

More scope for government involvement to prevent societal splits from immigration and class: IPS survey

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SINGAPORE: While action is being taken to prevent divisive issues like race and religion from developing into significant faultlines in society, there are other issues where greater intervention is seen as potentially beneficial, according to survey findings revealed on Tuesday (Oct 29).

More respondents felt that there could be further intervention by the Government on the issues of class or socio-economic status, immigration and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) matters, according to the study by the Institute of Policy [Studies].

For instance, almost half the respondents indicated that they wanted greater government involvement to prevent faultlines from class and immigration issues, compared to less than 30 per cent who indicated this for race and religion in the study titled *Faultlines in Singapore: Public Opinion on their Realities, Management and Consequences*.

“With these two fault lines (immigration and class) rising to the fore over the past decade alongside Singapore’s economic imperatives, continued attention is warranted.

“Even as many have benefited from the state’s economic prerogatives, a substantial proportion of residents still desire the state to further mitigate the discontents of economic growth and openness,” according to researchers Mathew Mathews, Melvin Tay and Shanthini Selvarajan.

The data came from the IPS Race, Religion and Language (RRL) survey, which started in August 2018 and concluded in January 2019.

The survey was completed by about 4,000 people. They were invited face-to-face and if they agreed, they received a survey booklet that they had to complete on their own, which was later collected.

RESPONDENTS DIVIDED OVER LGBT ISSUES

When it came to LGBT issues, a "substantial proportion" or 39 per cent of respondents expressed a desire for more official involvement.

More liberal respondents wanted equitable rights for LGBT individuals in terms of housing and employment and more conservative respondents desired state action to check LGBT activities, by stopping Pink Dot, for instance, said the researchers.

The same proportion of respondents wanted more public discourse on LGBT issues. At the same time, a quarter of respondents also felt that there should be less public discussion on LGBT issues, making it the topic that most respondents felt this way about.

“This could possibly be attributed to significant numbers of conservative-leaning individuals who may be satisfied with the status quo and are unsupportive of sustaining public discourse on issues of LGBT rights or individuals who deem discussions of LGBT as better confined to the private sphere due to the ‘personal’, more intimate nature of such issues,” the researchers said.

MISMANAGING FAULTLINES COULD LEAD TO SUSPICION, VIOLENCE

The majority of respondents - more than 85 per cent - indicated that they anticipate some adverse consequence arising from the mismanagement of faultlines.

“In general, this study has found that the majority of Singaporeans were cognizant of the gravity of managing our societal faultlines. Most recognised that there would be dire consequences to Singapore society if faultlines were not properly dealt with,” the researchers said.

Race and religion, as opposed to the other three faultlines, were identified by more respondents as having the potential to result in suspicion, mistrust and anger among racial and religious groups if not managed well.

They also have the potential to trigger violence if mismanaged, in the view of a third of respondents. The other three faultlines were not viewed as dangerously.

The researchers said that riots centred on race and religion from Singapore’s pre-independence period such as the Maria Hertogh riots and 1964 racial riots may have impacted respondents’ perceptions.

Mismanaging immigration issues was perceived to impact national identity and government trust the most, especially for Chinese respondents, the survey found.

IMMIGRATION ISSUES LINKED TO EROSION OF IDENTITY AND TRUST IN GOVERNMENT

Compared to minority respondents, more Chinese respondents were likely to feel that there would be an erosion of identity and mistrust in the Government if immigration issues were mismanaged.

The report suggested that this could be due to inflows of both non-Chinese immigrants and Chinese immigrants with differing norms and cultures relative to local-born Chinese.

“Since there is a close connection in Singapore between national and ethnic identity with many Singaporeans identifying with both these identities, it is possible that more Chinese respondents want to maintain a distinctly Singaporean-Chinese identity and fear that immigration might change that,” the survey found.

Aside from race, affluence appeared to colour the perspective of respondents. Respondents living in larger, more expensive homes, which according to the researchers, is highly

correlated with income, are also more likely to perceive more severe consequences arising from the mismanagement of immigration.

The researchers said that differences in how individuals value certain ideals can be discerned based on their acquiescence to how the Government deals with social divides.

“While some gravitate towards libertarian views and would prioritise virtues of freedom of choice, the free market and individual judgement, others prefer the State to exercise varying degrees of authority in engendering social equality and harmony,” they said.

Source: CNA/ja