

## **Maintaining social cohesion in S'pore could even be harder than building social cohesion: Edwin Tong**

*Tong stressed the importance of fostering a collective “we” mindset.*

**Khine Zin Htet**

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Maintaining social cohesion in Singapore could prove even more challenging than building it, despite the country's success in forging a cohesive and progressive nation, said Minister for Culture, Community and Youth Edwin Tong.

Speaking at the Institute of Policy Studies' (IPS) Singapore Perspectives 2025 conference on Jan. 20, 2025, Tong reflected on the challenges Singapore face moving forward in an increasingly polarising world.

### **Successful social cohesion**

Tong highlighted Singapore's “exceptional outcome” in developing a strong national identity and cohesive community.

He credited this success to fostering interaction and mutual appreciation of Singapore's diverse cultures and being impartial to all races and religions:

"[Singapore's success] arises from the ability of our people to come together, to collectively want to build a strong social compact, but still creating space for people who are different from us, who may have a different belief, different practice and different views."

He noted that Singapore's national identity was built "upon" the strength of its cultural and ethnic diversity rather than "in place of it".

### **Singapore faces challenges**

Despite this progress, Tong warned that maintaining social cohesion poses greater challenges due to evolving global and domestic dynamics, climate change, and divisive forces.

### **Geopolitical tensions**

Tong pointed to global instability, such as the Russia-Ukraine war, the Israel-Hamas conflict, and U.S.-China tensions.

He observed that these developments have driven countries inward, adopting introspective policies that "worsen globalisation".

This, in turn, could disrupt the balance between ethnic or cultural ties and Singapore's shared identity, Tong said.

### **Ageing population**

Domestically, Singapore faces challenges stemming from its ageing population.

Tong highlighted that Singapore's total fertility rate fell below 1 for the first time in 2023.

By 2030, one in four Singaporeans will be aged 65 or older, compared to one in five just a few years ago.

The ageing demographic necessitates balancing immigration to sustain the economy while addressing concerns over job competition, crowded spaces, erosion of national identity, and the formation of foreign enclaves, Tong said.

Failure to address these issues could deepen societal divides, he cautioned.

### **A collective "We-first" approach**

Tong stressed the importance of fostering a collective "we" mindset as opposed to "me" while encouraging diverse skills, perspectives, and aspirations.

This balance, he said, is vital for Singapore's continued success.

Singapore's approach to social integration and building social capital has to be guided by pragmatism and purpose as well, he added.

"We must enable the space for diverse cultures to flourish but also develop a strong sense of 'we first' as a nation."

Quoting former prime minister Lee Hsien Loong's 2017 speech at the opening of the Singapore Chinese Cultural Centre, Tong underscored the importance of integration over assimilation:

"Our aim is integration, not assimilation, no race or culture in Singapore is coerced into conforming with other cultures or identities, let alone that of the majority."

Tong likened Singapore's vision of unity to rojak—a dish where distinct ingredients combine harmoniously.

"I think that's what we are, that's what we can strive to be," he said.