

IPS-OnePeople.sg Forum on Ethnic Identity and Culture

Thursday, 19 July 2018
Multi-Purpose Hall, Level 1
The Grassroots' Club

PANEL I
Singaporeans' Ethnic Identities - An Evolving Dynamic

Speaker

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Navel Gazing and Sleepwalking?: Evolving Ethnic Identities in Singapore

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**IPS – OnePeople.sg Forum on
Ethnic Identity and Culture**

*Panel I: “Singaporeans’ Ethnic Identities
– An Evolving Dynamic”*

27 July 2018

Collective Action Challenge

- **How do societies ensure diversity does not become a source of friction, discord, and division?**
- **What can multicultural societies do to foster harmonious relationships between diverse communities?**
- **More importantly, how can societies fortify themselves to come out resiliently against the forces that seek to divide and destroy?**

State of Multi-ethnicity in Singapore

- **Generally positive overall**
- **Ethnic and civic identities not regarded as incompatible – norm of multiple identities**
- **Coercive care and pre-emptive prudence in management of ethnic markers of race, language, and religion**

Ethnic Identities Still Strong

- **Given ethnic diversity, stronger attachment to one's ethnic identity is not surprising**
 - Ethnic Chinese responses (e.g., identifying with other cultures) in keeping with their being the majority
 - Putative rise of “Chinese privilege”
 - Double bond of being Malay and Muslim
- **Ethnic markers matter more to non-Chinese**
 - E.g., Importance of connection to ancestral motherland

State of Multi-ethnicity in Singapore

- **But centrifugal forces may be in motion**
 - **Stronger ethnic consciousness with exclusivity**
 - **Mother tongue as almost defining of ethnic identity**
 - **Immigration: Ethnic identity trumps civic commonality**
- **Increasingly less attuned to our multiracial ethos and resort to parochial identities**

Arguments

- **Policies relating to ethnicity have maintained importance of ethnic identity to Singaporeans**
- **Greater ethnic consciousness and exclusiveness could stifle nation-building process**
- **Imperative to reduce ethnic consciousness and facilitate growth of overarching civic identity and loyalty**

Citizenship

– Moulding Common Identity & Values

- **Civic citizenship as most apt non-majoritarian constitutional arrangement**
- **Ethnic groups do not forfeit their collective claim to and recognition of distinctive identities**
- **Overarching, common civic identity as sine qua non**

Getting to Racial Nirvana

**Can Singaporeans,
of all ethnicities, of “old” or “new” citizens,
see beyond the longstanding conception of
who we
are as racial- or hyphenated- Singaporeans,
and
instead be inspired by
our history and quest for a Singaporean
Singapore?**

Openness to & Understanding Other Cultures

- **Ideal and reality of experiencing ethnic cultures other than one's own**
- **“Consuming” food cultures – transient and exoticising**
- **Lack of inter-cultural understanding among younger Singaporeans**

What the Future Beholds?

“

... a high percentage of Singaporeans, aged 21-25, especially ethnic minorities, perceive markers such as ethnic language, traditions and festivals to be important to one's ethnic identity. In addition, many Singaporean millennials ranked high on ethnic pride ...

(at p. 63)

”

Scapegoating CMIO Classification?

- **Homogenising (intra-race) and heterogenising (inter-race) effect**
- **Removing racial classification not the silver bullet**
- **Salutary effect of recognising of different races**
- **More inter-ethnic marriages**

Being Race Conscious to be Race Blind

For example:

- **CMIO Classification**
- **Special Position of the Malays (Art 152, Constitution)**
- **National Service Deployment**
- **Mother Tongue Policy**
- **Ethnic Self-Help Framework**
- **Ethnic Integration Policy**
- **Group Representation Constituency**
- **Reserved Presidential Election**

Form vs. Substance

- ***How we use the policies matters even more than whether we use them***
- **Do policies, that worked in the past, now tend to promote racial exclusiveness and ethnocentrism?**
- **Policy path dependence – policy decisions and choices in the past have a strong influence on current behaviour**

Pillars of Multiracialism

- **Founding constitutional moment**
- **Multiple identities recognised and supported**
- **Imperative of overarching civic identity with sub-national ethnic belonging**
- **Ensuring adequate minority representation in key institutions**

Trust as Central in Multiracialism

- **Ensure racial identity and belonging a shield not a sword**
- **Citizenship and subscription to core values as core to being Singaporean – civic identity must trump ethnic identities**
- **Policies must engender cross-cutting cleavages and a common identity to build trust and confidence**

External Influences

- **Rise of (religious-)identity politics globally and regionally**
- **Rise of Singaporeans' ancestral homelands and impact on their diasporas**

In Lieu of a Conclusion: We, the Citizens of Singapore

- **Who are we? How are we enriched by the presence and success of others ethnically different from us but who are fellow citizens?**
- **Singapore was created on the aspiration of an expanding concept of the 'we'. How can we work towards ensuring that a contracting and fearful idea of 'we' never materialises?**