

George Floyd killing stirs Asian feelings on region's own racial strife, from police custody deaths in Malaysia to Chinese privilege in Singapore

Kimberly Lim and Tashny Sukumaran

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- The death of the unarmed black man in Minnesota has prompted Asians not only to demonstrate, but to reflect on their own prejudices too
- In Malaysia, Indians are most likely to die in custody; in Indonesia, Papuans have long faced discrimination; in Singapore, there is a notion of Chinese privilege

The death of George Floyd has fuelled protests across the United States, but also sparked a reaction across Asia, with demonstrations in Japan, Australia and New Zealand, and a flurry of online discussions on racial discrimination in Singapore and Malaysia.

Since a video that showed Floyd, an unarmed black man in Minnesota, struggling to breathe as he was pinned down at the neck by a white police officer went viral last week, Black Lives Matter demonstrations against racial injustice and excessive force by police have taken place in more than 100 cities across the US.

These turned violent in recent days, with thousands of arrests made as riot police used tear gas to disperse crowds and at least 40 cities imposed curfews on Monday.

Peaceful protests have also taken place in London, Berlin, Milan and Auckland, with more planned in several Australian cities. In Perth on Monday evening, protesters held signs that read "We can't breathe" and "Black Lives Matter".

Hundreds of protesters also gathered in Shibuya, Tokyo, on Saturday after a video of police officers pinning and grabbing the neck of a Kurdish man stopped by traffic police on May 22 went viral. The protesters gathered to accuse the officers of racism and denounce Floyd's death, chanting "Do not discriminate against foreigners".

Racial strife

In Malaysia, there has been heated commentary on the country's own internal racial strife, with many taking to social media to urge Malaysians to address their own prejudices.

"If anyone remembers, Sugumar Chelladury was stepped on by police and he died in police custody in Malaysia in 2013. Please start to recognise that the dynamics of power exist in all countries, even if many of us don't have the will to verbalise yet," tweeted Michelle Yesudas, a legal adviser and human rights defender.

Custodial deaths in Malaysia have been a long-standing issue, with activists pointing out that the victims are mostly from the ethnic Indian minority population. In the case of security guard Sugumar, eyewitnesses reported several policemen apprehending Sugumar, beating him by the side of the road, and stomping on the back of his neck. The police denied assaulting him and refused to give permission for a second postmortem after initial results showed he had died of a heart attack, a finding his family disputed.

According to official statistics, there were 257 deaths in police custody between 2002 and 2016, although watchdogs have claimed that there has been severe under-reporting.

Malaysians on social media this week also took potshots at Samantha Katie James, the country's Miss Universe 2017 candidate, after the beauty queen posted a series of controversial statements on Instagram urging black people to "relax, take it as a challenge, makes you stronger".

"You chose to be born as a 'coloured' person in America for a reason," she posted. "To learn a certain lesson. Accept it as it is, till now hunger and poverty still exists. It is what it is. It's inevitable. Best you can do is remain calm, protect heart, don't allow it to crumble. That's your responsibility."

Her remarks were widely mocked, with many sarcastically lamenting how they had not "chosen" to be born as celebrities or millionaires. As anger mounted on Tuesday, James posted an apology.

"I do hear you, I'm sorry, I know you're hurting. I'm not in your shoes to fully understand this," she wrote.

She added: "Throughout my journey I have learned that we are more than just this temporary physical body, like an avatar, merely a tiny speck of dust in this vast infinite universe, we tend to overlook that from time to time.

"In our process towards evolution as a human being, on earth. We chose our body, our family, our place of birth, our name and our lessons from the path we take tailor made for us."

More than 80,000 people have signed an online petition calling for the 25-year-old to be stripped of her Miss Universe Malaysia crown. She was also stripped of her "blue tick" on Instagram, which indicates verification of her profile.

In Indonesia, activists have drawn attention to the long-standing grievances of Papuans, the ethnic Melanesians from the country's resource-rich easternmost regions. A separatist movement has brewed there for decades, fuelled by accounts of human rights abuses by Indonesian security forces, racial discrimination and allegations that the region's wealth has largely benefited those outside Papua.

Chinese privilege

In Singapore, the US protests have revived conversations on Chinese privilege and the impact of the casual use of racial slurs on social media, mostly among millennials.

The strong reaction from the movement even prompted state leaders to respond. Former prime minister Goh Chok Tong wrote in a Facebook post on Tuesday: “Though the historical context was different, there is a lesson here for all countries.” He said that Singapore must “continually work towards an inclusive society where everyone will emerge stronger with our house intact”.

The term Chinese privilege, coined by Singaporean activist Sangeetha Thanapal, is similar to white privilege and refers to the advantages Chinese Singaporeans get for being part of the majority race.

