

On racism and xenophobia in Singapore

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“Do you think that the *hatred* Singaporeans feel towards foreigners is because of an identity crisis, as you suggested, or because the government has failed to provide sufficient basic services, like housing and transportation?” a young Filipino journalist asked at last week’s book launch (see [here](#)).

The crowd released a collective gasp when they heard the word “hatred”. I was shocked. I mentioned in my reply that it was too strong a word to use. Regardless, the fact that she said it bothers me, and has prompted me to share some thoughts.

These are casual observations and musings that build on the one serious analytical piece I’ve written on race, Chapter 8: Colour Matters, in *Floating on a Malayan Breeze: Travels in Malaysia and Singapore*.

As such, please treat each of my main statements below as postulations, to which I invite discussion and debate. Any thoughts and responses are much appreciated.

Note: Though racism and xenophobia are somewhat distinct, they often get conflated in contemporary Singaporean discourse. I will therefore sometimes discuss them collectively.

1) In Singapore, the moderate voices far outweigh the racists and xenophobes

In the immediate wake of the Little India Riots, there were some anti-South Asian racist and xenophobe rants. However, there was an instant backlash from voices of moderation. Same thing with the furore over the mooted celebration of the Philippines Independence Day in June this year. In both instances, I was heartened by Singapore society’s collective rejection of racist and xenophobic strands.

I think the big problem here is perception. People think racists and xenophobes do not exist in Singapore and then are shocked to find them. Others probably think that racism and xenophobia can be fixed—as ever in technocratic Singapore—with a simple combination of brainwashing, carrots and sticks.

For decades the government has painted a picture of Singapore as some multi-ethnic utopia devoid of bigotry. One of the PAP’s great successes, so the story goes, was saving Singapore from the cauldron of 1960s inter-ethnic conflict and creating a completely tolerant society. There is some truth to this, of course, and it’s all the more impressive given the race-conscious road that Malaysia, our socio-economic twin, was embarking on.

However, racism has always existed in Singapore. I have felt it occasionally throughout my life, even to this day. By preventing Singaporeans from ever having open, honest dialogues about race—partly through media controls—the PAP has effectively prevented a deep, genuine inter-ethnic harmony from crystallising. We are conditioned extrinsically to be tolerant; but have not found the intrinsic desire to be.¹

A recent survey on race and religion by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) suggests as much. Only 70% of Singaporeans believe that it is good for Singapore to be made up of different races. Only 55% expressed interest in meeting and getting to know people of other races. Only 50% are interested in understanding other people's customs.²

It is easy for me to play with statistics. An optimist could remove "Only" from the above three statements and paint a glass-half-full picture. But given Singapore's ambitions to be a multicultural, global city, I believe that these numbers are depressingly low.

2) Racism and xenophobia are less intense than in many other countries...

Despite there not being a genuine atmosphere of inter-cultural tolerance and understanding, one of Singapore's great strengths is minimal institutionalised discrimination. The IPS survey attests to this, with less than 10% of minorities saying they feel discriminated against in the use of public services. (More than 10% do, however, when applying for jobs.)³

All things considered, based on anecdotal experience, I therefore want to hazard that racism and xenophobia are not as big problems in Singapore as they are in many other parts of the world.

Moreover, when one thinks of xenophobia, it is important to look at immigrant numbers. Between 2000 and 2010, every year the average net inflow of foreigners (non-citizens) was about 80,000 people, or 2% of Singapore's population in Year 2000 (4m).

Let's compare this to the UK. Over the past few years, the UK's net annual migration has averaged around 200,000 people, or about 0.3% of the UK's population in Year 2000 (58m).

Treat this simply as a rough, back-of-the-envelope type comparison. But it allows us to appreciate the scale of the issue. In relation to citizens, the UK's foreign population has increased at less than one-sixth the rate of Singapore's over the past few years.

And yet the UK has seen a whole panoply of xenophobic elements emerging, including the rise of the far-right British National Party. Partly as a result of all this pressure, the UK's current government has promised to halve net migration to 100,000 by 2015.

Can you imagine what the ground might be like in the UK—never mind countries such as Austria and Switzerland—had it been subjected to the same foreign inflows that Singapore has? Anarchy. (A point Donald made at the talk.)

There are many take-aways from this, including on authoritarianism versus democracy. A Singapore sycophant might argue that this is precisely why democracy is bad, because it allows far-right elements to emerge and organise.

But that kind of thinking is myopic and out-dated. By suppressing racial and religious discussion all these years, Singapore has simply encouraged it to fester in silos.

The Internet has allowed people to express themselves freely. It provides a window into society. Yet the PAP's simplistic, stock response is to blame the Internet and certain online commentators rather than seeking to understand the roots of their discrimination.

Every time there is an ethnically or religiously inflammatory incident, the government chooses to focus on the noisy minority spewing xenophobic comments; and conveniently ignores the majority who respond with moderation. Perhaps this is a calculated red herring, an easy way of deflecting attention from the PAP's own culpability, something I explore below.

