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BLM Movement: Singapore and Glocalisation

By Norman Vasu and Yasmine Wong

SYNOPSIS

Global support for the Black Lives Matter movement has left some befuddled as to why a seemingly domestic movement has garnered global support. The concept of glocalisation may be a way to explain it.

COMMENTARY

THE KILLING of George Floyd in the United States brought about international reverberations felt far and wide. Mass protests have erupted from [Oslo](#) to [Osaka](#) and from [Bogotá](#) to [Berlin](#). The global protests began with marches in solidarity with the [Black Lives Matter](#) (BLM) movement's desire to end police brutality and systemic racism in the US.

While this is so, the *raison d'être* of international protests have transmogrified into protests over how a [colonial past](#) should be understood, whether [statues](#) of individuals who profited from the slave trade should remain erect, and how [minorities](#) and [indigenous communities](#) are treated.

Glocalisation: Internationalising Local Events

This internationalisation of a domestic event has led to some puzzlement and concern. The Australian prime minister, having witnessed protests in Sydney denouncing both the killing of George Floyd and Indigenous Australian deaths in police custody, warned that movements happening overseas [should not be imported](#) to Australia.

The BLM movement has also led to conversations about being a minority in Singapore. For example, a picture of students in Raffles Institution donning black masks and black

painted faces to celebrate the birthday of an Indian classmate surfaced online in the wake of BLM, prompting a [response](#) by the minister for education.

Whilst acknowledging the existence of racial insensitivities in Singapore, he stressed the historical and contextual differences between Singapore and the US. How best can this internationalisation of a seemingly domestic event be understood?

The manifestation of the various guises of the BLM movement internationally is perhaps most appropriately understood through the concept of [glocalisation](#).

Glocalisation, a concept that is a portmanteau of the processes of globalisation and localisation, is employed to describe the resultant product of the global interacting with the local. This interaction creates something shared globally while also simultaneously exhibiting recognisable elements of the local context within which it is embedded. Expressed differently, the product of glocalisation has internationally recognisable common features but its multiple forms around the world have distinct local characteristics.

An often employed illustration of glocalisation is the ubiquitous fast food conglomerate McDonald's. McDonald's restaurants around the world share common identifiable features – the golden arches along with the red and yellow colour scheme for example – while concurrently displaying local peculiarities – a Quarter Pounder with Cheese is instead a Royal Cheese in France owing to France's use of the metric system.

Glocalisation of BLM in Singapore

The utility of the concept of glocalisation in understanding what is currently happening is three-fold and all three elements can be seen in the way the BLM movement has actualised in Singapore.

The globalisation in glocalisation

First, the globalisation element of the glocalisation explains why antiracism, a fundamental driver of the BLM movement, has gained international traction. In the context of Singapore, the global message of antiracism resonates with segments of Singapore's society as discussions on racism in Singapore predate the movement.

Testimony to this may be found in the existence of Instagram accounts like [minority voices](#) which elevates experiences of everyday racisms faced by minorities in Singapore before the BLM movement. Another recent example of how discussions on racism are not alien to Singapore would be the controversy surrounding the [NETs E-Pay advertisement](#) in 2019.

The advertisement had a Chinese actor artificially darkening his face to portray an Indian man and a Malay woman in a headscarf. This advertisement drew ire and a [discussion](#) on the offensiveness of "[Brownface](#)".

The localisation in glocalisation

Second, the localisation in glocalisation captures why protests internationally have adopted and applied antiracism to locally specific causes. In Singapore, owing to its specific milieu, glocalisation metamorphosed BLM's antiracism drive into discussions on the [lived experience of being a racial minority in Singapore](#), the [treatment of migrant workers](#), as well as the manner in which [Singapore's colonial past](#) should be understood and treated.

The focus on the local brought about by the global is illustrated through the manner in which many have [pointed out](#) how support for BLM should not be done at the expense of ignoring racism and xenophobia at home.

Discussions were rooted in [what injustice looks like in Singapore](#) and [what the BLM movement means to Singapore](#), manifesting in the creation of a publicly available compilation of [Singapore-specific material on race](#) and the emergence of more online platforms such as [hearmesg](#) to consolidate personal anecdotes on discrimination.

Furthermore, as BLM has also inspired the [struggle against white supremacy](#), states have been forced to confront their treatment and understanding of colonial histories. Singapore has been no exception here. In the context of Singapore, questions have been asked of the [appropriateness of Stamford Raffles](#) being commemorated through a statue, considering his racist imperial legacy.

The glocalisation of protest

Third, glocalisation also explains the different responses to the BLM movement. Despite the threat of COVID-19, protestors around the globe have come out in force. However, protesting is not in everyone's cultural DNA, and it is certainly not in Singapore's. The negative perception of protests as an illegitimate form of political action has been engrained in historical memory, and is enforced by the government's [zero-tolerance approach](#) to illegal protests.

Instead, discussions mostly take place on social media, not only because protesting is not a norm in Singapore but also perhaps because social media platforms allow for the creation of spaces to discuss topics like race and religion—issues considered [taboo](#) in mainstream spaces.

By understanding how glocalisation has affected the BLM movement, unease expressed over the adoption of a supposed alien concept to a local context may be quelled. In the same manner the Quarter Pounder with Cheese is also a Royal Cheese, Singapore has effectively glocalised the BLM movement for causes that are an integral part of its social fabric with calls against immutable interpretations of history, for workers to be treated better, and racism to be eradicated.

Capturing this nuance, glocalisation is not only the best way to understand the BLM movement's impact on Singapore's society but it is also a manner to anticipate what future movements will bring.

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