

Report on IPS Closed-Door Discussion on Preliminary Findings from the Singaporean Malay Youth Identity Project

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“Glad”, “sad”, “typical” and “unique” — the Malay Youth Identity Project focuses on such keywords to gauge identity formation and raises issues of representation, reflexivity and cultural reproduction of the Malay Muslim Community (MMC) within the microcosm of Singapore society.

This project investigates the issue of how today’s Malay youths see themselves as members of their ethnic group in the context of Singapore’s current multi-ethnic society. Its findings have identified the strengths or weaknesses in a young Malay person’s sense of identity and whether these have had an impact on his or her affiliation to the ethnic group. The strength of a Malay youth’s sense of belonging to his or her ethnic group would determine the level of support rendered back to the ethnic community by the youth in the future.

The closed-door discussion identified and explained the factors that shape these youths’ frame of mind when responding to the demands of the Singapore society. The research also identified the plethora of issues challenging Malay youth identity formation in Singapore today.

Over 20 experts and practitioners from the public and private sectors attended the discussion on 24 April 2019, chaired by Dr Shamsuri Juhari, Research Fellow at IPS, at Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore.

The Malay Community: A Demographic Imperative

After a short introduction on the origins and current status of the Malay community, Dr Shamsuri explained the demographic imperative facing the community. Currently, the Malay population in Singapore stands at about half a million (503,900) individuals comprising 13.3 per cent of the total resident population in Singapore. Though a minority race, the Malays nevertheless form the second largest group after the Chinese. The population structure has advanced from that of a broad base to one with a narrower base, with an upward-moving bulge constituting those from the working group aged from 18 to 65 years old. The caveat to this demographic structure is that the Malay community, with its predominantly younger population, will in the next few years translate to more Malays entering the labour force.

Future developments of the Malay society, and consequently the nation, would then be tied to the growth of this group — both in size and quality. Seen in this light, the Malay Muslim community (MMC) poses a positive demographic advantage when compared to the rest of the population. In terms of policy setting, it is therefore sensible to “groom” this group so that it achieves its highest potential in the foreseeable future.

Dr Shamsuri concluded that while today’s Malay youths remain proud of their ethnic identity, these feelings are constantly challenged by negative perceptions of their community. The findings also show that there is greater readiness for them to accept diversity among and outside of themselves. Nevertheless, these youths see “unnecessary rigidities” that have been imposed on the Malay identity. Unfortunately, this results in many perceiving themselves as the proverbial square pegs being forced into round holes. Today’s youths thus see the need for Malayness to be transformed from a “state of being” to Malayness as a “state of mind”.

The session then opened itself to feedback from all participants. The follow-up discussion revolved around several issues.

Concerns on Vacillating Emotions and Perceptions

The theme on vacillating emotions received significant attention from the discussants, attributing to the following pointers – pride versus shame in being a Malay, humility versus assertiveness, and acceptance of fate versus putting in one’s effort. While the Focus Group Discussions surfaced issues of concern that were not new to the Malay community, what was stark was the way in which the perceptions of these young participants towards their ethnic community were becoming increasingly ambivalent. This resulted in a see-sawing of their appreciation of specific Malay characteristics. In turn, their emotions vacillate from one end of the spectrum to the other. There is also a consensus that more research is needed to be done. One participant suggests that instead of using the label “vacillation of emotions”, the research should instead take up the term “moderation of emotions”. Dr Shamsuri noted that such a view may be apt if based on specific contexts and situations. However, seen from a macroscopic and aggregate level, the description of vacillating could be more apt.

Creating more positive mental models of the Malay Muslim community

Participants agreed that various sources of positive mental models – parents, peer groups, schools, Malay films, use of stories and narratives – can provide platforms that cater to youth interests. These play a role in giving youths exposure and to develop them holistically.

Concept of “God’s Will” (*Redha*)

A participant shared that Malays were generally passive, refusing to put in effort and easily contented based on the belief of “God’s Will” (*Redha*). The participant believed Malay youths have internalised notions of “there is no need to strive for academic achievement” (*tak payah belajar tinggi*).

Contextualising “success” and “achiever”

Being “a success” and “an achiever” is too closely associated to education in Singapore. Various participants stressed that their take on success went beyond looking at material wealth and academic achievements. One participant said statistics assumed standards and goals were the same for all. However, he stressed that numbers do not capture the intricacies and nuances of every situation. Another participant noted that success should not be equated with material wealth.

Problematic position between being “just enough” and “the desire to excel”

Participants noted the mentality of “just enough to eat” (*cukup makan*) has curbed the desire to excel for many youths. Youths are seen to no longer go for the best as they aim for the bare minimum to survive rationalising that the effort is unnecessary as it is going against the concept of “God’s Will.” A discussant highlighted that the phrase “just enough to eat” has some presumptions that must be unpacked further. An educator cautioned that if Malay youths were to become contented with putting in effort for “just enough to eat”, the Malay community will end up lagging behind the other communities.

Structure, Systems and Agency

The theme arose from the realisation that various interplay of factors has contributed to the problems faced by the Malay community including the Malay youth of today. A participant highlighted that structural inequality have prevented Malays from taking up important roles, while another suggested that concepts such as the conventional belief in fate must be further examined within the current Singapore structure. All these must be seen in contrast to “agency” (personal choice), which also plays a part in the outcomes of individuals’ lives.

Negative Portrayal of the Malay Narrative

Overall, respondents identify areas where “the system” can be improved with the hope that structures can be “tweaked” to reverse the negative perceptions embedded in the Malay psyche. A discussant provided an alternative take for a more positive narrative and called for the need for everyone in the community to aspire and strive to change the narrative.

Purpose of Project

Two participants suggested relooking into the purpose and objectives of projects relating to Malay youth identity so that it can be more definite in what it hopes to achieve.

Epilogue

Dr Shamsuri summarised the discussion and noted participants’ suggestions on how the community can complement “the system” to strengthen the pride, conviction and value of being a Malay. This is so that when the time comes, the youths will be more ready to contribute back to the MMC and the larger society in line with the current nation-building approaches.

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