they political, religious, economic or social, very often seek to do exactly this. Their purpose is to manipulate Malaysia's societal web so that it better serves their interests.

Anyone listening to the political rhetoric of late in Kuala Lumpur cannot fail to detect these efforts. Through the past six decades, they have grown repetitious and boring, and many have become indifferent, callous and cynical about them.

To think that these do not have effects, however, is wishful. The Malaysian web internalises every development, whether internal or external, even though it may not show it on the surface. Every provocation has and will have its effect.

Not having much power, public reactions to attempts at manipulation are irritation, frustration and seething anger below the surface. Pragmatism and the desire for safety and security mean that it pays to keep these hidden.

Given the right conditions and circumstances, however, these will rise to the surface. We see this in other parts of the world as well, where distrust and antagonism are leading to furious anti-establishment backlashes.

In strong democracies, these have resulted in personalities who have no business being in positions of public leadership, being elected. Their xenophobic, almost sociopathological personality traits are huge causes for global concern. (As a digression, those enraged at the anti-Muslim tirades issued by the leader of one such country might want to seriously reflect on their own positions with respect to anti-Muslim feelings.)

In weak democracies, the possibility of power changes is much less and the state often suppresses any form of dissent. About the only means for the public to vent their anger against social injustices is to emigrate or take to the streets in protest.

In non-democratic states, there are even fewer options and the tendency is for unhappiness to be expressed in violent ways. People with no hope and painted into a corner will inevitably see some resorting to murderous force.

The web of societal relationships that make up Malaysian society is imperfect but it is nevertheless resilient. This is not only the view of politicians — including the highly divisive ones — and academics, but can be seen by first-hand experience.

But, precisely because our societal web has not yet completely broken down, these politicians feel that it is alright to set one strand against another, one community against another and one set of beliefs and ideologies against another.

They see no reason for them to stop until the "camel's back is broken", especially if they are safe from political or legal sanctions — even as others are not. The Malaysian societal web is resilient, but not infinitely so.

Global trends suggest that dark days may lie ahead of us and not merely economic-wise. The possibility of country being turned against country has never been greater with the rise of nationalism and exceptionalism.

We are already on the slippery slope of social retrogression. We need to think carefully whether we want to proceed on this destructive course or turn back.

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