

IPS 35th Anniversary Conference: Revisitings Panel 3: Revisiting Pluralism

By Sophy Tio and Ezzafatin Aslam

Entitled “Revisitings”, the IPS 35th anniversary conference examined some of the critical issues facing Singapore. These include Meritocracy, Housing, Pluralism and Social Compact.

Panel 3 of the conference discussed various forms of pluralism in Singapore, and featured speeches by Mr K Shanmugam, Minister for Home Affairs and Minister for Law; Ms Zuraidah Ibrahim, Executive Managing Editor of *South China Morning Post*, and Ms Corinna Lim, Executive Director of the Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE). This session was moderated by Professor Chan Heng Chee from the Lee Kuan Yew Centre for Innovative Cities, Singapore University of Technology and Design.

Shanmugam: Policies and laws towards racial pluralism

In his speech, Mr Shanmugam discussed the importance of pluralism, specifically focusing on racial pluralism. Singapore society is organised on the key basis of pluralism, he said. It is a melting pot of people of different races, religions, languages and cultures. Mr Shanmugam emphasised the significance of social cohesion as a pillar of Singapore’s operating framework, alongside defense and a strong economy.

He contrasted the state of Singapore in 1965 — limited resources and low levels of education — to its current status as a thriving nation with a high GDP, high measures of human development, impressive educational outcomes and exceptional healthcare. He attributed Singapore's growth to its stability, the rule of law, an educated workforce, and most importantly, the unity of its people achieved through pluralism.

Three institutional safeguards for racial pluralism

Our laws and policies help build a national identity and safeguard racial pluralism, he added, giving examples of institutions in place to protect minorities. One such law is the Constitution, in which the protection of the interests of racial and religious minorities is ensured. The Constitution also recognises Malays as the indigenous people of Singapore and acknowledges the government's responsibility to protect their interests. The Presidential Council for Minority Rights (PCMR) similarly ensures that bills passed by Parliament do not infringe on the rights of any minority group.

Mr Shanmugam then described Singapore's Ethnic Integration Policy (EIP) as an example of the Singapore government's efforts to promote social cohesion. He introduced a comparison of Singapore's housing policies to those of the United States, where housing policies were implemented to segregate races by neighbourhoods. In contrast, the emergence of ethnic enclaves in Singapore was minimised through the introduction of EIP in 1989. According to Mr Shanmugam, the EIP ensures the mixing of different races across housing estate and consequently, in schools. He then shared that EIP limits were reached in nearly one-third of Housing and Development Board (HDB) blocks (constituting 10 per cent of neighbourhoods in Singapore) last year. This statistic suggests that Singapore neighbourhoods would otherwise observe greater ethnic clustering, thus illustrating the necessity of the EIP. While acknowledging the difficulties minorities face when selling their properties as a consequence of EIP, Mr Shanmugam explained that instead of abolishing the policy, the government addresses this by adopting a more interventionist approach. He noted that HDB exercises adequate flexibility in addressing appeals and providing assistance to the small number who face difficulties.

Lastly, he discussed Singapore's laws against hate speech, racially incendiary comments and incitement of violence against other groups. Mr Shanmugam emphasised that these laws apply equally to all individuals and provided examples of recent cases of its enforcement. Minister compared Singapore's approach to that of other countries with higher tolerance for offensive speech. He noted that the threshold for free speech should be informed by our unique histories and is highly contextual. Laws against racial discrimination are also being updated; the Ministry of Manpower will be enhancing the Tripartite Guidelines on Fair Employment Practices (TGFE) and the Ministry of Home Affairs will be introducing the Maintenance of Racial Harmony Act.

A race-sensitive approach

Assessing our current challenges, Mr Shanmugam acknowledged that Singapore is still a work in progress. We cannot deny that there is casual racism and racial prejudice in Singapore, he noted. He highlighted that instead of a "race-blind" approach, the government takes a race-sensitive approach where differences are not concealed and ensures that racial minorities are not disadvantaged. Recognising English, Chinese, Malay and Tamil as official languages and making English the working language is an example of this approach, he said. Mr Shanmugam explained that Singapore's laws, structures, systems and institutions are in place to ensure that racism, though innate in human beings, is not institutionalised.

The minister concluded by stressing that the pluralism and multiculturalism foundational to Singapore's success may be untenable if not managed carefully. Singapore's legal framework is only effective insofar to govern what people cannot do and act against the small number of transgressions. He noted the importance of concerted efforts by the government, grassroots organisations, civil society organisations and society to cultivate genuine empathy, understanding of different races and acceptance of each other.

