



IPS 30th Anniversary: Diversities — New and Old Panel III: Politics of Diversity Management

By Shazly Zain

Emerging social groups, changing ideologies and contending political demands are now issues coming to the fore of Singapore society. The development of new identities in modern Singapore society thus makes the understanding and acceptance of diversity more complex. The increasingly fluid socio-demographic landscape may, however, lead to “push-backs” between competing social camps. The panellists for this session consisted of Dr Janil Puthuchery, Senior Minister of State for Transport and Communications and Information, Professor Cherian George, Professor of Media Studies of the Hong Kong Baptist University, and Associate Professor Suzaina Kadir, Vice-Dean of Academic Affairs in the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, who took on the role of Chairperson for the panel. They discussed the flexibility of current policy frameworks in managing the complexity of core identities in Singapore.

The Importance of Diversity Management

Dr Janil Puthuchery began his presentation by highlighting the negative outcomes in the past when diversity was not properly managed. He explained that most discussions tend to see the issue of diversity management from an ideological perspective. Dr Puthuchery then suggested approaching diversity from a broader standpoint. He asserted that all diversities have to be addressed differently.

In terms of approaches to the management of diversity, Dr Puthuchery highlighted two extreme strategies that can be undertaken: the heavy-handed, micro-managing, interventionist approach, and the laissez-faire approach that allows diversity to look after itself. His opinion is that Singapore straddles between these two approaches. For example, Singapore has, at times, relied on national policies to manage diversity, because society-wide aggregate actions may have negative outcomes and especially for minority groups.

The primary policy objective in managing diversity is to create an increasingly cohesive society through an enlarged “common space” where a sense of togetherness can be shared. Dr Puthuchery emphasised the need to refrain from framing issues of diversity in terms of winners or losers. He highlighted that Singapore’s approach has worked thus far and functional outcomes have improved. He exemplifies this by describing how “middle ground” politics has been made a norm and how the extremes of politicisation are no longer well received by Singaporeans.

The current public discussions on social mobility and inequality underscore this trend. Dr Puthuchery noted that most of the current discussions are on issues surrounding social stratification. He highlighted that how well one fares in life contains a certain element of luck. For example, individuals cannot choose their parents or the social class they are born in. Social policies are thus needed to intervene and downplay the negative effects of chance.

The politics in the management of diversity, he stressed, needs to be centred on meritocracy. This has to be managed with a plurality of values around diversity such as dignity and moral worth apart from just economic worth. Dr Puthuchery acknowledged that while meritocracy has its share of flaws, Singapore should work on these issues and not completely abandon the system.

Constructing a Singaporean National Unity

Professor Cherian George reflected on the political values Singapore has embraced from the 1990s to the current neoliberal age. He pointed out that capitalism has become an ethic and no longer just a tool. Community spirit and values such as *gotong royong* (helping one another) has been replaced by an individualistic sense of self-entitlement. Individualism is now equated with material progress and entry into exclusive circles.

While Singapore has some natural immunity to global neoliberal trends — such as the political dominance of religious doctrines of certain faiths — no single religion holds a majority in Singapore. This means that religious nationalism is not strong enough to sway politicians. Also, Singapore has had its share of fundamental contradictions. For one, the pursuit of individualism is encouraged despite the call for collectivism and cooperation among those in society.

Professor George suggested three ways for Singapore to continue constructing its national unity.

1. Social order, where security is outsourced to the state but where a certain level of conflict is managed but seen to be a given in line with the nature of ethnic diversity.
2. Reciprocity, which requires the recognition of the rights of others, even if it is not favourable to the individual. In this respect, fair and transparent rules on handling disputes must be created and properly enforced. Singaporeans must recognise everyone's views and rights to participate within the norms of society.
3. Civic ethos, where Singaporeans' notion of "the good life" factors in the views of others. This, for example, can be manifested when people of the majority faith rise to the defence of those from minority faiths, or when the majority support the introduction of higher income taxes in order to enhance social justice and lessen poverty. Nationhood demands that individuals seek happiness by helping one another.

Professor George suggested developing the value of reciprocity and civic ethos in Singaporeans to combat the negative effects of diversity such as the proverbial tyranny of the majority. He said however, that Singaporeans have been taught to view differences in cultural opinion as potentially dangerous fault lines. Differences are viewed as vulnerabilities; as "sites" of fear or something that feeds public fear.

Professor George also stressed the need to make democracy work better in the face of rising populists and authoritarian approaches. He explained that when Singapore's pioneering leaders envisioned Singapore's system of governance, they drafted a pledge that focused on building a democratic society. These leaders believed that democracy was the solution to the nation's problems. However, it requires that citizens construct — on an ongoing basis — a democratic society.

Professor George expressed concerns that the PAP government's preferred model of democracy has become one where citizens "stay out of the kitchen", and where elected leaders are "the professional cooks". This one-party dominance straddles many divisions and takes up the role of referee mediating the many competing interests and values.

Professor George cited the current set of immigration policies as an example of PAP "misalignment" with the public. In 2013, the government published its Population White Paper where a planned size of 6.9 million residents was discussed in Parliament. Singaporeans rebuffed the findings and did not trust that the government was acting in their best interests. In another incident in 2014, Philippine nationals residing in the country aborted their planned national day celebrations in a public venue on the advice of the Singapore police, who were concerned about the potential fallout from the celebrations. Professor George noted that while the government has since learnt to treat immigration issues more sensitively, it has not investigated the underlying reasons behind the negative reactions by Singaporeans. He highlighted the importance of strengthening both people-to-people and people-to-government relations.

