

## **'Take the extra step' to make minorities feel comfortable, says Lawrence Wong in speech discussing racism in Singapore**

***Chew Hui Min***

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SINGAPORE: Finance Minister Lawrence Wong on Friday (Jun 25) appealed to the majority Chinese community in Singapore to be sensitive to and be conscious of the needs of minorities.

In a lengthy keynote speech at a forum on race and racism jointly organised by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) and the S Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Mr Wong addressed recent concerns about racism in Singapore following a spate of highly publicised incidents.

"First, we must recognise that in any multi-racial society, it is harder to be a minority than a majority. This is so everywhere in the world," said Mr Wong.

"So, it is important for the majority community in Singapore to do its part, and be sensitive to and conscious of the needs of minorities."

Mr Wong also spoke about how far Singapore has come in racial harmony since independence, and Singapore's "dynamic" and "delicate" multi-racialism.

Giving some examples of how race affects the daily lives of people here, Mr Wong said that it matters to someone who faces discrimination when looking for a job, or feels left out when everyone else in a group speaks in a language that not all can understand. He also highlighted landlords who specify a preference for some races.

"It matters to our students, neighbours, co-workers and friends who have to deal with stereotypes about their race, or insensitive comments," he said.

"These things do happen, not always, and perhaps not even often, but sometimes they do. And when they do happen, they cause real hurt, which is not erased by lightly dismissing them as casual remarks or jokes."

Asking the majority community to "take the extra step" to make those in the minorities feel comfortable, he said: "Treat others in the way you would like to be treated; and by your actions, teach your children to do the same. Remind those among your family members or friends who may slip up from time to time.

"At the same time, I am grateful that minorities have reciprocated by recognising that the majority community has legitimate needs and concerns too."

## **CHINESE COMMUNITY "NOT MONOLITHIC"**

Mr Wong also addressed the concept of "Chinese privilege" and said that there may be "biases or blind spots that the Chinese community should become aware of and to rectify".

At the same time, the Chinese community in Singapore is "not monolithic", he noted.

"Please understand that we still have a whole generation of Chinese Singaporeans who are more comfortable in Chinese than English, and who consider themselves at a disadvantage in an English-speaking world," said the minister.

"They feel they have already given up much to bring about a multi-racial society: Chinese-language schools, Nanyang University, dialects, and so on. 'What do you mean by 'Chinese privilege'?' they will ask, for they do not feel privileged at all."

## **"I FEEL THE HURT CAUSED"**

The IPS-RSIS Forum on Race and Racism in Singapore was held in the wake of a series of incidents that had sparked debate on the state of race relations in the nation.

In May, a Chinese man allegedly [kicked an Indian woman in the chest](#) while uttering racial slurs. This month, a Ngee Ann Polytechnic lecturer, a Chinese man, [confronted an inter-racial couple](#) in a video that went viral. A Chinese woman was also filmed [hitting a gong](#) to disrupt her Indian neighbour's prayer ritual.

On Jun 23, a Malay woman was sentenced to four weeks' jail for making racist insults at an Indian female commuter on a bus.

"These racist acts are unacceptable. I feel the hurt caused. Like all of you, I wish these incidents had not happened," said Mr Wong.

But he urged those who were wondering if racism had gathered speed to see the issue in a "broader context".

He said that the Government monitors closely all incidents involving race and religion. Such occurrences took place in greater numbers earlier in Singapore's history, but declined gradually over the decades, said Mr Wong.

However, there have been significantly more cases than usual this year, "most likely" because of the stress of COVID-19, he said.

"Such incidents don't always make the headlines. But racism still exists in Singapore; it is among us – in our streets, our neighbourhoods and our workplaces," he said.

Mr Wong highlighted the impact of social media - that while giving such greater visibility, has also help create greater awareness of racism in Singapore.

"This has made us, especially the majority, look closely in the mirror and reflect deeper about who we are, and who we want to be. And we clearly cannot leave things as they are," he said.

"We are better than this. Whether online or offline, we must hold ourselves to higher standards, and tackle racism wherever it exists in our society. The question is: What do we do now?"

## **BE "HONEST AND UPFRONT" ABOUT RACISM**

Mr Wong said that Singapore must continue with its approach of "mutual accommodation, trust and compromise".

"Let me be clear: I am not saying that we should refrain from voicing our unhappiness, or that minority Singaporeans should pipe down about the prejudices they experience," he said.

"On the contrary, we should be upfront and honest about the racialised experiences various groups feel, and deal squarely with them."

He urged Singaporeans to continue to speak up and to be prepared to have uncomfortable discussions, and to listen to each other.

However, he warned against insisting on "maximum entitlements and rights" for one's own group or to "construe every compromise as an injustice that needs to be condemned", or "put the worst interpretation on every perceived slight or insensitivity".

"Because when one group jostles aggressively to assert its identity and rights over others, it will not take long before other groups feel put upon, and start to jostle back," he said.

"We end up fuelling our worst tendencies – our tribalism, hostility and vengefulness." He asked groups calling for change to be conscious about how they approach the matter.

