

ECONOMIC DOWNTURN: THE RISK OF THE POOR FUELLING EXTREME POLITICAL BEHAVIOUR AND VIOLENCE

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ABSTRACT

The global economic meltdown will have profound effects on Malaysia in the near future. Although presently we have been able to cushion the downturn, the sustainability of a long term economic recession or depression is questionable. Even now, a lot of economists doubt America's Trillion dollar stimulus package will work. A large number of states in the world are experiencing large scale unemployment. Malaysia's unemployment rate will definitely go up in the near term as more people will lose their jobs especially in the manufacturing sectors. As the popular dictum goes 'A hungry man is an angry man', the threat of social problems erupting from large scale unemployment is all too real. Strategic history has illustrated some important examples of a large surplus of unemployed young men and a financially poor society due to limited economic opportunities, often provides fuel for extreme political behavior, sometimes leading to violence. From the French Revolution in the 1790s to Iraq and some Arab states in the 21st century. We have seen in some of our neighboring countries where large segments of their population are in poverty, face constant internal security problems such as bombings, kidnappings, murders and the most serious threats, violent secessionist movements. This paper will look at various issues and potential social security threats in Malaysia brought about by the effects of the global economic downturn, in particular unemployment and the poor. It will discuss why these potential social threats in the form of extreme political behavior must be countered before it manifest into something more disturbing.

Keywords : social security; political violence; economic risk.

1. Introduction

The world is experiencing the worst economic meltdown since the Great Depression in the 1929 and 1930s. The amount of aid handed out by governments in Europe and Asia is unprecedented with the United States of America (USA) giving out as much as 7 trillion US dollars to boost her domestic economy.

All this efforts are to prevent the economies of these developed states from collapsing. The consequence of mass state economic bankruptcy will lead to unthinkable security and social problems within the states and in global politics. The fact that the world economies are inter related and linked with each other, make the individual actions of each state's economic managers more important.

Already, the world is slowly feeling the effects of the current global economy downfall, with declining trade, negative growth, rising mass unemployment and growing poverty. History had illustrated many times that if a state suffers from mass poverty and unemployment usually leads to high incidence of extreme political behavior, sometimes verging into violence.

Malaysia is experiencing some retrenchment of workers especially in the manufacturing sector. The full effects will only be felt when the developed markets such as Malaysia's largest trade partner, USA, suffers and reels from this downturn. This will lead to even lower

demands for Malaysian goods and the after effect is all too worrying. The threat of mass unemployment and rising poverty may constitute to higher incidence of social frustration and angst leading to extreme political behavior. The results of extreme political behavior could be revolution, rebellion, terrorism and other violent acts, which ultimately leads to chaos and even bloodshed.

2. Aristotle's Curse of Poverty

Aristotle famously quoted in the fourth century BC "Poverty is the parent of revolution and crime". Aristotle blamed acts of political violence on the time-honoured perpetrator, poverty. His perception that poverty is the most powerful force behind extreme political behavior and violence still is much accepted today.

The link between poverty and terrorism was widely acknowledged after the September 11 attacks, based on Aristotle's 2,000 year old writings. In fact, the aftermath of the September 11 attacks led many prominent leaders to call for a more global equitable distribution of wealth as they believed the poor and poverty was the main causes of the attackers' beliefs and plights. Kim Dae-Jung, the South Korean winner of the prestigious Nobel Peace Prize, in his acceptance speech, said that "At the bottom of terrorism is poverty". Echoing Kim's view on poverty were other Noble Laureates and some even called for a new Marshall Plan as part of a new strategy to counter terrorism.

2.1 Or is it just poverty?

Academic research on root causes of violent behaviour among population has shown that the reasons with the longest lineage were frustration and aggression. John Dollard first proposed a casual link between frustration felt by an individual to violent actions, designed to remove the source of frustration. This hypotheses was popular among the political science fraternity in the late 1960s and early 1970s within the realm of "relative deprivation theory".

