

Covid-19: Time to rally round the flag

Bilveer Singh

For The Straits Times

Crises are challenging times for any state, big or small. These can make a great difference in how states and governments come to terms with these challenges and eventually overcome them.

There are different types of crises, many of which can be resolved by governments, but some do require additional support, especially from the society at large.

A failure to resolve the crisis can lead to the collapse of the government, including at great costs to the societies where these crises are taking place.

Political science has a concept called “rally round the flag”. This

involves the society at large, not just members of the ruling party, but also the opposition, opinion makers and general public, supporting the government during a crisis, especially one that is undermining the state or has the potential to.

Some crises bring to the fore existential challenges, about nationhood, security and well-being. Such crises are not times for politicking but for joining forces on the principle of “one for all, all for one”. Crises in the past where this effect could be seen include the 1962 Cuba missile crisis in the United States, the 1997 Asian financial crisis across Asia, and the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the US.

By any measure, the global spread of Covid-19 has created a crisis of serious proportions for Singapore, evident from the public health, economic, social and even

political challenges thrown up since Singapore first reported the infection on Jan 23.

Since then, the number of infections has increased exponentially, especially among foreign worker dormitories, with the Government forced to undertake drastic measures while continuing with essential services to prevent total paralysis.

What to do now? By any measure, the Government has undertaken an excellent job in curbing further spread and keeping death rates very low. The measures implemented have been what can be described as a “whole of government” and “whole of society” comprehensive approach, and are far superior to most states in the world, even among developed countries.

The success of these measures is evident from the way society as a whole has followed the lead and operationalised policies – closing workplaces to work from home, and using home-based learning when schools shut. Most stayed home to observe social distancing rules. In short, the quasi-lockdown, named “circuit breaker”, has much public support and endorsement, and hence, legitimacy. In return,

the Government has promised to look after the sick, unemployed and stood by \$60 billion in aid to keep jobs and help businesses, among other initiatives.

So what is involved in “rally round the flag”?

It is the public expression of support for the government of the day, be it through words or deeds. It involves the muting of criticisms and opposition to the government in general, and especially with regard to policies surrounding the crisis that is being managed.

It cannot be that the government is doing all things wrong – and yet that is the impression you may get on some social media pages.

A rally-round-the-flag response to Covid-19 is important because a public health emergency cannot be tackled by the government alone; all of us need to cooperate.

A rally-round-the-flag response has positive effects.

First, it boosts the standing of the government in the eyes of the public and international community. Second, it compels the government of the day to do the right thing rather than being populist and try to mine the crisis for any short-term political gain.

Third, with immense public support, the government of the day will be able to mobilise public opinion to undertake difficult measures that it would otherwise be deterred from.

Many are indeed rallying round the flag, from companies providing housing for quarantined citizens or helping to produce masks or swabs for diagnostic tests, to groups of citizens self-organising to deliver masks, food and care packages to the vulnerable.

Singapore still has a long way to go in battling the infection. Whether it is a foreign worker, citizen or a permanent resident, as long as the infection remains among them, all of us are in danger and a new wave of infection can easily emanate.

Viruses cannot be stopped at one’s borders and after Covid-19, another virus will surely visit us, just as we had to deal with Sars and H1N1 before this. Surely, there will be much soul-searching about how Covid-19 hit Singapore so hard after we thought that we had managed Sars, H1N1 and even Mers. It is during this review period post-Covid-19 that anyone with good ideas to save Singapore should

come up and share their views.

To be sure, the chorus of “never enough” will continue, as will the complaints. Indeed, one can debate whether the Government was slow in advising the wearing of masks; was complacent about infections among dormitory dwellers; and could have instituted a faster, more widespread lockdown.

Until then, as responsible, loyal and patriotic Singaporeans, we should rally round the flag and defeat the virus first.

When one does this, one pulls together with powers of the state to overcome the threat. Debate about the threat, its origins, what could have been done, and what could be done better, can all be left for the future. Conquer the threat first, debate from one’s comfort zone later.

stopinion@sph.com.sg

• Bilveer Singh is an associate professor at the Department of Political Science of the National University of Singapore. He is the author of *Is The People's Action Party Here To Stay? Analysing The Resilience Of The One-Party Dominant State in Singapore* (World Scientific Press, 2019).