All said and done, it seems to me that racism and xenophobia are not as big problems in Singapore as they are in many other parts of the world. However, acknowledging their continued presence must never imply that they should be accepted or ignored.

3) ...and yet Singaporeans do not always sufficiently fight racism and xenophobia

Even though they may not be eradicated in our lifetime, racist and xenophobic strands of thought must always be called out.

I have been a little surprised in recent weeks by some apparent tolerance of anti-Filipino vitriol. I think it is right to be critical of government policies one disagrees with, such as the Population White Paper. But discrimination against other individuals or groups is never OK.

One person who seems to confuse the two is Gilbert Goh, an activist. Last year he organised Singapore's largest protest against the 6.9m target, which was attended by a broad spectrum of people, including me. But his recent posts on Facebook are downright shocking. This is one slogan he reposted:

"Dear Filipinos, If you insist on celebrating your national day at Orchard, we will take this as an act of **WAR** and will defend ourselves with our lives as this is our country, our land! **Be warned!**"

(Emphasis theirs. Gilbert has since removed the post from his wall, in the face of much criticism.)

These sorts of comments are vile, disgusting and have no place in our society. Gilbert should be ashamed of himself.

4) Government policies, attitudes and statements are partly to blame for racism and xenophobia

During the pre-Internet era, 1960s-1990s, when racism and xenophobia had nowhere to rear their heads publicly, the PAP claimed credit for building a multi-ethnic paradise. Now that bigotry—which always existed—is more visible, the PAP blames the online community.

This is disingenuous. In fact, when it comes to race, religion and immigrant integration, the PAP has done both good and bad.

Let's look firstly at Lee Kuan Yew's statements over the years.

"Three women were brought to the Singapore General Hospital, each in the same condition and each needing a blood transfusion. The first, a Southeast Asian was given the transfusion but died a few hours later. The second, a South Asian was also given a

transfusion but died a few days later. The third, an East Asian, was given a transfusion and survived. That is the X factor in development.”

- Lee Kuan Yew, in a meeting at the University of Singapore on 27 December 1967, as recorded by Chandra Muzaffar, a Malaysian political scientist

Meanwhile, in a speech to parliament in 1985, he said,

“We have a practical people whose culture tells them that contention for the sake of contention leads to disaster. I have said this on many a previous occasion; that had the mix in Singapore been different, had it been 75 per cent Indians, 15 per cent Malays and the rest Chinese, it would not have worked. Because they believe in the politics of contention, of opposition. But because the culture was such that the populace sought a practical way out of their difficulties, therefore it has worked.”

One might connect his first statement to the disgruntlement over the 1965 breakup with Malaysia and his second to his inability to handle the energetic, persistent JB Jeyaretnam, who was elected in 1981. In any case, Mr Lee's statements suggest that he has long believed in the superiority of Chinese people and culture.

He backed up this ideology with firm action. First, his skepticism about the loyalties of Singapore's Malay Muslims meant that they are excluded from many high security branches of the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF). This leads to some bizarre outcomes. For instance, today new Chinese migrants are afforded higher security clearances in the SAF than Malays whose families have lived in Singapore for generations.

Second, he argued in 1989 that Singapore is not ready for a non-Chinese prime minister, an idea that continues to hold sway among some leaders today.

Third, Singapore has been actively importing relatively more Chinese in order to maintain the ethnic balance in society. In 1989, Mr Lee said that the lower Chinese birth rate justified the government's programme of encouraging Chinese immigration from Hong Kong. According to him, the Chinese majority must be maintained, *“or there will be a shift in the economy, both the economic performance and the political backdrop which makes that economic performance possible.”*

Minorities: Racially inferior. Disruptive. Can't be trusted.

To his eternal credit, Lee Kuan Yew, modern Singapore's founding father, built a meritocracy that strives to be race-neutral. Nevertheless, it would be wrong to sugar-coat his legacy by ignoring his racially-divisive words and policies.

When it comes to xenophobia, I would like to discuss two facets of the government's approach that I believe have coloured Singaporeans' views of foreigners.

The first is worker's rights. Singapore has consistently failed to guarantee the rights of foreign workers, from construction workers to maids. For a supposed first-world country, our treatment of them borders on deplorable. I am no expert here, and there are many more insightful analyses by the likes of Alex Au that can shed light on the salient issues around this (see [here](#)).

The second is around the material values and life goals that the government has consistently advocated. One thinks of the remark by Lim Wee Kiak, a PAP MP, that a person's dignity is tied to his/her salary. Or ministerial pay packets and the justification for them. Or Lee Kuan Yew's comment, in response to high ministerial salaries, that

*"You know, the cure for all this talk is really a good dose of incompetent government. You get that alternative and you'll never put Singapore together again: Humpty Dumpty cannot be put together again... my asset values will disappear, my apartments will be worth a fraction of what they were, my ministers' jobs will be in peril, their security will be at risk and **their women will become maids in other people's countries, foreign workers.** I cannot have that!" [Emphasis mine]*

The implicit messaging of all this is clear. To work as a maid or a foreign worker means you are a failure. Certain jobs have dignity while others do not. In Singapore, a country with extreme income inequality, the people who earn pittance are, well, not worth very much.

