

# Peace

- Corwin Pek's award-winning submission at *The Queen's Commonwealth Essay Competition*

Peace does not connote merely the absence of a war-like situation, but it also implies maintenance of the law and order. Peace can be viewed as the diffusion and transformation of a violent situation through non-violent means. While the modern world greatly values peace and non-violent conflict resolution, such a view is unfortunately not shared by some. These parties may indulge in extreme violence in order to publicise and achieve their goals. Retaliation with violence, then unfortunately becomes the last resort in order to bring about a quicker stop to the victim's pain and suffering.

"Never think that war, no matter how necessary, nor how justified, is not a crime." Ernest Hemingway wrote this in an introduction to a book in 1946. Wars – the worst enemy of peace – remain indiscriminate as they have been for ages. Despite the advancements in regional and global diplomacy since the Second World War and the end of the Cold War between the US and its allies against the Communist Bloc, armed conflicts still occur. For every nation that wins a conflict, many combatants and civilians die, and their siblings and families feel the need for revenge outside the course of the legal system. History has witnessed this trend for centuries.

The 1980s and 1990s witnessed consistent wars in Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, and among warring states in North and Central Africa. The Middle East again became the focal point after the 9/11 terrorist attacks in New York and Washington. In Asia, recent conflicts include the South China Sea disputes and North Korea's nuclear provocations. Whether the wars were or would be waged for the control of territories or oil and gas reserves, or to quell terrorist groups, the impact on communities remains the same as it has been for centuries. Regardless of the level of sophistication of the weaponry and the precision of the pilots and their planes, the outcome is predictable. Regardless of the safeguards and international military codes, the victims are the same. Bullets, smart bombs, missiles, and even the most sophisticated drones cannot differentiate innocent bystanders from the targets that they seek to kill. War is always indiscriminate even when it is justifiable. Yet, the use of military is a final and necessary means of enforcing law and order and re-establishing political and economic stability.

The peace and tranquillity of a place can also be rocked suddenly by a terrorist attack or a natural disaster. While governments and communities prepare for such incidents diligently, no amount of preparation is enough. When terrorists bombed Bali in 2002, the panic on the congested streets of that paradise was similar to that in Banda Aceh when the tsunami swept inland in 2004. The city was not designed to cope with contingencies and the people did not expect what had happened to them. The emergency services could not be mobilised as they were largely trapped too.

Sometimes, the fact remains. Society will never be fully prepared to face what terrorists and nature throw at them. The most important action following such tragedies is for the government and communities to focus on harnessing collaborative actions to heal the wounds during the recovery and rebuilding process.

While it is not too difficult to mobilise heavy equipment to reconstruct buildings, bridges and schools, it is difficult to heal the wound and memories etched in the minds of victims and survivors. In the aftermath of a terrorist attack or a natural calamity, most government agencies focus on tending to the medical, physical and psychological traumas of the survivors.

Many governments today take a hard stand against public protests and demonstrations that disrupt the peace, economic activities and social stability of the country. The constitutions of many countries outlaw protests and demonstrations. Public gatherings are carefully monitored and intelligence operations gather information on planned protests. Cities like New York and London are wired with security cameras that provide live feed to the traffic officials as well as to the security agencies monitoring the activities on the streets.

Historically, protesters had organised marches and walkouts and starved themselves to direct attention to their causes. Martin Luther King, John Lennon, Mahatma Gandhi, and other politicians and musicians had participated in various protests to push for change. Several died for their causes. The protesters were reacting to harsh colonial policies against natives, war over ideology, and many other policies that evoked discontent. Recent protests opposed the US ban on immigration from certain Muslim-majority nations. Many opposed the war in Iraq and Afghanistan that had been waged following the 9/11 attacks in the US, and the austerity measures following the bailout of several economies in Europe in the recent financial crisis. People took to the streets waving banners, chanting and disrupting economic activities, hoping to send a signal that they opposed the measures taken.

What happens when peace is disrupted in a country? What does the country lose when protests and demonstrations break out in the streets? Private businesses suffer each day the protesters picket and block access to ports, airports and financial centres. Local and foreign companies suffer financial losses each day the workers decide unilaterally to protest for higher pay or better working conditions. While one group wants to benefit and force changes, another group of citizens suffers financial losses and emotional trauma from the rising tensions on the streets.

As for the government, the security agencies are always in the quandary. They are resistant to use force on the citizens but there are instances where local and foreign provocateurs arm their protesters with weapons and techniques to provoke the security forces to respond aggressively. Provocateurs have been known to exploit situations, hide their agenda in the midst of the anger and provide manpower and expertise to organise the demonstrations to discredit the government. On the whole, many countries with no natural resources and with total dependence on tourism and global trade cannot tolerate demonstrations and protests. Many governments and societies cannot afford to have irrational and unrestrained street violence impacting their security and eroding the reliability of their legal system.

Protests can still persist via more peaceful means on Internet forums and news channels. Youths today are more innovative and constructive in protesting against policies or repressive government actions. They use networking sites on the Internet to voice their views, exchange perspectives and send consolidated signals to the

policymakers. Views on Twitter, Facebook and other communications platforms now reflect grouses and suggestions that government officials can review reflect on, investigate and formulate into new policies. They are able to transmit photographs and videos of their grouses to the press and get them uploaded for others to respond to. Even with these tools, the public has to be responsible and exercise caution so that irresponsible opportunists and provocateurs do not misrepresent their thoughts and words.

There are peaceful and constructive ways to change a system that is based on meritocratic and democratic values. Youths with a good education, ethnics and firm conviction of serving the society can be part of the political process. They can join political parties, express their views on policies and run for parliamentary positions at the elections. Others will opt to join the public service and take part in evaluating the effectiveness of the system and policies. By joining the public service or contesting in general elections, these youths are able to have direct contact with the voters, articulate their ideas to change the society and the economy, and lay the foundations for a better tomorrow through peaceful means that are in line with the constitutional guidelines. All governments take firm measures when rogue individuals and groups work outside the policy and political frameworks and try to cause instability that could jeopardise the unity and peace of the country. All citizens have to be aware that their lives are governed by the constitution that they had agreed to when attaining independence, and that any change and political reforms needs time and has to be done calmly through consensus.

Using force to demand change seems easy and convenient. Making changes through political channels is difficult and takes time. Sustaining policy implementation and adapting it to changing times is easier said than done. However, mounting conflicts and hatred between the people and the leaders; countries and countries; region and region serve only to slow down the progress in society. Today, the keypad; diplomatic solution is mightier than brute force. Make peace; not war.