

Social cohesion speech timely as complacency may have set in

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SINGAPORE: It was a National Day Rally of a different kind this year as the sensitive topic of race and religion dominated Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's address to the nation.

Some 40 minutes of Mr Lee's speech on Sunday evening were devoted to the need for Singapore to maintain racial and religious harmony. As the prime minister pointed out, it was an "unusually serious and sensitive subject" for the rally.

Political observers said it is a reminder to Singaporeans not to take social cohesion for granted as the makeup of the Singapore society is changing. One Cabinet minister told Channel NewsAsia on Monday that now is as good a time as any to send out that message.

Eugene Tan, assistant professor, School of Law, Singapore Management University, said: "We have more new immigrants who may come to Singapore without having a full appreciation of our multi-racial, multi-religious and multi-lingual society.

"Some of them come from fairly homogeneous society, so the lack of appreciation for some of the differences that exist in our society could cause conflict and tension. I think at the same time, it'll be useful to see more substantive measures taken to ensure that the new immigrants get up to speed quickly about our society."

Agreeing, research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies, Azhar Ghani, said: "Over the years, the different groups that form the Singaporean ethnoscape have settled into an equilibrium in how they interact with each other.

"This equilibrium may be affected if different or fresh interpretations of religious norms that may come with increasing religiosity were to accentuate differences and promote exclusivity.

"This equilibrium may also be affected with immigration as those settling here not only bring with them skills, but also specific national histories and multiple identities."

While some local incidents like the leadership tussle at women's group AWARE highlighted how one religiously motivated group could impose its agenda on civil society, the Community Development, Youth and Sports Minister, Vivian Balakrishnan, said there was no single trigger point that brought about the emphasis on race and religion in this year's rally

He said: "Our own society is in order. I believe Singapore is more united, more tolerant, more understanding than we could have hoped for 50 years ago. We are not perfect, we haven't fulfilled our ideals yet, but we must always have ideals which are just that little bit harder to reach, so that we keep trying.

"This is speaking and doing from a position of strength, so I don't want Singaporeans to suddenly worry – 'Oh, this is an emergency, this is a crisis, this is a reaction - it is not'."

In the prime minister's discussion with the Cabinet, Dr Balakrishnan said the focus was to ensure that the message was pitched right so communities do not get defensive.

He also pointed to the spontaneous responses on various new media platforms such as Twitter. He said he was cheered by the positive responses from young Singaporeans who may otherwise take race and religious harmony in Singapore for granted.

Nonetheless, observers said some complacency has set in, especially among the younger crowd.

"The younger Singaporeans, as I sense from my own students, fail to understand that ethnic peace and stability is not a natural state of affairs. For example, the students feel that sometimes a workforce that is homogeneous, comprising colleagues of the same race, would promote workplace productivity," said Assistant Professor Tan.

"But if you look at our societal context, if every employer or employee were to take the view that the workplace should comprise people of only one race, that's going to pose significant issues and trouble for Singapore. The lack of overt conflict has lulled many Singaporeans, especially younger Singaporeans, into a false sense of security."