2.1.1 Deprivation

After World War II, in a lot of political and sociological writings, internal conflicts of social nature were perceived to be confined to poverty stricken countries. The structural theorists were glad to explain the reasons behind the rebellions and revolutions happening in some Third World states at that time. However, in the 1960s and 1970s, in the rich Western states, there was a rise in dissident activities, which was baffling as such phenomena was supposed to be restricted to impoverished people and states.

Davies, Feierabend and Feierabend, and Gurr made a research trying to provide an answer to this puzzle by attempting to fuse an essentially individual-based theory of aggression to the structural conditions of a society. Their studies shown that when expectations over run achievement, regardless of the economic situation or political rights, frustration is born. This collective frustration turns to anger and subsequently to violence.

Deprivation from poverty can be defined in one of three ways. First, poverty defined as a source of individual or "egotistical deprivation", where an individual takes part in violent political actions out of his own personal anger. Secondly, deprivation felt by individuals in a group or "fraternal deprivation". This is a situation where individual actors may not have personally experienced discrimination, poverty, or humiliation, their intense feeling and sense

of deprivation is the product of a shared concept felt by an entire community or group. Third, empirical studies examine whether the macro structural variables such as per capita income, rate of poverty, or inequality in income distribution are correlated with sociopolitical violence and terrorism. The macro-level studies shows a mixed bag of results. When it comes to international terrorism, there is little evidence that the poorest countries export attackers. Similarly, while many poor countries experience widespread violence and outbreaks of civil wars, many others do not. Based on these 3 ways on deprivation caused by poverty, “fraternal deprivation” assumes the most likely reason of mass extreme political behaviour and violence.

2.1.2 Fraternal deprivation

“Fraternal deprivation”, a shared feeling of deprivation or a collective experience. Some studies had shown that the more economic poverty a society suffer, the sense of humiliation and injustice that a group feels gives birth to acts of political violence.

This group affiliation leads to collective identity. Examples of this are groups formed on the basis of collective common concern, such as animal rights, human rights, economic rights, etc. When rational people act, they act upon not only what they believe is best for them individually but also what they perceive to being the best interest of their community.

These theories are just a few examples of numerous social and psychological theories trying to explain why humans resort to extreme behaviour and violence in response to poverty. To understand this phenomenon, we will look into 2 brief historical case studies to illustrate the linkages between poverty and political violence.

3. The French Revolution

During the late 1700’s, great discontent had swept through France. The common people, members of the middle class and nobles were all dissatisfied, but for different reasons. In 1789, the people’s discontent finally led to the French Revolution in 1789. The ten years between 1789 and 1799 were a time of struggle and violence in France. During these ten years thousands of aristocrats, including the King and Queen, lost their lives on the guillotine. It ended when Napoleon Bonaparte became first consul of France.

There are many causes of the French Revolution in 1789 but the economic factor is the one we will study here. France at that time was one of the richest state in Europe with respectable international power. So, why did the people revolt against the monarchy resulting in the downfall of King Louis XVI?

The French economy towards the end of the 18th century was the premier economic power in continental Europe. The French monarchy had based their operating tax collection from the people on an ancient system of taxes and relied on nobles purchasing of land titles for funds. This system excluded the nobles from paying taxes (as they had purchased the titles) and the burden of taxation was born by the peasants, wage earners and businessmen; basically the middle and lower classes. Noblemen and the higher classes lived in great luxury while many peasants did not have enough to eat. The financial situation in France deteriorated further by the cost of helping the Americans in the American War of Independence and the Seven Years War. This debts incurred by the French government were compounded by the lavish lifestyle of the monarchy.

The inefficient taxation system and tax collection rendered France into a virtual state of bankruptcy and as a result, King Louis XIV decided to raise taxes and also to tax the nobles. These were met with hostile rejections by the noble class and the poor peasants’ situation

became more dire. The financial problems were made worse by a famine that hit France. A strong El Nino cycle was often blamed for a series of famines started 2 years before the French Revolution. The climate changes caused long hot and dry summer draughts, and harsh winters. These factors had resulted in bad crop harvest and there was a widespread shortage of grain. French's main staple food, bread, suffered a high inflation of prices as a result of the shortage of wheat. It was recorded that in 1789 the price of bread increased by a staggering 88%. Many peasants, already poor from bad harvests, started begging on the streets for food. Soon, the peasant class became restless and demanded social equality and access to food supplies.

