

Forum on Indicators of Racial and Religious Harmony

By Zhou Rongchen
IPS Research Assistant

The Indicators of Racial and Religious Harmony, measuring Singaporeans' attitudes towards race and religion, is a collaboration between the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) and OnePeople.sg. The indicators were developed from an IPS survey that collected responses from 4,131 Singapore residents. The study results were released on 18 July, followed by a forum on 11 September at The Grassroots Club.

In his opening remarks at the forum, Janadas Devan, Director of Institute of Policy Studies, reminded the audience about a significant date: 16 September 2013. This date marked former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew's 90th birthday as well as the 50th anniversary of Malaysia Day, which commemorates the establishment of the Malaysian Federation, when Singapore attained independence from British colonial rule. When the British returned after WWII, they proposed a Malayan Union, which excluded Singapore but allowed Singapore residents to seek citizenship and, with that, equal rights in Malaya. Singapore, having a Chinese majority, was seen as a threat to the Malay majority in Malaya and the Union was eventually dissolved. Mr Devan stressed that there are serious implications for race and religion even till today, and that the survey results showing that Singaporeans are ideologically committed to a multiracial society provide evidence that we have awoken from the nightmare of racial unrest in history.

Dr Mathew Mathews, IPS Research Fellow and principal investigator of the study, then presented the survey findings.¹

The presentation was followed by a panel discussion featuring two academic experts and three community leaders. They were Nominated Member of Parliament Assoc. Prof. Eugene Tan from the School of Law at the Singapore Management University; Assoc. Prof. Kwok Kian Woon, Associate Provost and Sociology faculty at Nanyang Technological University; Viswa Sadasivan, CEO of Strategic Moves and a former Nominated Member of Parliament; Gerald Singham, Vice President of OnePeople.sg and a partner in Rodyk & Davidson LLP; and Zulkifli Baharudin, Chairman of Indo-Trans Corporation and a former Nominated Member of Parliament. The discussion was attended by about 150 participants, including community leaders, civil society representatives, educators and civil servants.

¹. For survey findings, see [http://lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/ips/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2013/08/Forum - Indicators-of-Racial-and-Religious_110913_slides.pdf](http://lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/ips/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2013/08/Forum_-_Indicators-of-Racial-and-Religious_110913_slides.pdf).



From left: Dr Mathew Mathews, Assoc. Prof. Kwok Kian Woon, Mr Zulkifli Baharudin, Mr Gerald Singham, Assoc. Prof. Eugene Tan and Mr Viswa Sadasivan answering questions from the audience during the forum.

Panel Discussion

Mr Singham started the panel discussion with a word of caution: although Singaporeans have done well as shown in the indicators, racial and religious harmony is still a work-in-progress.

On the same note, Mr Viswa found it disturbing that only 45 per cent of Singaporeans have a close friend of another race after 48 years of independence. He brought up the structural issue of Special Assistance Plan schools, or SAP schools, and cited the lack of interaction between SAP students and students of other races as a potential problem to examine.

Assoc. Prof. Eugene Tan pointed out that structurally, it is the focus on differences rather than commonalities that divide us, and that the public sector could set the tone in minimising minority discrimination, upon which the private sector could emulate. To him, it is important for the majority Chinese to take the lead in bridging the gap, because less is at stake for them. He also stressed that the discrimination reported in the survey was *perceived* discrimination, which may not fully reflect the actual reality.

Mr Zulkifli raised the point that social stratification has never stopped, and we now see further stratification along social and economic lines even within racial minority groups as well as smaller enclaves forming in richer estates, leading to increased segregation. He reiterated that multiracialism is still a “serious work in progress” if it were to be “entrenched as part of our ideology and life”.

Assoc. Prof. Kwok Kian Woon focused on interpreting the survey numbers as well as evaluating what they tell us. He questioned the relevance of certain terms used in Singapore: “Race” is more often used here than “ethnicity”. However, the former connotes fixed and static biological and genetic givens, while the latter infers the cultural and social aspects of one’s identity. Moreover, while people can move in and out of ethnicities, they are more strictly defined by race. He noted that race and religious issues are seen as highly sensitive matters.

