

Singapore's multi-racial society open to have non-Chinese leadership: Study

Singapore's predominantly Chinese-led multi-racial society has become more open to the idea of electing top leaders who are non-Chinese, according to a survey

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Singapore's predominantly Chinese-led multi-racial society has become more open to the idea of electing top leaders who are non-Chinese, according to a survey conducted by Channel News Asia (CNA) and the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS).

However, most respondents were very uncomfortable with the idea of a new citizen from any country taking on these roles. Less than 10 per cent said they would be comfortable with a new citizen as president or prime minister, CNA reported on Saturday.

New citizens are migrants settling in manpower-short Singapore which invites professionals from around the world, especially to support its flourishing economy.

In the second edition of the CNA-IPS survey on race relations, which was conducted last year, a bigger proportion of respondents said they could accept a Singaporean-Malay (69.6 per cent) or Singaporean-Indian (70.5 per cent) as the prime minister.

Researchers said the figures are a significant increase from the previous study in 2016, where 60.8 per cent said they were comfortable with a Malay as prime minister and 64.3 per cent with an Indian as prime minister.

Almost all respondents (96.8 per cent) were ready to accept a Singaporean-Chinese as prime minister, slightly higher than the 95.6 per cent in 2016.

Researchers also found that respondents from the three major races -- Chinese, Malays and Indians -- showed the highest preference for someone of their own race as prime minister.

Among Chinese respondents, virtually all said they were comfortable with a Singaporean-Chinese as prime minister (98.9 per cent), while 63.9 per cent said they would accept a Malay prime minister and 65.8 per cent an Indian one.

Comparatively, 92.6 per cent of Malay respondents said they would accept a Singaporean-Malay prime minister, but 87.5 per cent would be comfortable with a Chinese one and 80.4 per cent with an Indian one.

Among Indian respondents, 91.9 per cent would accept a Singaporean-Indian as prime minister, but 90.3 per cent would be comfortable with a Chinese one and 80.8 per cent with a Malay one, the survey stated.

Meanwhile, for the role of president, the percentage of respondents who said they could accept a non-Chinese also rose.

About 82.2 per cent said they were comfortable with a Singaporean-Malay as president a jump from 65.5 per cent in the previous study and 82 per cent could accept a Singaporean-Indian up from 70.6 per cent in 2016.

In the 240-page report, researchers suggested that the larger rise could be a result of President Halimah Yacob, who is a Malay, dispelling perhaps earlier prejudices that a Malay was not suitable for the highest office of the land.

A growing number of people think that racism remains an important problem even while the overwhelming majority believe everyone in Singapore can become rich or successful regardless of their race, according to the survey based on responses from more than 2,000 citizens and permanent residents aged 21 years and above, with a sample that was reflective of the Singapore population in terms of their age, race, gender and housing type.

However, an additional 350 or so Malay and Indian respondents were polled so that their views were properly represented.

More than half of the survey's respondents (56.2 per cent) felt that racism is an important problem, which was an increase from the previous CNA-IPS survey conducted in 2016 (46.3 per cent).

Despite this, a large majority of people believe that meritocracy is not contingent on race, with more than 80 per cent of respondents agreeing that everyone can become rich or successful irrespective of what race they are, which was consistent with the findings from the 2016 survey.

While most respondents (88.8 per cent) said it is important for political leaders to talk openly about racism, more than half (58.6 per cent) also felt that such public discourse could cause unnecessary tension.

They may feel that political leaders taking the lead in such discussions could avert some of the potential tension, said the report.

It noted that Chinese respondents (54.9 per cent) were slightly more likely to feel that ethnic minorities are getting overly sensitive in discussions on race, compared to Indian (42.7 per cent) and Malay respondents (47.8 per cent).

The survey also found that respondents were evenly divided on whether there is majority privilege in Singapore, with 53.9 per cent feeling that being of the majority race is an advantage. This was comparable with findings from the 2016 survey, where 52.7 per cent felt this way.

Those between the age of 12 and 35 years, especially Malay and Indian respondents, were generally more likely to feel that majority privilege exists.

In terms of which cultures respondents felt were more privileged, most (70.2 per cent) said they did not believe that the majority race's culture was privileged. However, ethnic minorities were more likely to feel that the converse is true.

Accommodating different cultural needs is also seen as compatible with a strong Singaporean identity, with 71.6 per cent feeling that doing so has not impinged on national identity. Virtually all respondents, 92 per cent, expect the level of national unity to increase or at least stay the same in the next five years, the report said.