Institute of Policy Studies

IPS Conference on Race, Language and Religion

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Race, religion and language are three foundational pillars of differences that define multi-cultural Singapore. The Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) held its Conference on Race, Language and Religion on 9 October 2014, where scholars, policy makers and community leaders were brought together to discuss the current state of social harmony in Singapore. This conference sought to explore the construction of racial, linguistic and religious policies and identities in Singapore, and how Singapore can manage its more diverse population and continue to ensure social harmony.

Panel One: Building Harmony — Views from the Ground

Speakers: Dr Mathew Mathews, IPS Senior Research Fellow; Dr Teng Siao See, IPS Research Fellow; Dr Chiang Wai Fong, IPS Research Fellow; and Mohammad Khamsya Bin Khidzer, IPS Research Assistant

The first panel shared preliminary findings of a series of focus group discussions conducted to examine the prevailing views towards social harmony in Singapore. Mr Mohammad Khamsya elaborated on the spaces, attitudes and opportunities that can help in building cross-cultural friendships. Dr Chiang described how the participants of the focus groups thought about social exclusion and discrimination, and spoke about various majority/minority fault-lines. Dr Teng explored how Singaporeans negotiate and navigate diverse identities and how that can unsettle harmony. Dr Mathews focused on the aspirations Singaporeans have towards social harmony and the divergence in the suggestions to attain those aspirations, as proposed by the participants of the focus groups.

Panel Two: Building a Racially Harmonious Society

Speakers: Dr Nazry Bahrawi, Lecturer, Singapore University of Technology and Design; Dr Rizwana Abdul Azeez; and Ang Yiting, Assistant News Editor of *Lianhe Zaobao*

Chairperson: Dr Sharon Siddique, Director of Sreekumar.Siddique & Co Pte Ltd

Ms Ang explained the heterogeneity of the Chinese population in Singapore through historical lenses. She suggested that the current racial classification is not representative of the Chinese community, and that discussions have overlooked the diversity within the

Chinese in Singapore. Dr Rizwana argued that Singaporeans and Singapore Permanent Residents are reproducing ethnic boundaries although they are residing out of the national borders of Singapore in Johor. Dr Nazry exerted that Singapore has an "unhealthy obsession" with classifying people into neat categories. He urged the audience to rethink if race should be our primary identity marker and argued that the current racial classification system — the CMIO (Chinese-Malays-Indians-Others) model — is not inclusive.

Members of the audience appreciated the historical perspective in understanding diversity within ethnic groups in Singapore, and agreed that Singaporeans need to look into our history to help us understand who we are and why we are who we are now. An audience member suggested that Ms Ang missed an important segment of the ethnic Chinese community; apart from the dialect-speaking, Mandarin-speaking, and English-speaking Chinese, there was also a sizeable number of Chinese who spoke Malay and were keen in the history and culture of the Malays. She added that the former Nanyang University had a Malay Studies Department and was active in promoting Malay literature. In response, Ms Ang acknowledged that her presentation was not comprehensive as the Chinese community in Singapore is very diverse and complex. She light-heartedly commented that she would need another presentation to fully explain the nuances in the dialectic relationship between the Chinese locals and the Chinese new immigrants.

Agreeing with Dr Nazry that Singapore should rethink the use of race as the defining characteristic of the population, a member of the audience suggested that Singaporeans should move towards recognising and respecting each other as individuals and fellow Singaporeans. It was pointed out that self-help groups might become irrelevant in future as: (1) the population becomes more diverse and (2) Singaporeans increasingly believe that help should be dispensed according to socio-economic circumstances instead of race. Issues such as educational under-attainment should be tackled at the national level instead of the ethnic group level. Concern for the insidious nature of racialism and its role in institutionalising stereotypes was also expressed. It was pointed out that racialist thinking and behaviour are justified since high-standing personalities make racialist remarks too. Hence, political leaders should be more mindful in making comments on race.

To counter racial discrimination, an audience member suggested that we should stop using terms such as "minority race" and "majority race". Instead of emphasising our ethnic identity, we should think more about how "multicultural" we are. This point was rebutted by another member of the audience, who argued that power dimensions exist despite the terms we use to refer to different ethnic groups. Instead, further research should look into the existing power dynamics between ethnic groups as it has implications on building a racially harmonious Singapore.

