Shanmugam defends CMIO model, says removing it may result in 'worse outcomes'

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The Chinese-Malay-Indian-Others (CMIO) framework has worked well for Singapore, and helped forge and preserve racial harmony, said Minister for Home Affairs and Law K Shanmugam on Wednesday (Feb 5).

He was responding to a parliamentary question by Non-Constituency Member of Parliament Leong Mun Wai on when the Government plans to review the CMIO model.

During an Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) conference last month, Minister for Culture, Community and Youth Edwin Tong said that the CMIO framework should be constantly reviewed to reflect Singapore's increasingly complex multicultural landscape.

In his reply during Parliament, Shanmugam said the CMIO framework helps the Government administer race-based policies and programmes which promote social cohesion, provide targeted interventions within the various racial communities, and safeguard the rights of minorities.

This includes the Ethnic Integration Policy (EIP) which draws from the CMIO framework to ensure a good mix of races in public housing estates.

While acknowledging there is "some truth" to what some say about the framework being "overly simplistic and rigid", the minister pointed out a 2021 IPS study which found that 87 per cent of respondents considered race important to their identity.

He added that over 60 per cent of Singapore residents polled in a 2021 CNA-IPS survey on race relations felt that the CMIO policy is effective in preserving racial harmony and should be retained.

"If we eliminated the framework, we may well get worse outcomes as a result," Shanmugam noted.

Looking overseas, the minister highlighted the racial tensions and rising race-related offences in France, which has banned the collection of race-based data since 1978.

Stating that he does not want to draw a "simple, straight-line conclusion" between France's data collection ban to its racial situation, Shanmugam said the lack of race-based data prevents measuring and understanding the difficulties that different races face in different areas and prevents effective intervention to resolve those issues.

"Our model of multiculturalism, multiracialism, with the data and framework we have, has worked quite well for us so far," he added.

"But as Minister Edwin Tong said, we do keep in mind the issue, review periodically, ask ourselves about the CMIO framework, amongst other issues, and see whether it continues to be relevant."

Separately, Shanmugam also questioned Leong's motives for raising concerns about the framework, saying that he and his party — the Progress Singapore Party — had previously criticised the EIP in Parliament.

Leong had been accused of making comments with racist undertones against Indians regarding the Singapore-India Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement (CECA).

In his response, Leong stated that his party supports the EIP but believes the policy causes economic disadvantages to minorities.