

A Nuanced Picture of Singapore's Growth Story

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On 9 May, the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) hosted 13 New America Foundation (NAF) Fellows at a half-day roundtable to discuss Singapore's need for a new social compact, and the current state of race and religious relations. The NAF is a non-profit, non-partisan public policy institute that aims to address the next generation of challenges facing the United States by nurturing new thinkers and promoting new ideas. The Fellows included published authors and practising journalists who have written for NBC, Slate.com, *The Economist*, the *New York Times* and *The Atlantic*.

Several IPS researchers attended the roundtable. Arun Mahizhnan, Special Research Adviser at IPS, convened the session with an introduction of IPS' work as well as an overview of the political, social and cultural landscape in Singapore after the 2011 General Election. Three speakers – Yeoh Lam Keong, Adjunct Research Fellow at IPS; Donald Low, Associate Dean (Research and Executive Education) and Senior Fellow at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy; and Dr Mathew Mathews, Senior Research Fellow at IPS – gave their views and took questions from the Fellows.

The Current Social Compact

Mr Yeoh and Mr Low examined how Singapore had fared through the lens of academic Nancy Fraser's theory of the "triple-movement" of social protection, marketisation and emancipation (Fraser, 2013). According to the theory, states that are best able to deal with globalisation can provide a balance between social protection, marketisation and emancipation. Both Mr Yeoh and Mr Low discussed the factors that had led to Singapore's immense economic growth vis-à-vis several of its neighbours and noted that the government is gradually trying to increase social protection. However, there are no similar visible efforts with respect to emancipation. There is an increasing interest in political reform among the younger generation, but it is unclear how the process will pan out. What is clear is that there will have to be a renegotiation of the social compact with Singaporeans, and the government will need to take proactive measures to ensure that public sentiment remains in its favour.

Dr Mathew's presentation, based on findings from the [IPS survey](#) on race, language and religion in 2013, described the current social dynamics in Singapore. While national identity is important to respondents, race and religion are also integral parts of their identity. He observed that it was clear how cultural differences can strain social cohesion, and that the

government has placed priority on managing the diversity in Singaporean society via social policies.

Q&A SEGMENT

Civic Engagement and Growing an Intellectual Community

Curious about the state of civic engagement in Singapore, the NAF Fellows asked about the level of involvement of younger Singaporeans in civil society, and how politically aware and engaged they are. It was pointed out that governance in Singapore has traditionally been seen as the pursuit of elites, and society was not used to engaging in normative debates. However, civic engagement on social media has been on the rise, and even though many limit their activities to online platforms, there are some who eventually extend their involvement to the offline space. This led to questions about the quality of views put forth by Singaporeans, with participants noting that the Internet, while providing a platform for considered thought, was also a hotbed of emotive, irrational and unpredictable responses. One concern was whether “infantile” responses could result in more pressure on the government to be populist.

The discussion also focused on the importance of nurturing an intellectual community in Singapore, which would be aided by a less-fettered media and greater freedom of information.

Impact of Social Policies

Participants were also interested to find out about gender and racial differences in education attainment and income levels. While gender differences are not significant, they were told that there continues to be concerns about social mobility among specific sectors of society. People with lower education also earn less, and the insufficient social protection for this group means that it is harder for them to catch up with the rest of the population. Their children would in turn be disadvantaged compared to their peers, resulting in a vicious cycle that might be hard to resolve if left unchecked.

Questions on immigration policies and foreign migrant workers were also raised. The large influx of low- and semi-skilled foreign workers is a good source of labour, but workers' rights have not progressed in tandem. The influx of foreigners has led to strains on infrastructure and public services, and has given rise to some unhappiness. Singaporeans have begun to realise that they must choose either a smaller foreign worker population with lower economic benefits but better worker protection, or a larger population with minimal workers' protection but large economic benefits.

Conclusion

Many of the NAF Fellows write about politics, poverty, technology and innovation for US publications. A number of them had read widely on Singapore prior to the discussion, and expressed that the roundtable gave them a more nuanced and detailed picture of

Singapore's growth story, with the discussion shedding light on the domestic complexities at this stage of Singapore's development. Mr Mahizhnan rounded up the session by noting that this was an "exceptionally interesting time in Singapore's history", and the fact that people are slowly finding their voices spells hope in the renegotiation of Singapore's social compact.

The NAF Fellows were in Singapore as part of a Singapore International Foundation (SIF) programme, titled "Insights into the Challenges and Strategies of a City-state". During their time in Singapore, SIF organised meetings for the Fellows with policymakers and decision-makers, to learn about Singapore's diversity and multicultural policies, challenges in healthcare, education and housing, and the impact of technology and social media on society.

Reference

Fraser, Nancy. (2013). "A Triple Movement? Parsing the Politics of Crisis after Polanyi", *New Left Review* 81: 119–132.

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