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Religion seen as most worrying threat to harmony

(SINGAPORE) Singaporeans may be downright class-conscious, but it is religion - rather than race or class - that poses the most worrying threat to social harmony.

That, in any case, is the majority view of members of the audience at an Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) conference who responded to an SMS poll on the issue yesterday.

More than 600 people - business people, policy makers, academics and others - attended the Singapore Perspectives 2005 forum at the Shangri-La Hotel, which had the theme, People and Partnerships.

SMS polls were conducted throughout the conference to give the organisers some idea of the respondents' reactions to the key themes raised.

Of 337 people who responded to the question about which socio-political division is most worrying for maintaining harmony in Singapore, just over half (51 per cent) cited 'religion'.

About 28 per cent said 'race', 16 per cent picked 'class', while barely 5 per cent chose 'political ideals'.

'Interestingly, religion was not a division that was specifically referred to at the conference,' said IPS research fellow Gillian Koh, commenting on the poll results. 'The response is certainly a sign of the times where, the world over, religion has become highly politicised.'

In his talk at the forum on the class dimension in Singapore, drawing on a survey he conducted in 2001, sociologist Tan Ern Ser said class matters more than ethnicity and age.

His survey findings - which were published last year - suggest that class explains social and political values and attitudes more than race, but Dr Tan did not touch on religion during his presentation yesterday.

The survey findings did throw up several disjunctures. For example, only 2 per cent of Singapore's upper-class consider themselves well off, and 12 per cent actually say they are 'poor'.

And 29 per cent of those with a monthly income of at least \$8,000 describe themselves as 'working class', though none in this income group claim to be 'lower class'.

Dr Tan said his findings also suggest that those living in three-room HDB flats aren't too badly off, and he would categorise as the truly poor, underclass, those in one or two-room flats.

The survey also found that 14 per cent of the middle class said their expenditure exceeds income. They probably portray the 'middle class squeeze', he said.

The issue that bears addressing most, Dr Tan said, is the problems of the 'sandwiched generation' - the 25 per cent or so of the population who are likely to be around 40 to 60 years of age, who have to take care of both the young and the old in their households.

Among other poll questions at the conference, 53 per cent of 274 respondents on what should be top priority in the government's economic strategy picked 'economic competitiveness'.

This came well ahead of the 31 per cent who said 'job creation'.

The other two choices were 'high growth' (about 9 per cent) and 'fair income distribution' (about 7 per cent).

And, asked for their view on Singapore under Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's leadership, the majority (49 per cent of 213 respondents) said it is too early to tell.

But 41 per cent said they are optimistic, while five people (2.3 per cent) are pessimistic. The remaining 7 per cent were neutral.

Sixty-two per cent of 231 respondents would like Mr Lee's administration to 'allow more tolerance towards alternative views and practices'. But 19.5 per cent, the next biggest response, wants the government to 'reinforce Singapore as a morally conservative society'.

Said IPS' Dr Koh: 'These could be interpreted as different, mutually exclusive directions which the government could take at the broad national level.'

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