"Let's do so in ways that expand the space for agreement, not narrow it; that deepen cross-cultural understanding, not cause defensiveness and suspicion; that appeal to the better angels in all of us, not instigate a 'them vs us' dynamic," said Mr Wong.

## **"POLICIES NOT CAST IN STONE"**

Mr Wong also said that the Government will continue to "engage widely" and update its policies on race and other policies that help to strengthen racial harmony.

Raising the example of the Government's current review of [Muslim nurses wearing the tudung](#) with their uniform, he said: "Our policies are not cast in stone."

"This process of policy review entails detailed study and extensive dialogue between the Government and our various communities. It cannot be rushed, nor should things be changed simply based on who shouts the loudest," he added.

Some commentators have also questioned the CMIO or "Chinese, Malay, Indian and Others" categorisation of races in Singapore.

Addressing this, Mr Wong said that the Government has taken care to ensure this balance remains stable for the citizen population.

"Some say we should go beyond CMIO. But how would Singaporeans feel if the proportions of C, M, I and O were to shift dramatically?" he asked.

"In fact, we have taken great care to ensure this balance remains stable for our citizen population – precisely because we understand how unsettling major changes can be to all groups, majority or minority."

He said that Singapore has also worked hard to integrate new citizens, and to review and update work pass policies to ensure that such policies "fit into our social context".

"Such are the realities of living in a diverse society, in a dynamic, globalised world. We have to make constant adjustments; and repeatedly check to make sure we get the balance right," he said.

## **DISTINCTIVE MODEL OF MULTI-RACIALISM**

Mr Wong also spoke about Singapore's race journey to this point, spelling out how Singapore's form of multi-racialism is distinct from other countries.

"Our multi-racialism does not require any community to give up its heritage or traditions. Ours is not the French way, insisting on assimilation into one master language and culture: speak French, accept French ways and assimilate into French society," he said.

"Instead we decided to preserve, protect and celebrate our diversity. Hence, we encourage each community to take pride in its own cultures and traditions."

At the same time, Singapore seeks "common ground" among its communities, and aims to expand common space and strengthen a shared sense of belonging and identity, he said.

Singapore's bilingual policy is a key plank in this approach, making considerable effort to preserve the Chinese, Malay and Tamil languages, said Mr Wong.

"We believe that by affording our children access to the rich traditions that our vernacular languages carry, they would know who they are and won't become pale imitations of Europeans or Americans," he said.

Mr Wong said that some criticise policies to preserve and develop different cultures, for example, Special Assistance Plan or SAP schools.

The Government established SAP schools in 1979 against a backdrop of falling enrolment in Chinese-medium schools. The stated aim was to preserve the best of these schools and promote the learning of Chinese language and culture.

"But I will ask those who criticise SAP schools to consider: would our society be better off if standards of our spoken and written vernacular languages were to fall, and Singaporean Chinese, Malay and Indian cultures were to wither and dissipate?" he said.

"Similarly, we have programmes in a few schools to enable our students to deepen their proficiency in Malay and Tamil, and to nurture their bicultural interests."

Noting that Singapore also has madrasahs, strong vernacular media and a large variety of Chinese, Malay and Indian cultural organisations – from the Chinese Orchestra to the Malay Heritage Centre to the Indian Fine Arts Society, Mr Wong asked: "Should all this be done away with on the grounds that they perpetuate racial consciousness and are not inclusive of other races, other languages, other cultures, other traditions? Obviously not."

## **DELICATE, DYNAMIC BALANCE**

Mr Wong said that Singapore got to where it is today through mutual accommodation and compromise and not through confrontation or compulsion.

"We have found a balance that all can accept: No community has gotten everything it wanted, but collectively we have achieved much more together than what we would otherwise have attained by just focusing on our individual agendas," he said.

"Everyone is generally comfortable, and we are all able to live harmoniously together. This is a delicate balance, but it is not a fixed position. The situation is dynamic."

Society's attitudes and conditions have changed, said Mr Wong. There is greater mixing and interaction between races, younger Singaporeans have grown up less conscious of racial differences, and more than one in five marriages in Singapore are inter-racial.

Because of where Singapore is today, there are Singaporeans who feel it is time to take a "race-blind" approach on race relations.

"I appreciate these desires. Indeed, I share these aspirations," said Mr Wong. "Perhaps I am young enough to feel the idealistic instincts of the millennials, and old enough to understand the caution born of experience of my parents' generation.

"But we can all agree that our multi-racialism is not perfect, and we have to keep working at it deliberately, to reduce our imperfections, step by step."

### **"WORK IN PROGRESS"**

Mr Wong concluded that the Government will "never waver" in its commitment to promote harmony among all races, and ensure that all Singaporeans enjoy full and equal opportunities in life.

"Let us each be our brother's keeper, our sister's keeper and let us move forward with a spirit of mutual respect and fellowship," said Mr Wong.

People should be helping each other understand their different cultures, and find "the common stake we all have in one another", he added.

"We must have the humility to acknowledge our multi-racialism is still a work in progress. The honesty to recognise that not everyone will want to move at the same pace and yet persevere to protect our multiracialism – cherish it, nurture it, strengthen it," said Mr Wong.

"Then step by step, we can approach ever more closely to our ideal: 'One united people, regardless of race, language or religion'."