Zuraidah: Growing demands for cultural and political pluralism

Ms Zuraidah Ibrahim began by describing two dimensions of pluralism: cultural pluralism and political pluralism. According to her, cultural pluralism involves considering strategies to ensure that all the different groups that make up a society are able to live in mutual respect. Political pluralism, on the other hand, involves considerations of whether a diversity of opinion is reflected in Parliament, and whether decisions made in society factor in a range of ideas, including those that oppose the status quo.

Ms Zuraidah noted that while Singapore is undeniably a culturally plural society, she questioned whether Singapore's current lack of political plurality ought to be maintained. She described Singapore as a highly plural society culturally — largely due to the extensive protections afforded by the government, illustrated by the fact that no religious group in Singapore claims a majority, as well as how Singapore has four official languages protected by the law. She observed that recent generations of inter-marriages have made Singapore more diverse than it has ever been, with its society moving beyond the official "Chinese, Malay, Indian, Others" (CMIO) framework. However, she was also critical of cultural pluralism as a concept used merely to avoid worst-case scenarios, such as race riots. She suggested that perhaps cultural pluralism can be examined in a more positive light.

Citing the recent example of hospitals allowing female nurses to don the *hijab*, she noted that many individuals, not limited to the Malay-Muslim community, felt that this change was long drawn out. She also mentioned the example of under-representation of Muslim men in Singapore's Armed Forces. To her, these examples serve to show the importance of accommodating differences, instead of trying to erase them. Ms Zuraidah then explained that ethnic minorities in Singapore are often made to feel that their various differences in identity make them less Singaporean. While the government has been competent at setting up guardrails that ensure minorities' sense of security within Singapore, she believed subtler forms of discrimination continue to pervade everyday interactions.

On the topic of political pluralism, she said that the extent to which Singaporeans desire political pluralism will ultimately be shown through election results. She described how election results show that many Singaporeans are uncomfortable with the extent of PAP's political domination and emphasised that public desire for a more politically plural Parliament is not to be underestimated — citing how the PAP-endorsed candidate could not secure the majority vote during 2011 Presidential Election, despite Singaporeans' high levels of political apathy.

She also described PAP's awareness of the electorate's growing demands for political pluralism together with a capable PAP-led government. However, the powerful entry of PAP-backed Mr Tharman Shanmugaratnam into the 2023 Presidential Election signals to Singaporeans how they cannot have their cake and eat it too. She added that greater political pluralism is undoubtedly unattractive for the PAP since it lacks experience ruling without a supermajority.

The class aspect of cultural and political pluralism was the final point Ms Zuraidah made. Most Singaporeans are inclined to believe that the rich and poor are able to interact in common public spaces, such as hawker centres and schools. Her concern was over increasingly open displays of extreme wealth by the top one per cent, which can accelerate socio-economic segregation and alienate the majority of Singaporeans. Ms Zuraidah cautioned against this trend and called upon the government to assure its electorate that it continues to look out for the interests of the majority. The outcome of whether the government has succeeded in convincing its people of their accountability will be reflected in the next general elections.

Corinna Lim: Diversity as well as equal and active participation in society

Ms Corinna Lim discussed what it means to be a truly plural society. She shared that her thoughts were based on her position as someone who is privileged yet marginalised, and as someone who has worked actively in the social justice space for over 30 years.

Grounding the discussion in her personal experience, she expressed the challenges of being a stigmatised sexual minority, particularly when the marginalisation is hidden and invisible. Ms Lim highlighted the importance of creating brave spaces where marginalised individuals are encouraged to share their experiences. Such spaces foster deeper and more sensitive discussions without causing antagonism and polarisation.

She emphasised that for people to fully feel at home in Singapore, it needs to be a place where everyone can be fully appreciated and accepted for who they are, without fear or shame. Ms Lim substantiated this by referencing several LGBTQ individuals she is acquainted with, who left Singapore due to a lack of inclusivity — something she had considered doing as well.

Ms Lim recognised the recent repeal of Section 377A as a sign of the country's evolution. She also noted various changes in housing, workplace protection, gender equality initiatives and forthcoming legislation that have positively impacted the lives of single mothers, LGBTQ individuals, and those experiencing abuse and discrimination. While she said that these changes are sometimes too gradual, she commended the government's efforts in consulting stakeholders and engaging in dialogue regarding the repeal.