The start of the Industrial Revolution had also resulted in mass migration of French people to the bigger cities to seek employment. This further aggravated the famine problem in the bigger cities. The influx of immigrants mixed with the poor peasants and the French cities soon became overcrowded and filled with unemployed and hungry people.

The disenchanted people of France were bitter and antagonized by the desperate situation. They were miserable and had no hope for the future prompting them to support the revolutionary movement that finally brought down the monarchical rule of King Louis XIV leading to the 'reign of terror', a series of prosecution against all supporters or anyone related to the monarchy. As many as 30,000 French people met their fate at the guillotine before Napoleon Bonaparte came into power.

This collective identity of poverty had build a strong bond of 'fraternal deprivation' leading to a collective group of violent revolutionaries. The revolutionaries 'objectives had interested many other similarly impoverished people and recruiting of new members were not a major problem for the movement. Poverty, famine, high unemployment and desperate lives, are all the right ingredients for a recipe of mass unrest and revolt against the ruling government perceived to be unfair and useless.

4. The Palestinians cause

The newly formed United Nations General Assembly, on 29 November 1947, passed the United Nations Partition Plan for Palestine, with two-third majority. Zionist and Jewish political leaders accepted the partition plan but Palestinian leaders rejected it. Soon, Palestine Arabs and Jewish paramilitary forces clashed in armed skirmishes. Jewish leaders declared the birth of State of Israel on 14 May 1948. The neighboring Arab states and armies (Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Transjordan and local Arabs) attacked Israel following its declaration, and the 1948 Arab-Israeli War ensued. Consequently, the partition plan was never implemented. Subsequently, 3 more wars were fought between the Arabs and Israelis, in 1956, 1967 and 1973. These wars resulted in the capture and occupation of large portions of Egyptian and Palestine land. Currently, Palestinians, with a population of around 4 million, lives in 2 separate 'enclaves' or pieces of land, Gaza and West bank.

The Palestinians had lived under the oppressive blockade of Israel for more than 60 years. As a result, today, it is estimated that two-thirds of Palestinians live below the poverty line. The Palestinian economy is divided based on its territories of the West Bank, East Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip. The Palestine economy had traditionally survived from handouts and aid given by Western nations including the United States of America (USA). When Hamas won a democratic election and came into power in the Gaza strip, the USA and members of European Union that recognizes Hamas as a terrorist organization, stopped extending aid to Palestine. This exacerbated the situation further, plunging the economy of Palestine.

Israel almost surrounds the Palestinian territories and controls the borders, rendering crossborder commerce and trading of goods very difficult, and sometimes Israel simply refuses to allow any goods going in and out of Palestine. As a result of all these economic choking activities, Palestinian unemployment has risen from 23% in 2005 to over 50% at the end of 2006.

Therefore it is not surprising to see Palestinian youths joining extreme political movements. The deterioration in economic conditions has in some ways contributed to the eruption of terrorism. Palestinian youths are left without jobs or any other prerequisites of a satisfactory life.

One area where poverty plays a contributory role in extreme political behaviour and violence is the unemployment of highly educated men. When they see no solution to their prevailing economic circumstances, they become more susceptible to the false promises of those who favour terrorist methods to bring about social and political change. The case of the French peasants and Palestinians' plight serve to highlight the dangers of high poverty and a slow decayed economy to a country's social-political stability.

5. Analysis

In our study of poverty and social unrest, we have looked into the French Revolution and the Palestinian's plight. Both bear similarities in terms of mass unemployment and high poverty rates. The French peasants and lower income class had lost all hope of survival and a very bleak future had driven them to come out against the ruler. They knew that the nobles will always be in control of their lands and monopoly of businesses. This had given rise to desperate hopes for future survival. All it took was a charismatic leader with new hope for the future, influence the mass people and unite them in a common cause, which they already had collectively identified to spark a political violence.

