

S'poreans share the ability to embrace, adapt to diversity

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We refer to the commentary “Move beyond identifying S'poreans based on ethnicity” (Nov 7).

Ms Nur Diyanah Anwar argues that the call from Singaporean leaders is for new citizens to assimilate into Singapore society and that this is unrealistic if being Singaporean necessitates categorisation into a racial group in the first place.

She argues that the Chinese-Malay-Indian-Others (CMIO) framework and the resulting primacy of one's ethnic identity have stood in the way of forming a broader sense of national identity.

In our research on social identities and migration here, we note that the current policy orientation is towards the integration of migrants.

It seems couched as an additive process of allowing migrants to bring with them their existing culture to practise, yet adapt where necessary to the Singapore way of life, which values ethnic, religious and linguistic diversity.

It is an adaptation to diversity, not uniformity.

What have Singaporeans, rather than policymakers, said on these issues? In 2010, the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) Integration Survey of 2,001 local- and foreign-born Singaporeans listed the top characteristics migrants should have.

These were respect for multiracial and multi-religious practices, and the ability to integrate into the community in the functional sense: Be gainfully employed and be a good neighbour. Participants did not select options that had an assimilationist bent.

Ms Nur Diyanah argues that the Republic's current ethnic groups take an atomistic perception of their place in society, making it difficult for Singaporeans to adopt a common identity.

The 2013 IPS Survey on Race, Religion and Language of 4,131 residents stated that their connection to Singapore was the most important definition of who they were, over and above race, religion, mother tongue and language of most frequent use.

The CMIO framework is used to guide selected policies, but daily, lived realities bring to mind a picture of multiple identities — an activation of different identities in different contexts. And that defines being Singaporean.

We can, at any time, adapt to and identify with different groups at work or at play. From IPS' surveys, the call therefore is for migrants to do likewise: To find many forms and levels of commonality with others who also call this place “home”.

Singaporeans understand that we do not have the free-for-all approach to multiculturalism of some Western countries, and recognise the need for common social and political institutions alongside ethnic-based ones, as they are all valuable in their own right.

It seems like a paradox, but Singaporeans understand how to navigate the diversities; it is what we have in common.

They also hope that policies and policymakers reinforce this vital, unique instinct that makes us accept all, regardless of race, language, religion or even nationality, which we appreciate is ultimately what lies at the heart of Ms Nur Diyanah's anxieties.

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