Panel Three: A Common Language to Unite or Divide

Speakers: Associate Professor Viniti Vaish, National Institute of Education (NIE); Dr Tan Ying Ying, Assistant Professor, Nanyang Technological University (NTU); and Associate Professor Mukhlis Abu Baker, NIE

Chairperson: Associate Professor Vincent Ooi, National University of Singapore (NUS)

Associate Professor Vaish described the expansion and escalation of the English language and how it excluded members of lower socio-economic classes and older demographic groups. To ensure the equitable distribution of the linguistic capital of English within the national school system, Associate Professor Vaish suggested that "translanguaging" pedagogy, or simultaneously communicating in multiple languages, could customise learning processes and help students of various backgrounds acquire language skills. Dr Tan proposed that English should be considered as a mother tongue language for Singaporeans. She supported her claim by stating that the usage of English in Singapore complements the theoretical conditions of a mother tongue language. She argued that considering English as a mother tongue language would assist with building a unifying national identity. Associate Professor Mohd Mukhlis queried the impact of language management policies on linguistic proficiencies and language attitudes of Singaporeans and the extent to which the English language should be promoted over other official and heritage languages. He suggested that policies and pedagogies should be designed to encourage students to acquire skills and knowledge simultaneously in both English and mother tongue languages.

A member of the audience commented that implementing the "translanguaging" pedagogy is challenging as Singaporean students speak a variety of languages and dialects. Associate Professor Mukhlis responded by describing how "translanguaging" is conducted in New Zealand, and that Singapore can learn from these existing models of learning. A question was raised on whether Singapore should temper the hegemony of English or revive the languages that have been "lost" along the way in order to retain linguistic diversity in Singapore. The panel unanimously agreed that it is still pertinent for Singaporeans to be proficient in English, and that Singaporeans can be proficient in both English and their respective mother tongue languages. The issue is how Singapore can put in place structures and alter the learning environment to help students be effectively bilingual.

The discussion then turned to the definition of bilingualism in Singapore. Members of the audience questioned the validity of the current definition of bilingualism, and discussed who should have the authority to decide which languages Singaporeans should learn. It was suggested that Singapore should refer to the two languages students learn in school as "first language" and "second language" since the term "mother tongue" is problematic in that its definition is subject to debate. Dr Tan and Dr Vaish disagreed; using the terms "first language" and "second language" implies a hierarchy of the languages, which is not intended, as both languages are perceived to be equally important.

Towards the end of the session, the room was in agreement with a member of the audience who commented that the standard of English in Singapore is deteriorating. This comment led to several members of the audience chiming in to emphasise the questionable quality of "spoken English" amongst youths. In response, someone commented that the visible deterioration of the standard of English amongst Singaporeans could be attributed to the larger number of English speakers as compared to the past when English was only spoken by the elites.

Panel Four: Negotiating the Sacred and the Secular

Speakers: Professor Vineeta Sinha, Head of South Asian Studies Programme, NUS; Professor Geoffrey Benjamin, Senior Associate in the Centre for Liberal Arts and Social Sciences, NTU; Dr Azhar Ibrahim, Visiting Fellow in the Department of Malay Studies, NUS

Chairperson: Dr Lai Ah Eng, Adjunct Senior Fellow of the University Scholars Programmes, NUS

Dr Lai began by debunking the assertion that religion has lost its relevance in these modern times. On the contrary, one could say that the 21st century is the century of religion with growing religiosity affecting the lives of people all around the globe. Singapore too has had its fair share of religion-related controversies such as the Pink Dot/Wear White movement. With the democratisation of expression and information, Singapore is currently experiencing a state of hyperdiversity, which means having to prepare itself for possible conflicts while maintaining harmony.

Professor Geoffrey Benjamin's presentation covered the fallacy of the secularisation thesis. Additionally, he attributes the rise of religious fundamentalism to the popular, literalist approach to reading religious texts, which while rational, is a-contextual. The following presentation by Professor Vineeta sought to problematise what she deemed to be an artificial separation of the secular and sacred in Singapore, enforced through the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act (MRHA) and other state apparatus. Professor Vineeta also pointed out the state's tendency to homogenise religion through political discourse, which contours how Singaporeans themselves think of a particular religion. Dr Azhar picked up Prof. Vineeta's last point, elaborating on the power dimensions involved in religious differences. He examined the dominant orientation of Singapore Muslims and conjectured that the state only engages with particular segments, those which are aligned with its ideology and concluded by saying that there needs to be a secular civil space for dialogue.

During the Q&A session, a question, directed at all on the panel, asked if Singapore's constantly changing physical landscape was a problem since religious practices have been known to be bound to certain spaces. Professor Vineeta explained that where there are structural constraints in practising religion, creative agency takes over. She gave the example of how some Hindu festivals today are run in stadiums too. Another audience member made the comment that Dr Azhar was homogenising Islam in Singapore when he ascribed a particular religious leaning to religious organisations in Singapore. Dr Azhar explained that he said no such thing, reiterating the power dimension involved in sustaining a dominant discourse. Hence while a group or organisation may have differing views on a particular issue, the ones who are in more influential positions tend to have the last say on the matter.

The presentations and discussions at the conference will be published in a conference report at a later date.

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