For Ms Lim, pluralism is about embracing diversity and promoting equal and active participation in society. This includes being open to different views and perspectives. As a civil

society organisation that fights for gender equality, AWARE approaches advocacy in ways that include data-driven advocacy backed by research, assuming good faith, engaging stakeholders in closed-door meetings and with the public to create awareness, dialogues and persistence. Ms Lim emphasised the need for other social justice groups beyond AWARE to have better access to policymakers. She expressed a sense of optimism regarding the Government's increased approachability over the years.

She also spoke about the government's role to protect minorities as a precondition for pluralism. While she described that the upcoming Workplace Fairness Act is a critical step in the right direction, she noted that it currently does not protect against discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity and expression. She urged for the extension of workplace discrimination protection to everyone, including LGBTQ individuals.

As pluralism becomes more complex — and because the ways in which it is dealt with deeply impact peoples' lives — Ms Lim concluded by underscoring how crucial it is for Singapore to handle it right.

The future of Singapore's pluralism and the CMIO structure

In response to a question on the future of Singapore's pluralism with regards to the CMIO structure, Mr Shanmugam said the CMIO classification system should not be over-emphasised. While he acknowledged that most aspects of everyday life in Singapore are not dictated along CMIO lines, he also asserted its importance in specific contexts. To explain its importance, he referred to the examples of the Ethnic Integration Policy, as well as Singapore's ethnic self-help groups. He affirmed that Singapore is an "open society" with a lot of open opportunities that are not tied to racial categorisation. He suggested that while CMIO categorisation is necessary, it is not a system that defines the Singapore society.

Ms Zuraidah agreed with Mr Shanmugam, additionally noting that the CMIO categorisation is an oversimplification of the diversity on the ground. While she highlighted the importance of tracking racial identity as a crucial part of measuring outcomes, she expressed concern over how such methods of data collection could enable racial chauvinism.

Ms Lim brought up how inter-racial marriages also necessitate a more nuanced view on race. She acknowledged that while there are current accommodations being made to the system, such as the recent introduction of hyphenated ethnic identities as well as allowing families to decide the race of their child instead of following a paternal bloodline, these categorisations may not be truly reflective of an individual's experiences. Ms Lim also put forth the question of whether CMIO categorisation may hamper Singapore's growth. She cited the example of how Singapore's immigration policies are oriented around maintaining the current population's ethnic composition. Comparing Singapore to diverse cities like New York, she expressed hope for a more racially, ethnically and culturally diverse Singapore.

Mr Shanmugam responded by describing that the Singapore government's commitment to maintaining the racial percentages of its population has the objective of serving the Malay community's concerns. He described the Malay community as being concerned with the maintenance of their status as the second largest racial group in Singapore. Minister also expressed how attracting highly skilled Malays to Singapore is a bigger challenge compared to attracting highly skilled Indian and Chinese individuals. He asserted that changes to Singapore's racial composition would undermine Malay confidence.

Plurality in Singapore in the context of the digital age and increasingly porous borders

Responding to a question regarding foreign influences on Singapore's concept of pluralism, he acknowledged that it is a complex challenge lacking an answer, and that Singapore is striving to respond to it.

Ms Lim added on to Mr Shanmugam's point, saying that society needs to focus on increasing understanding instead of antagonism. She described how sharing stories as well as developing skills of empathy in schools are a solution to this. Ms Lim also mentioned her hope for a more liberalised approach towards the bureaucratic administration of marginalised communities such as the LGBTQ community. She cited the example of how LGBTQ support groups have long been excluded from formal registration as charities and social advocacy groups. She asserted the importance of the creation of safe spaces as well as the empowerment of individuals to deal with differences.

When asked about whether the government is prepared to dictate, define or enforce morality in the public sphere on morally principled grounds over pragmatic considerations, particularly regarding controversial issues like abortion and euthanasia, Mr Shanmugam said the government's duty is to mediate between different sections of society, and then put a framework of laws. He cited the example of the 377A repeal, as a reflection of Parliament's commitment to not shy away from discussing these issues.