Similarly the Palestinians also do not have much hope for their own future. The youth do not have jobs and are constantly harassed by Israeli security forces. They have seen first hand and experienced the violence of war and suicide bombings since they were young. Some may already had lost their fathers, mothers or brothers in attacks by Israeli forces. In is very easy for these youths to be attracted to violent political movements. A question arises, if the Palestinian youths had jobs with a sufficient living stipend, would they resort to restless behaviour or violence? We will only know when Israel releases her choke hold on Palestine and allow free trade and sustainable investment in and out of Palestinian borders.

The link between poverty and political unrest seems almost patently obvious. The great Greek philosopher, Aristotle had stated that poverty has been the prime suspect in fomenting political violence and that thought had prevailed for at least 2,000 years of recorded scholarship. However, latest studies had shown that there may not be a direct linkage between poverty and acts of terrorism. The profiles of the most recent attackers ie. the participants of the 9/11 attacks and the London underground train bombing (the 7/7 attacks), along with the involvement of the doctors in the failed plot to bomb various targets in the UK, provide strong anecdotal examples of the involvement of the middle class as opposed to the poor in acts of terrorism.

The involvement of the educated and well-to-do middle class may be link to the theory of fraternal deprivation or deprivation felt by individuals as members of a group. This situation is where individual actors might feel that while they may not have personally experienced discrimination, poverty or humiliation, their intense sense of deprivation is the product of shared concept felt by an entire community.

6. How about Malaysia?

The current global economic downturn will slowly sink its ugly teeth in Malaysia's economy. Bank Negara Malaysia (BNM) has estimated that by the end of 2009, Malaysia will be in recession. The worst case scenario will see a lot of business collapsing in Malaysia causing widespread unemployment. This widespread unemployment may be turned into a 'collective identity' of 'fraternal deprivation' that may lead rise to coordinated and concerted efforts to remedy the unjust situation.

The Malaysian government views this impending downturn seriously. It has installed numerous fiscal policies and economic boosting packages. The effectiveness of these tools is yet to be measurable. The government acknowledged that the jobless may have lost sense of usefulness and therefore implemented a financial grant for jobless individuals to pursue higher education at a local university. The government will sponsor RM10,000 for a Masters degree and RM20,000 for a PhD.

The Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), a component party of the ruling Barisan Nasional political party has just launched the TRAIN project, to give training for unemployed graduates of all races. This demonstrates the seriousness the government view on the risks posed by unemployment of youths and resulting restlessness that may lead to social unrest and related problems.

Again, it is too primitive at this stage to estimate the usefulness of these packages. Malaysia after gaining her independence slightly more than 50 years ago may experience her worst recession or even a depression. It is unpredictable on how the people will suffer from this downturn and how poor some may be turned into, nonetheless, the historical legacies of high unemployment and poverty, as illustrated by the French and Palestinians serves as a strong reminder to us.

7. Conclusion

The direct linkage between poverty and unemployment with extreme political behaviour has not been established by more recent studies. This is in contrary to the age-old belief that poverty is the main source of human unrest. Latest studies had shown that there is a strong propensity of the well-to-do and educated youths that submit themselves to the ideological struggles of such groups. However, the image of poor and subsequent feelings of guilt has been seen as a strong influence of collective responsibility. This in itself often serves as a main guiding principle of youths joining radical movements.

However, the risk of the poor and unemployed may contribute to mass uneasiness that may succumb to feelings of deprivation and it will easily render them to commit these feelings into actions by forming or joining extreme movements which may lead to violence. History has, on many occasions, shown that when there is large scale poverty and mass unemployment, it is always a breeding ground for new extreme ideologies and its movements leading to political violence. The 2 brief case studies presented here can be augmented by studies of the rise of Nazism in post-World War I Germany, the support of poor peasants given to Viet Cong during the 1950s and numerous other violent conflicts.

It is of utmost importance that the government and its security apparatus to take urgent steps in preventing poverty and mass unemployment form this economic downturn. However, the final question is, how much can the government do, when it is faced by a daunting task of holding the economy from slipping into the recession abyss, to prevent the risk of mass uneasiness fuelled by the consequences of the economic downturn?

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