Panellists flag challenge of reaching consensus as views get more diverse

Siau Ming En
TODAY, 19 January 2016

SINGAPORE — With growing diversity in views and demographic changes in Singapore, the Government will have to continue to engage Singaporeans on these issues, but panellists at a forum yesterday flagged the challenges of coming to a consensus and resolving differences between viewpoints.

Referencing hot-button topics — namely LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) issues and the relevance of the Chinese-Malay-Indian-Others (CMIO) framework — Acting Education Minister Ng Chee Meng (Schools) observed that the former involves quite divergent viewpoints, while the latter involves deeply entrenched policies and systems in Singapore.

At a panel discussion on "cohesive diversity" at the Institute of Policy Studies' Singapore Perspectives conference yesterday, Mr Ng said leaders will need to continue consulting and engaging people when it comes to resolving differences. At times, they may need to allow society to evolve before finding consensus.

And while Singaporeans want their voices to be heard, they must also "have the understanding and the humility to know that my view may not be the primary view, this is one of the plethora of views," he said.

After consultations are held and when decisions are made, Singaporeans will have to try and move forward, even if it means "subjugating your view beneath someone else's".

Asked by members of the audience on the Government's stand on LGBT issues and whether the authorities could do more for the group as society's views on the issue evolves, Mr Ng noted that "the space for consensus building in this is small because the viewpoints are quite opposed".

"(Do) we have the patience to educate, to allow the processes of discussion, of forging common bonds to move this relationship forward … The best way forward is to allow (society) to evolve … whether over time we will find new equilibriums that society at large accepts," he said.

"When you talk about two different groups, as I mentioned, to forge cohesive diversity, do we come into the conversation to force our viewpoint? Or do we come in with the humility and respect also to consider other viewpoints," he added.

Panellist Associate Professor Elaine Ho from National University of Singapore's Department of Geography questioned if the CMIO approach towards governance and policymaking here is "capacious enough".

"We may privilege certain types of identities that are tied to being the pioneer ethnic categories ... Now with a growing range of minority populations, how do we then also represent these other kinds of ethnic groups that are congregating in Singapore today?" she asked.

In response, Mr Ng said he would be very careful about moving away from principles that have served Singapore well, noting that the Government will have to ensure that they do not impinge on minorities' rights and that they are represented in Parliament.

He noted that the Government has given parents the option of choosing which race to reflect on their children identification cards at birth, which sees CMIO model evolve in a "different light".

Professor David Chan of Singapore Management University, also a panellist, said it is important that an individual's "ascribed status" should not disadvantage them in policies. For example, if there were no discussion on gender differences, the Women's Charter would not have been created.

"When you don't look at group membership and group differences, certain policies will simply not occur … If I stop seeing people as CMIO or using the classification, I will not have the HDB quota system. So we need to re-examine what policies we really want to do away with," said Prof Chan, who is director of SMU's Behavioural Sciences Institute.

Referring to the CMIO, Mr Ng said going forward, it is not so much about Singapore's leaders making extraordinary concessions, but continuing to engage Singaporeans, even as certain issues may require different representatives to articulate the various viewpoints.

In his opening remarks, Mr Ng also said the Government will continue to refine the Singapore approach to diversity through "inclusive politics". "Every Singaporean will have a part to play," he added.