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Measuring chaos: why the world needs a dignity index

By Nayef Al-Rodhan



Photo: Getty Images

Britain is heading for a sticky summer as the cost of living crisis squeezes household budgets and the country faces its highest levels of inflation in forty years. After years of austerity, being sardined indoors and now facing an economic stranglehold, you don't have to be a leading pollster to predict that hardship could very soon push people to civil unrest.

While it is easy to track inflation, it is much harder for policymakers to take the pulse of the nation and steel citizens for a 'summer of discontent'. But they can try. A good start would be to create a new framework to measure dignity, with an eye on making sure dignity levels remain intact, even while higher prices begin to bite.

As the country tries to deal with these unprecedented crises, many of our traditional indicators for success: GDP, the stock market, approval polls, have been found wanting. To look at these measurements you would not be able to appreciate the drastic changes going on in the world, and perhaps more importantly, in the years leading up to these events, you would not have been able to use these indicators to predict them.

Dissatisfaction with traditional indicators of progress, such as the stock market, has a long history. Critics have been keen to pick up on the disparity between the success of the financial markets and the living standards of ordinary people. GDP or the progress of the stock market are only able to track economic growth and success from a macro point of view, what they cannot take into account is the human experience that underlies economic growth. Natural disasters, economic booms, and investment bubbles can have real human costs, but pain and suffering are not factors in economic growth. Economic indicators do not factor in the indignities people suffer, which is one of the crucial factors for human prosperity.

All political order ultimately rests on a guarantee of dignity for the citizens living in that society, at all times and under all circumstances. What is clear is that the key factors for determining how successful societies are at preserving dignity are: security, human rights, accountability, transparency, reason, justice, opportunity, innovation and inclusiveness. When any of these is breached, when people feel

they are being treated unfairly or without reason, the political order breaks down. Dignity is therefore much more inclusive than happiness, political freedoms, or the mere absence of humiliation, it is a set of factors underpinning social cohesion.

Many studies have highlighted the importance of social cohesion in maintaining political order during economic or political shocks. Dignity is therefore as much a question of social cohesion, and belonging, as it is one of rights. It is this cohesion that is routinely cited in another well-known indicator – the Human Happiness Report.

It has become something of a cliché for Scandinavian countries to top world happiness rankings, to the point where policymakers routinely dismiss them as offering little new to say. It is worth asking why the likes of Sweden, Denmark and Norway are so successful. They are all liberal democratic societies, and their dominance of the Human Happiness reports could be interpreted as an endorsement of that political model. However, while some liberal democracies are able to produce the social, economic, political, and cultural conditions that enable societies to flourish, others are struggling.

It is true that, in theory, democracies guarantee political freedom, the rule of law, human rights and a platform for citizens to engage in the political process. However, some democracies have demonstrated an outright renunciation of their principles at home and are plagued by serious flaws. From inequality, lack of opportunity, and infringements of civil liberties, to discrimination and corruption, these factors are often missed in traditional indicators. The Human Happiness report therefore offers a useful snapshot of what many liberal democracies are missing.

But here's the rub: the Happiness report is only annual, and by ultimately focusing on 'happiness' it lacks a prophetic quality that the stock market or other economic indicators provide. By the time a country has slipped down the happiness report, it is usually fairly obvious why.

What we need therefore is an active dignity report, that can track countries' progress on a more regular and holistic basis. I have previously developed a dignity scale that focuses on dignity factors more closely, and again a Scandinavian country, Sweden, came out on top. However, the difference was that this scale focused on a range of factors linked to social cohesion, rights, prosperity, governance and sustainability, and these could be tracked closely and regularly to provide a barometer for the stability of political order – which would be a vital tool for policymakers.

At a time when the world is undergoing rapid change and massive instability, we should encourage efforts like the World Happiness Report for expanding our understanding. And we should ask more of them. We cannot address the problems with our traditional political models unless we interrogate why they are failing us. By measuring states' ability to support their citizens' dignity at all times and under all circumstances, we will be far better placed to make the right decisions for our future.

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