

Divisive forces can't be allowed to take root here, says Heng Swee Keat

Need to act decisively against them, says Deputy PM, citing nativism as an example

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Singapore needs to act decisively to prevent divisive forces from taking root here, Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat said yesterday.

These include nativism - anti-immigrant sentiment - hints of which have already shown up here in the public conversation about foreigners, Mr Heng said in his speech at the Institute of Policy Studies' annual Singapore Perspectives conference.

"If we do not act decisively, and if we allow these forces to creep up on us, our hopes and concerns can be exploited to create fear and anger," he said.

Trends like globalisation and technological shifts have disrupted jobs and affected livelihoods, especially in countries that have not kept pace with these changes, said Mr Heng.

This has ushered in an era where forces like far-right parties have exploited people's fears and frustrations for their own political gain, he added.

"Campaigning along nativist and protectionist lines, and further undermining trust in public institutions, these divisive forces have washed over many societies, including Europe and Latin America," he said.

Singapore is not immune to these same forces that have swept across the world, noted Mr Heng.

Some of the recent discussions surrounding foreigners in Singapore, for instance, have been fraught with such tensions.

Earlier this month, the ruling party clashed with Workers' Party chief Pritam Singh in Parliament and online over employment data.

Trade and Industry Minister Chan Chun Sing remarked in Parliament that he was "very cautious about this constant divide, Singaporean versus PR (permanent resident)", in response to Mr Singh's question about whether employment figures could be broken down to separate Singaporeans and PRs.

Mr Singh said later on Facebook that such information was necessary "to counter fake news and falsehoods (which) fester far more when the facts are available but not made public".

The post drew a rejoinder from Senior Minister of State for Trade and Industry Chee Hong Tat, who called on Singaporeans to avoid "the politics of division and envy".

"We must firmly reject all attempts to drive a wedge between different groups within our society and stand resolute against efforts to stir fear and hatred for political gain," said Mr Chee.

Last Friday, the police said they had issued warnings to four men for harassing Mr Erramalli Ramesh, the man caught on video verbally abusing a condominium security guard last October.

The widely shared video triggered a backlash: Netizens dug up his personal details, which they posted online, some accompanied with racist remarks. Mr Erramalli and his family were also threatened with death, violence and rape.

Mr Heng said yesterday that Singaporeans need to ensure that differences do not become entrenched and corrode social cohesion, and be aware of "the dangers of political parties using divisive rhetoric to gain support in a fractured landscape, and the risks of falling prey to the pull of populism".

"Our diversity can be turned against us," he said. "Our unity can fray, and our society can wither."

Amid such forces and Singapore's own changing demographics, it is important to maintain unity as a people and focus on working together to build a shared future, said Mr Heng.

The foundation for this is strong political leadership, which means leaders who have integrity and who are deeply committed to the well-being of Singaporeans and the country's future.

They also must have the trust and support of Singaporeans, and be able to take Singapore forward, amid seismic changes around the world, by partnering the people, he added.

"They must have the moral courage to do what is right for the people, and not just what is popular," said Mr Heng. "We cannot be all things to all people."