While race relations have been managed in the multiracial, ethnic Chinese-majority city state through laws and education, minorities have voiced concerns about institutional racism, with a study by the Institute of Policy Studies think-tank finding that Malays and Indians were concerned about discrimination in the workplace.

Chong Ja Ian, an assistant professor of political science at the National University of Singapore (NUS), said that while Singapore did not have the same history of race-based slavery that the US has, minorities would still empathise with marginalised people.

Assistant Professor Walid Jumblatt Abdullah, a political scientist from Nanyang Technological University (NTU), said: “In the US, if you are black, you are treated almost as if you are guilty until proven innocent. In Singapore, we are all aware of the stereotypes that minority groups are subjected to. While the gravity of the situations differ, the basic idea is that minorities face certain stereotypes which may be harmful.”

Mohamad Shamsuri Juhari, a researcher from the Institute of Policy Studies, added that younger Singaporeans were more open to debate. “Governance is very much a top-down affair. While the old have been conditioned to accept such a status quo, the younger generation, however, has not.”

Afiq Roslan, 24, said he initially felt that discussing race might be too sensitive but chose to speak up by posting about the movement on Instagram and urging his followers to discuss racial issues with him.

“The knowledge and the solidarity that comes with the movement are the main things that have given me the courage to speak up,” said the Singaporean, who is in his final year at the University of Queensland.

Illustrator Joy Ho, 25, who has over 2,500 followers on Instagram, draws cartoons to support social causes.

She said: “Social media has proven to be a successful vessel for sharing ideas and moving people, and illustration has the ability to carry both emotion and call to actions. It’s more than important now for people to show that they are not afraid of speaking their truth to power.”

Analysts said the movement could generate productive discussions about race in various societies. Associate professor Chong from NUS said that there should be a “wider conversation about the structures that systematically disadvantage a group”.

“In Singapore, at least, there is less of a discussion of rights and structures even if the issue of discrimination comes up,” he said.

Raising awareness

Some Asians are helping to raise funds for the Black Lives Matter movement by including links on their social media posts to funds set up for victims, protesters and black-owned businesses.

Republic Polytechnic student Chia Han Teng, 20, produced a music video with local rapper Abang Sapau and other musicians, which was inspired by a poem the rapper wrote. The video gained 46,000 views in one day.

The song, which made references to Floyd’s death, was to show support for the movement, said Chia. He wanted to send the message that the politically apathetic should be more involved because racism “exists everywhere”.

A design student from NTU, who did not want to be named, has illustrated pictures explaining the effects of racial slurs and derogatory terms.

“I care about racism and I recognise how small little things we do are contributors to racism. I think when more people speak up, it’ll definitely help the whole movement. Also, the death of George Floyd and many others are uncalled for and justice should be served,” said the 21-year old.

NotOK, an online platform that shares everyday experiences of racism in Singapore, showed solidarity with the movement by posting a picture with the words ‘Black Lives Matter’.

Akanksha Raja, who co-runs the platform, said although Singaporeans may feel “removed” from the events happening in the US because “black people in Singapore are even more under-represented than what the general public considers to be minority ethnicities here”, there was a “storied history of anti-black attitudes in Singapore”.

“If you are a non-black Singaporean condemning anti-blackness in the States and supporting the Black Lives Matter movement, it is absolutely necessary for you to consider the realities of how anti-blackness plays out in Singapore, how complicit you may be in perpetuating anti-blackness in Singapore, and how to fight against it,” she said.

Seoul-based K-pop artist Jay Park, a major influencer in hip-hop’s rise in South Korea, donated US\$10,000 to the Black Lives Matter Global Network.

Park, 33, who was born and raised in Seattle, was the first Asian-American to sign with billionaire rapper Jay-Z’s entertainment agency Roc Nation three years ago.

K-pop fans across the world have also taken part in the movement. Fans in Dallas spammed the iWatch Dallas police app with K-pop videos after police requested people upload videos showing “illegal activity” from protesters in the southern US city. BTS’ fan club, Army, have been using #WeLoveYouBlackArmy to show solidarity with members of the boy band’s fan club who are black.

In India, Bollywood stars have also shown solidarity with the movement. Actress Kareena Kapoor Khan wrote on Instagram: “When injustice happens against citizens of your own country, have the spine to speak for that too. Hypocrisy at its best. Shame on you”, while Priyanka Chopra posted: “Wherever you live, whatever your circumstances, no one deserves to die, especially at the hands of another because of their skin colour.”

However, some users accused the stars of themselves being hypocritical, criticising them for not speaking out about racism in India and related topics such as clashes in Kashmir, caste-based violence and for appearing in adverts for skin lightening cream.

Additional reporting by David Lee in Seoul