Professor George ended his presentation by voicing his hope that the new generation of leaders embark on a major upgrade to the current system where "bugs", which have persisted for so long, can now be fixed. They should then be confident enough of their "products" by lowering barriers thus subjecting them to stress-testing and external scrutiny.

Discussion

Associate Professor Suzaina Kadir started the discussions by highlighting Channel NewsAsia's *Regardless of Class* documentary that was aired on TV recently. She pointed out to the negative class stereotypes that subsequently arose to reinforce the perception that issues relating to the old "fault lines" have not been addressed. She questioned what could be done to manage these fault lines.

Dr Puthuchery affirmed that while old fault lines persist, Singaporeans should nevertheless celebrate the milestones of achievements. To counter criticisms that the documentary seemed to reinforce racial stereotypes, Dr Puthuchery challenged viewers to check the racial lens that they used to assess what was watched. He expressed concerns that viewers may be watching the documentary with a social bias, hence the misconception that the documentary reinforced certain racial stereotypes. He clarified that the students that were interviewed were not chosen because of their race; those who were chosen were the ones who had volunteered. Dr Puthuchery stressed that these pupils represented their education streams and had volunteered to share their experiences and the personal challenges they faced as students in their respective academic tracks.

Professor George argued for the need to move away from looking at differences in race and religion as vulnerabilities, as diversity is what makes Singapore wonderful. Until this is done, Singaporeans will not trust one another and citizens will continue to rely on the state to play the role of mediator. Professor George acknowledged the good work done by organisations such as OnePeople.sg along with other youth-led initiatives. However, he proposed that more must be done to answer the question, “How does growing up in the midst of Malay, Indian and Other Singaporeans make Chinese Singaporeans a better people?” He asserted that no Chinese political leader in Singapore has yet to answer this question.

Professor Tommy Koh stood up and responded to Professor George’s last statement by describing how, as a Chinese Singaporean, multiculturalism and multi-ethnic life have improved his growth as a person. He has learnt valuable lessons from his Malay and Indian “brothers and sisters”. For example, he learnt two valuable concepts — *gotong royong* and *musyawarah* from the Malay community. *Musyawarah* refers the act of consulting one another, accommodating each other’s points of view, and being willing to agree to disagree. Professor Koh said that one way of managing diversity is by creating constructive platforms for dialogue. He thus voiced his concern that open discussion has been made difficult for LGBT issues, due to prohibitive content codes. Another participant lamented the absence of positive portrayals of LGBT characters on TV, which then feeds into Singaporeans’ negative stereotypes of LGBTs. She suggested removing content codes to allow for such portrayals. In its place, the authorities should allow for a “regardless of sexual orientation/gender identity” clause.

Dr Puthuchery responded that Singaporeans need platforms where LGBT issues can be discussed in a measured manner. This is because the debate is now highly polarised. While issues of race and religion have made headways in the way it is being discussed from a “middle ground” perspective, the dialogue on LGBT issues remains highly charged, with no broad middle ground being agreed on for talks between extremists on either end. Without this, there can be no grounds to even discuss content codes. Dr Puthuchery thus reiterated the need for time to achieve social acceptance on the issue.

Professor George advised the government to read the ground more accurately. He felt that there is a kind of selectivity in the way the state reads and subsequently leads the ground towards a certain, pre-emptive end. Similarly, on many economic issues, the way citizens are being prepared for a more modern economy is also based on a pre-emptive agenda by the State. He elaborated that the strategy is based on an ideological choice and is therefore not a neutral option.

On the issue of 377A, Professor George offered the suggestion that the government has been playing the role of a “biased referee”. He justified the claim by stating that it has been an open secret that activists for certain causes are penalised by such means as placing obstacles on their employment prospects. He was of the view that the government should not obstruct activists by way of harsh “persuasion”, especially if the latter refuses to agree with it.

A participant raised a question regarding his earlier comments on “civic ethos” and its links with social diversity, specifically in the context where certain faiths have expanding congregations. Professor George clarified that while there is a worrying rise of exclusivity in religions worldwide, political institutions in Singapore have remained neutral. Political parties in Singapore cannot appeal along religious lines since there is no electoral advantage in doing

so. He was however concerned that the centre of many religions is veering towards intolerance. It is up to the religious groups and their members to steer away from intolerance. Nevertheless, he has seen religious leaders fight for human rights and there has been a history of religions fighting for tolerance. He reiterated that religions whose members are becoming more exclusive should encourage their followers to return to their tolerant ways.

On the issue of meritocracy, a participant asked if moving towards a form of meritocracy that is less linear and more multi-directional is possible. Dr Puthucheariy explained that such an approach was already in the process of being implemented. He was of the view that youths and young adults were starting to embody this idea; they were not always looking out for the “perfect job”, as they were willing to experiment. Unfortunately, this results in people marrying later since their journey in finding “success” takes a longer time. Their articulation of what counts as success is also different compared to the generations of Singaporeans before them, he said. The rapidly changing world of today involves living by certain values and appreciating benefits that are no longer the same as their predecessors’.

A participant questioned the viability of a landscape where diverse political opinions can be aired freely. Dr Puthucheariy emphasised that diversity is a strength, but one that must be managed. There is a need for a “middle ground” where people with differing viewpoints could come together for dialogue. Dr Puthucheariy agreed with Professor George’s views that more trust must be placed in the “marketplace” for information and opinions. He cautions however that the appearance of political diversity does not necessarily generate genuine diversity in terms of principle and effect. In closing, Dr Puthucheariy expressed that he did not believe that the current situation in Singapore reflects that political views are being circumscribed. He highlighted the conference as an example where people, media and the online public could discuss issues openly.

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