

## **Minorities bear 'direct and real' financial burden from Ethnic Integration Policy for public housing: Pritam Singh**

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SINGAPORE: Minorities in Singapore bear a "direct and real" financial burden from the Ethnic Integration Policy (EIP) for public housing, Leader of the Opposition Pritam Singh said on Saturday (Jun 26).

In a Facebook post on Saturday, Mr Singh responded to Finance Minister Lawrence Wong's speech and dialogue on Friday about race, racism and multiracialism.

Mr Wong delivered a speech and took part in a dialogue at a forum organised by the Institute of Policy Studies and the S Rajaratnam School of International Studies on Friday.

The minister was asked about the EIP for public housing and if it disadvantages minorities. Under the EIP, a home owner of a minority race can only sell his or her flat to another member of a minority race, once the quota for the majority race has been reached.

Mr Wong had said that the policy was applied "consistently" to all ethnic groups, and that it has led to "social mixing and integration" and a "sense of attachment, belonging and identity as Singaporeans".

"What would happen without EIP? I have no doubt that we will end up with ethnic enclaves in many of our housing estates," he said.

Mr Wong also acknowledged that there were minority owners who faced difficulties selling their flats due to limits from the EIP, adding that such cases can be appealed and will be considered on a case-by-case basis.

People should recognise the value of the EIP and work to "improve it, fine tune it, make it better", rather than discarding it, the minister added.

### **ETHNIC INTEGRATION POLICY HAS "SERIOUS ECONOMIC CONSEQUENCES"**

On Saturday, Mr Singh said that Mr Wong's speech and responses during the dialogue were "well worth a read, no matter what your political leanings".

"The issue at hand - race - affects everyone, particularly Singaporeans and new citizens who will come after us."

Mr Singh said Mr Wong's "acknowledgement" that not all agree with some of the long-standing policies of the People's Action Party (PAP) Government was "particularly noteworthy".

The secretary-general of the Workers' Party (WP) said the EIP has "bothered" him and his colleagues.

"Over the years, we have heard our fair share of feedback from minorities of all races having to lower the price of their flats to effect a sale. Minorities bear a direct and real financial burden in the name of the EIP.

"Mr Wong's tone and acknowledgement of the problem goes much further than any Parliamentary pronouncement on the matter by the Government in my recent memory," said Mr Singh.

However, Mr Wong's comments on the prospects of racial enclaves deserved "a second look", he said. This was especially in light of how the region and the world have evolved since the introduction of the EIP in 1989, and the "reality of immigration to top up our population".

"National schools, institutions like (National Service), the bunching of minority races on the lower floors of public housing in many cases in spite of the EIP, and even the prospective effect of anti-discrimination legislation, do make the EIP one out of a number of policy options to mitigate the problem at hand," said Mr Singh.

"Even so, as it is, the inequity the EIP engenders for some minority Singaporeans is real, distorts the market and has serious economic consequences."

## **GRC SYSTEM A "TROJAN HORSE"**

During his speech, Mr Wong also addressed views that the Group Representation Constituency (GRC) system was not necessary, as Singaporeans could be trusted to vote for the best candidates, regardless of race, and without the aid of GRCs.

Mr Wong said that instead of constituencies with built-in majorities of Indians and Malays, Singapore has the GRC system to ensure at least a minimum number of minority legislators in Parliament.

"I respect the views of Singaporeans who believe we are ready to move beyond race, and so think we no longer need the GRC system," Mr Wong said.

"But we are not yet totally immune to the siren calls of exclusive racial and cultural identities. Neither have we reached a 'post-racial' state. Surely recent events have, if anything, confirmed our caution," he added.

On Saturday, Mr Singh said the minister's defence of the GRC system was "elegant in theory, but unconvincing in practice".

"The GRC scheme has long been overshadowed by incumbent political considerations, to the extent that it also serves a more important collateral purpose.

"What began as three-member GRCs expanded rapidly into six-member ones (now back to five). And the GRC scheme continues to be routinely abused at the altar of politics," he said.

Mr Singh added: "See how Fengshan became an SMC and was absorbed back into East Coast GRC within one election cycle? And who can forget Joo Chiat SMC of 2011? Why?"

Fengshan Single Member Constituency (SMC) was first formed as an electoral division in 1984 and absorbed back into Bedok GRC before the 1991 General Election. The SMC was then re-established before the 2015 General Election and absorbed back into East Coast GRC before the 2020 General Election.

In 2011, PAP's Charles Chong won Joo Chiat SMC with 51.02 per cent of the vote in a contest with WP's Yee Jenn Jong, who secured 48.98 per cent. The SMC was merged into Marine Parade GRC for the 2015 General Election.

"One cannot help but to conclude that in the case of GRCs, minority representation is a Trojan Horse for the PAP's political objectives," said Mr Singh.

"The WP has offered some realistic institution-building alternatives to get Singapore out of this self-serving quagmire.

"Getting the Electoral Boundary Review Committee (EBRC) out of the Prime Minister's Office and a more substantive EBRC report are important starting points," he said, adding that the WP hoped the Government would reconsider its position on this.

Mr Singh said that there was "much more to unpack" about Mr Wong's speech, which came amid concerns about racism in Singapore following a recent spate of highly publicised incidents.

"For example, is it true that the majority of Singaporeans today will inevitably vote along racial lines?" questioned Mr Singh.

"The policy questions and differences of opinion aside, Minister Wong's speech sends the right signals," he added.

"The call to educate each other about what matters to us, to help each other understand our different cultures, and to find that common stake we have in one another is an important one. It is one that transcends politics."

*Source: CNA/dv*