Mr Singham expressed that he was not surprised by the result — that 45 per cent of respondents do not have friends of another race. The Chinese form the majority population in Singapore, and statistically speaking, they are less likely to have many friends of the other races, he explained.

Dr Mathews explained that the demographic proportion of the majority race, the Chinese, which constitute over 70 per cent of the population, makes it more difficult for them to have friends from the minority races. For younger Singaporeans, he said that a higher proportion of English-speaking youths responded that they have friends from other races.

Questions and Answers

During the question-and-answer session, audience members asked about how sensitive the general population are towards racial and religious issues, and whether there is a false sense of security about these issues.

Mr Viswa said that by not talking about race relations, we are “not helping it to be demystified”. He recounted how, when he was growing up, he and his friends of other races were not offended when they called each other names based on racial distinction, as they were felt to be terms of endearment. To him, such trust derived from real honest conversations among citizens trumps state interventions like Racial Harmony Day.

A participant shared her concern about a report in *The Straits Times* with the headline: “Race is not an issue”. She claimed that headlines like these “lull us to sleep”, and give a false sense of security. She felt that Singaporeans may be in a semi-conscious state regarding racial issues in Singapore, and that it is better to be awakened.

Following on this point, another participant commented that race issues are issues of colour, and she felt that the dominant colour (i.e., the Chinese in Singapore) is prejudiced against the darker-skinned Singaporeans. She suggested the importance of addressing the issue head-on.

A participant pointed out that the study was done after the influx of new immigrants into Singapore and wondered whether racial sentiments were reinforced by xenophobic factors. He also raised concerns about Muslim women not being able to wear the *tudung* at work such as in the nursing profession, and the lack of dedicated spaces at educational institutions for prayer.

Mr Zulkifli noted that the *tudung* issue is not limited to Singapore, but is in fact a matter of contention in other countries. He attributed the phenomenon to the increasing religiosity among Muslims amidst increasingly secular societies. He stressed that Muslims must also

make an effort to compromise and accommodate when integrating into the societies of which they are a part.

Reflecting on an earlier point made about the difference between race and ethnicity, a participant pointed out that whenever the term “race” was used, the statement would always be racist. He wondered if there would come a time in Singapore where there would be a new terminology that goes beyond race and religion.

Assoc. Prof. Kwok suggested that it may be difficult to get people to accept a new terminology as many people are used to the thinking that they belong to a certain “race”. He added that a society with a good level of discourse will help us move away from such limitations.

Mr Viswa also agreed that it is time for Singapore to rethink nomenclature, terminology and word choices, stating that the frequent reference to race and religion in fact makes us race-conscious. He suggested that Singapore could start to think about using more neutral and inclusive terms.

Closing Remarks

Zainudin Nordin, Chairman of OnePeople.sg closed the session by stressing that a state of racial and religious harmony could not be enforced, and that in order to build harmony, Singaporeans needed to put in personal effort and engage in dialogue with maturity. With more immigrants coming into Singapore, bringing with them new values, language, culture and lifestyle, there needs to be even more of such dialogues. Mr Zainudin was heartened by the results of the study as it showed that Singaporeans could be optimistic about the state of racial and religious relations in Singapore. He noted that the top indicator — the absence of minority discrimination in public services — is not the norm in many parts of the world. With the exceptions of rare racist statements on the internet, most Singaporeans do not feel racial or religious tensions in their daily lives. He attributed this to the hard work put in by organisations, communities and the many ground-up initiatives. Singaporeans, he believed, needed to keep multiculturalism alive. For this to happen, they had to translate attitudes into action.

If you have comments or feedback, please email ips.eneews@nus.edu.sg



© Copyright 2013 National University of Singapore. All Rights Reserved.

You are welcome to reproduce this material for non-commercial purposes and please ensure you cite the source when doing so.