

Manage immigration issues before "fault line" deepens, say observers

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Observers said President Tony Tan's call to "prevent a new fault line from forming between local-born Singaporeans and recent immigrants" suggests Singapore's immigration policy has failed to gain a receptive audience among native Singaporeans.

They said the key is in getting Singaporeans to buy-in, and that immigration issues must feature in policy planning exercises.

Foreigners now make up about a third of Singapore's population. More often than not, foreigners are blamed for hot button issues in Singapore like jobs, public transport and housing.

James Du, member of the youth wing in the Tian Fu Association and a second generation Singaporean, said: "When new immigrants come to Singapore, they would like to call Singapore a home. And by calling it a home, they would want to purchase their own housing, they would be using the public transport everyday for work, for leisure.

"So everyone [will] compete for the same resources. The government really needs to expand these resources so there is less competition, and then when that happens, then we will not be pointing fingers again."

Ramon S Padiernos, a Filipino working in Singapore, said: "When I first started here, there's really not much of an issue about the work that is offered for foreigners, because at that time, the economy is really moving fast, there's so much employment... Then I observed recently that [it is becoming much more] of a concern."

While the government has acted to moderate the inflow of foreign workers, ramp up housing supply and promote a Singaporeans-first policy, observers said the issue has now moved beyond economics.

Dr Leong Chan Hoong, a research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies, said: "The problem now is moving beyond economics, so it's no longer an issue about whether Singaporeans are getting the priority or Singaporeans being treated better than the foreigners. I think Singaporeans, by and large, they know that they do get the priority in terms of economic benefits, welfare and subsidies. They get more as a citizen, compared to PRs and certainly compared to foreigners.

"The question now is really about the contest between identity and space, whether people feel that their space or identity is being encroached by the foreigners, the influx of foreigners and how to manage that discomfort and psychological boundaries between the different groups. I think these are the areas... that policy makers will have to look out for in the years to come."

Assistant Professor of Law at the Singapore Management University, Eugene Tan, said the root of the problem is in getting that buy-in from Singaporeans.

He said: "Even the educated Singaporeans are not buying in... the so-called transient workers, they are doing jobs that Singaporeans don't want to do. But the average IT worker for example is concerned that (employers are bringing) in more Indian, Chinese IT workers who are prepared to [work more for less money], and this immigration policy is not going to result in (the local worker) benefiting. They may not buy-in and that may be a major grouse against the government.

"There is angst and anxiety on the part of Singaporeans as well as the government. Angst and anxiety on the part of Singaporeans because they think the policy is overwhelming them (and) they may become second class or displaced. On the government, the concern that if we don't bring in enough [people], the population will decline (and) the economy will stagnate."

Dr Leong said the issue will move "up-stream", particularly for immigrants who stay on a long-term basis.

He said: "Meaning to say that it will stray into areas where it's not just a disagreement on certain issues but a disagreement on fundamental values and social attributes. Whether immigrants, PRs or second generation citizens, whether they see NS (National Service) as a rite of passage. Because Singaporeans by and large expect all Singaporean males to serve their national service, their obligations to the country. So it is important for immigrants who come here, to understand the purpose of NS and to respect that social institution.

"The other potential area... will be in the case of language, particular in the Mother Tongue policy. Now most of the people who come here, they have to do English as the main language, followed by their Mother Tongue. For some immigrants from the regional countries such as Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam for example, if they become citizens then some of them may want to consider taking up their native language as their Mother Tongue.

"The policy makers will have to examine what are the fundamental thrusts of those policies, what are they for and if the people are not comfortable with those policies, then what can we do about it? Whether do we need to communicate more and engage the people so that we can explain to them what are the imperatives of those policies or perhaps, look into possibly changing some of those policies to accommodate the change in landscape."

While there are many programmes to help new immigrants settle in, observers said that it works both ways, meaning that Singaporeans too should reach out in understanding the culture and forming friendships with their new neighbours.

Mr Du said the "last thing on the minds of a working-class foreign worker who takes on a 12-hour shift is integration." So he said that is where their Singaporean friends and co-workers can step in and take that initiative to reach out.

"It also takes Singaporeans to embrace them, to accept newcomers more willingly. I think Singaporeans need to have patience before all these policies kick in and results come in," said Mr Du, who got his citizenship 17 years ago.

Bringing together expectations is another area that needs to be tackled.

Dr Leong said: "I think for a lot of the local-born Singaporeans, they would expect or appreciate that immigrants who come here, respect the social norms and try their best to fit in and they also expect the government to treat the locals better compared to the foreign-born immigrants.

"For the foreign born immigrants... I think some of them may want to re-shape some of the social norms in Singapore, and the local-born Singaporeans may not be comfortable with that and they may see that as [contesting their] identity and space."

Observers added that the National Integration Council, set up in April 2009 and tasked with promoting social integration, need to ramp up its efforts.

Responding to queries from Channel NewsAsia, the spokesperson from the National Integration Council Secretariat said: "Integration is a two-way process that will take time. New immigrants must make the effort to learn more about Singapore and our culture and practices. As we work with the community to help immigrants adjust to the way of life here, we also appreciate the support of Singaporeans to reach out to new immigrants, to better facilitate their integration into our society."

The council said since the Singapore Citizenship Journey was launched in February 2011, some 3,700 new citizens have gone through the programme.

"This is more than half of the total number of applicants... The rest are still in the process of completing it," said the spokesperson.

The Singapore Citizenship Journey consists of both online elements and experiential learning programmes, and will culminate in a citizenship ceremony to officially welcome the new citizen as a full-fledged member of the Singaporean family.