

Getting PRs to become citizens a wider integration attempt: observers

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Getting Permanent Residents (PRs) to take up Singapore citizenship stems from a wider attempt at integration, said observers reacting to Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong's remark.

Mr Goh had said during a National Day Rally feedback session that some of the 500,000 PRs will be asked to take up citizenship. If they don't, their PR status will not be renewed.

The authorities have yet to disclose details of the latest government initiative at assimilation. But observers said any new policy will likely target those who have been here for three to five years, and who have enjoyed the benefits of their PR status.

Dr Leong Chan Hoong, Research Fellow at Institute of Policy Studies, said: "The policy makers would have a better chance if they target PRs who have stayed here for a certain period of time and who have benefited from our social policies."

"For example, they have purchased a subsidised flat under the old HDB housing estate schemes, or they may have children who have gone through the local education system and getting some form of educational subsidies or medical health care benefits."

"Essentially, people who have been in our system for quite a number of years and become very localised."

Dr Leong added that those impacted may be Employment Pass holders who may now think twice about applying for PR status, simply because it may have an impact on their citizenship in the long term.

While it may seem like a tough stand, observers said it is the government's way to assure Singaporeans over the growing number of foreigners. But they added that a sharper distinction must be made between PRs and citizens.

Eugene Tan, Assistant Professor at the Singapore Management University's School of Law, said: "It depends on what they see, what are the benefits that could come out of becoming a Singapore citizen. I think as the differentiation between Singaporeans and Permanent Residents becomes sharper, we could see more PRs converting to citizens."

"But until that distinction is a lot sharper, many PRs may feel that there are no plus sides to becoming citizens. In fact, for many Permanent Residents, having citizenship in another country and a Singapore Permanent Residence is actually a very good combination for them. In that

sense, there is no push factor for them to convert and at the same time there is no pull factor for them to convert from Permanent Resident to citizen.

"This is where the policy's challenge lies. Simply, for a long time the differentiation between a citizen and PR hasn't been very sharp. In recent years we see that distinction becoming sharper but for Singapore we are limited by the fact that we still need new immigrants.

"So if we have a policy in which we compel, so to speak, PRs, to convert to become citizens, that in itself could be a push factor. I think one pull factor would be to show that it makes both pecuniary and non-pecuniary sense for a PR to convert to citizenship. The idea here is: how can we make Singapore citizenship something that is attractive?"

On whether the move could result in turning away foreign talents from Singapore, observers said it is unlikely to do so, so long as the policy is clearly spelt out.

Some new citizens have expressed reservation about the move. One said it feels like PRs may be forced to take up citizenship. Most wanted the government to explain the rationale behind the plan.

Said a 30-year-old Singaporean who took up citizenship nearly 20 years ago: "It feels like it's forcing people to take up the citizenship and there's no choice...a lot of people (PRs) still have a sense of belonging to their (home) country."

But one new citizen said it is a good move because it will help the government identify the right people who are genuine about sinking their roots in Singapore.

43-year-old Perumal Moorthy, who took up citizenship in 1997, said: "It's a good idea because it helps the government identify the right person and people who are genuine about sinking their roots in Singapore."

One PR from Malaysia suggested dual citizenship, an idea observers said is worth considering.

"For Malaysians, we come here to earn more income and have a better quality life but most of my friends don't plan to become citizens because they want to retire in their own country," said a 29-year-old housewife who wants to be known as Annie Siow. Annie and her husband, an Indonesian, are both PRs. The couple have two young children born in Singapore.

SMU's Eugene Tan said: "We shouldn't discount the possibility of dual nationality, going forward. But I hope that we will make that transition in a gradual process and the main thing is to ensure that citizenship does mean something. It is not just a means to a passport. It is also a sense of identity and belonging."

By all accounts, the government has admitted that it took in a record number of foreigners during the boom years of 1997/98 to support the economic growth.

In 1998, Singapore's population shot up a record 5.5 per cent, with foreigners mainly behind the rise. Their numbers soared by 19 per cent to 1.2 million.

Foreigners now make up a third of Singapore's population of 5.08 million.

One foreigner, 28-year-old French national Benoit Doumas, is worried how any new policy on managing PRs will affect him.

Benoit has been in Singapore for the past four years. Two years ago, he got his PR status.

He said: "What will happen if you refuse to become a citizen?.....Can you go back to EP (Employment Pass) (status) or thing like this?"

"What kind of category of people will be addressed in (Senior Minister Goh's) statement? I mean, people like me who has been here two years are not suitable to be perfect citizens of Singapore yet."

Besides, Benoit said, he still has ties with his home country - even though Singapore is his second home.

His baby is on the way, but when it comes to the child's citizenship, he has no problem with her being Singaporean.

He said: "It will be good for her because if she studies here, if she's born in Singapore, she will have friends here, she will grow with Singapore. So I will think she has more roots to be a Singaporean."