Is it any surprise that they are discriminated against?

This also suggests that a lot of the discrimination one might find in Singapore is not simply racism or xenophobia but rather classism. Indian banker OK; Indian construction worker NO.

Finally, I would like to just speak very briefly about the issue of identity, which is what prompted the question from the Filipino journalist in the first place. I believe the tension in Singapore between those who would have a global city identity and those keen on a more local identity is expressed every week, from the Philippines Independence Day celebrations to the Songkran Water Festival that was scheduled to take place here.

I have written about this before in *The End of Identity?* (see [here](#)). In the context of this piece on race and xenophobia, I want to make two critiques of government policy. First, the government has consistently failed to engage the public in an ongoing discussion about the kind of country Singaporeans want.

In the tension between global-local, it seems as if politicians have been motivated more by GDP growth and the interests of multinational corporations than by the ideals and preferences of ordinary Singaporeans.

Do we want a global city or do we want a more regional, local one with closer ties to South-east Asia? It is interesting to note that in the same IPS survey Singaporeans say they are more comfortable with a local-born Malay OR foreign-born Malay as their boss than they are with a mainland Chinese.

Second, having embarked on this global city path, the government has failed to ensure that its fruits are distributed fairly. How did the PAP think that a huge swathe of Singaporeans would accept a complete overhaul of the country with incredibly high immigration and rising cost-of-living, without any concomitant rise in their real incomes? It seems almost foolish now on hindsight. But that's exactly what happened and partly why we have seen an uptick in xenophobia.

To surmise, I do not want to suggest that the PAP has consciously tried to foment discrimination (something that political parties elsewhere occasionally do). Rather, I am certain that government policies, attitudes and statements have had the unintended effect of worsening integration here.

I think what frustrates a lot of people is the government's trigger-happy willingness to fire down racist and xenophobic commentary without ever acknowledging its own possible biases and ever seriously attempting to mitigate the negative externalities of its own policies.

5) The Chinese-Malay-Indian-Others (CMIO) model has outlived its usefulness

Why does Singapore still insist on categorising people by race into these four buckets?

Some have suggested that the most important reason is for HDB ethnic quotas. But in a global city it makes little sense to maintain ethnic quotas in HDB housing estates, when little ethnic enclaves have formed all over the country, for instance with rich North Indians in Tanjong Rhu and the East Coast.

Others suggest that social welfare and self-help groups, like Mendaki and Sinda, were founded on ethnic lines and must continue this way. Without ethnic classifications, so the argument goes, who would help the poor Malays and Indians?

I have two critiques of this argument. First, there are many more civil society organisations operating in Singapore today without an ethnic mandate. Why doesn't Singapore, as a global city, start to channel charity money towards them rather than race-based groups?

Second, immigration has dented the analytical underpinnings of these groupings. In particular, let's consider "Indians". A little-known fact in Singapore is that Indians are now the richest ethnic group here in terms of resident household incomes. Many people assume the Chinese are. But from 2000 to 2010 the Indians' average monthly household income recorded nominal average annual growth of 5.2% to reach \$7,664, overtaking the Chinese (3.4% and S\$7,326 respectively).⁴

Using a traditional CMIO lens, one might conclude that the Indians in Singapore have been developing very rapidly. However, although the data is not readily available, I suspect that much of this growth is due to high-income Indian immigrants who have taken Singapore citizenship, rather than any marked organic improvement in the fortunes of Singaporean Indians.

These two groups—new Indian immigrants and older Singaporean Indians—are infinitely different. The fact that they are clobbered together and analysed is a reductionist move that can only lead to poor policy-formulation.

The CMIO model then has become a drag on Singapore's efforts to create a global city. It immediately limits the identities of locals while occasionally enforcing parochial notions of what a Singaporean should be. Perhaps it is better then to dispense with the CMIO model for one that acknowledges the demographics of a global city, with all its cultural and linguistic diversity.

¹ The establishment viewpoint is that inter-ethnic tensions can be kept at bay only by suppressing open, public discussion. At the heart of this is the vulnerability ethos that guides the Singapore Consensus. When it comes to race this vulnerability ethos, in my opinion, may have been pertinent in the 1960s but is today horribly anachronistic.

² Indicators of Racial and Religious Harmony, IPS. See [here](#)

³ By contrast, Malaysia has institutionalised discrimination in many spheres of life; but some have suggested to me that in places such as Penang and KL, they have sometimes felt, at a very personal, social level, a more genuine form of cross-cultural interaction.

⁴ Census of population 2010. Statistical Release 2: Households and Housing. See [here](#)