Navigating race, language and pluralism

A question from the audience mentioned that recent discussion of new residents and citizens who are unwilling or unable to speak English has caused unhappiness within minority communities, and asked whether we are returning to the past where the Singapore society is divided by language. The audience member cited that Chinese and Indians are two of Singapore's largest racial groups, and that China and India are two of the world's biggest geo-political powers. Welcoming migration to Singapore is necessary as to keep population percentages by racial group intact. The audience members questioned whether in the name of maintaining these racial numbers and hence pluralism, Singapore is to be seen as conduits of foreign influence. They then explained that language determines the access to the kinds of information we consume.

In reply, Mr Shanmugam affirmed that immigration policies possess a set of careful criteria. Potential migrants must demonstrate their capability to socially and economically contribute to Singapore. By the time they are assessed for citizenship, most are able to converse in the languages of Singapore. Even if the parents are unable to speak English, the children are quick to learn the language.

Instead of language proficiency, Mr Shanmugam opined that the real challenge is the low fertility rate of Singapore. He described it as a demographic time bomb that is under-discussed. Regardless, he reiterated the government's commitment to ensure that new citizens are assessed based on their ability to integrate. He also noted that considering the higher total fertility rate of the Malay community than that of the Chinese and Indian communities, levels of immigration into Singapore by Chinese and Indians are higher to broadly maintain the racial percentages. A question was then asked about how we can avoid essentialising certain groups or race in Singapore in the interest of being sensitive and embrace a nuanced approach to race or other forms of pluralism. Mr Shanmugam replied that maintaining population percentage is seen as an assurance of people's place in society and no threat of being overtaken. He acknowledged that societal changes such as interracial marriages will continue to occur. He emphasised that the government does not seek to make race a central issue and can only have a broad policy framework. He explained that parents are those who choose the racial identity of their children, and identity is usually self-evident, albeit not in all cases. These groups and their percentages will only matter when it comes to data and assessing the community's performance and needs.

Ms Zuraidah clarified that while boundaries are essential to be able to assess a community's progress, the boundaries that define a community change and are context-specific. The point regarding essentialism highlights that communities are not homogeneous. There is diversity in views on various issues within each community, and she believed these differences must be managed through conversations within the community.

Political pluralism in Singapore

A question building on Ms Zuraidah's point on political pluralism queried whether the ruling party is unable to accept diverse views. Mr Shanmugam responded that the PAP does not decide the current structure of Singapore's parliament — rather, it is the people who decide. He described Singapore's electorate as one that is highly educated, and are conscious of their goals for the Singapore government. The PAP is not opposed to diversity, but they are not in favour of losing. He opined that while political pluralism is an attractive idea in theory, he felt that in practice, political plurality has yet seen success in governments outside those of Scandinavian countries. At the same time, he acknowledged that there is also no successful precedent for single-party governments or dictatorships. Given our size and natural insecurities, Singapore is constrained. In the practice of politics, one is inclined to be sceptical of any political system's ability to deliver good governance. Minister cited his uncertainty over whether the current structure would continue to provide the success it is experiencing today. Mr Shanmugam emphasised that the success of Singapore's governance is relegated to its

society's ability to choose good leaders, regardless of political system. He added that PAP should not be blamed for having good candidates who maintain the party's majority in Singapore government.

Ms Zuraidah said that although she agrees with the minister fundamentally, she theorised that the issue at hand is not a binary of false choices. She believed that the people are concerned over whether to be satisfied with the status quo or to urge for change. She posited that it is ultimately a question of whether the people are happy with the current concentration of power or wish for more accountability.

Mr Shanmugam replied that the PAP is accountable. He acknowledged that while there is a concentration of power, the opposition and the population hold them accountable.

[Sophy Tio](#) is a Research Associate and [Ezzafatin Aslam](#) is a Research Assistant at the Institute of Policy Studies' Social Lab.

IPS is grateful to the following organisations for their support of IPS:



BGC Group Pte Ltd
BinjaiTree
Building and Construction Authority
Changi Airport Group
City Developments Limited
EnGro Corporation Limited
Institute of Technical Education
Keppel Corporation

Khong Guan Biscuit Factory (S) Pte Ltd
KPMG Services Pte. Ltd.
LinkedIn
Maritime and Port Authority of Singapore
Monetary Authority of Singapore
Nanyang Polytechnic
National University of Singapore
OUE Limited

PSA International
Sentosa Development Corporation
Shangri-La Hotel Limited
Singapore Polytechnic
Singapore Pools (Private) Limited
Surbana Jurong
Thakral Group
Zuellig Initiatives Philanthropiques

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



© Copyright 2023 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.