

## **Singapore's majority-Chinese population should do more to address racism: minister**

- **Finance minister Lawrence Wong says the authorities are ready to update policies to strengthen social harmony**
- **His comments come on the back of recent episodes of racial intolerance that have been hotly debated in the multicultural island nation**

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***South China Morning Post***, 25<sup>th</sup> June 2021

[Singapore](#)'s majority-Chinese population should do more to address [racism](#) - related grievances aired by members of ethnic minority groups, a minister has said in the government's first major response to the country's ongoing debate on racism, adding that the authorities are ready to update policies to strengthen social harmony.

The comments by finance minister Lawrence Wong, seen as a potential successor to Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, follow weeks of debate – mostly online – over recent episodes of racial intolerance.

Among them was a rare case of racially motivated assault last month that saw an Indian woman kicked by a Chinese man who was shouting slurs.

In the aftermath of these incidents, social media platforms have played host to at times anguished reflections from the country's minority Malays and Indians over racism they face in school and at the workplace.

Wong said it was important the ongoing conversations took place “with empathy, with humility, with maturity and goodwill towards one another”.

The ideal of a multiracial “Singaporean Singapore” was not just “good to have ... this is existential to us”, he said.

**The minister was speaking at a forum on race and racism in Singapore that was jointly organised by the Institute of Policy Studies and the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), and broadcast on Zoom.**

The minister said it was a reality that in any multiracial nation “it is harder to be a minority than a majority”.

“This is so everywhere in the world, so it is important for the majority community in Singapore to do its part, and be sensitive to and conscious of the needs of minorities,” Wong said.

Nearly three quarters of Singapore's 4 million citizens and permanent residents are ethnic Chinese, followed by 13.5 per cent who have a Malay background and 9 per cent of Indian heritage.

Some 3 per cent of the population, including Eurasians, are classified as "others" under the country's so-called "CMIO" framework, which takes the initials of each demographic category to present statistics on different communities.

Citing scenarios such as discrimination in the job and housing markets as well as Singaporeans contending with racial stereotypes, Wong said "these things do happen, not always, and perhaps not even often, but sometimes".

"And when they do happen, they cause real hurt, which is not erased by lightly dismissing them as casual remarks or jokes. I believe the majority community in Singapore understands this," he said.

"So I ask that we do more and take the extra step to make our minority friends, neighbours, co-workers feel comfortable," Wong said. "Treat others in the way you would like to be treated; and by your actions, teach your children to do the same. Remind those among your family members or friends who may slip up from time to time."

Even so, Wong said he hoped minority groups in the country recognised that the majority group in the country "has legitimate needs and concerns too".

The concept of Chinese privilege – which has gained currency in Singapore, mirroring the discussion about white privilege in the West – might be problematic as some in the community might feel they were not privileged at all, Wong said, given how they had "given up much" to bring about a multiracial society.

"Please understand that we still have a whole generation of Chinese Singaporeans who are more comfortable in Chinese than English, and who consider themselves at a disadvantage in an English-speaking world," he said.

Nevertheless, Wong said he was "not saying that we should refrain from voicing our unhappiness, or that minority Singaporeans should pipe down about the prejudices they experience".

"On the contrary, we should be upfront and honest about the racialised experiences various groups feel, and deal squarely with them," he said. "We must continue to speak up, and even be prepared to have uncomfortable discussions – not to start arguments, but to begin civilised discussions, listen to each other, and understand all points of view."

He said the government planned to “continue to engage widely, and to update our policies on race, as well as other policies that help to strengthen racial harmony in Singapore”, adding that race management policies were “not cast in stone”.

One example, he said, was a review of Muslim nurses wearing the Islamic veil, known locally as the tudung. The Malay-Muslim community has for years lobbied for the garment to be permissible attire among nurses and other uniformed groups such as the police. Prime Minister Lee earlier this year said a decision specifically on the use of the tudung by Muslim nurses would be made by the end of August, when he is due to make his annual policy speech.

Citing that review process, Wong said policy changes required “detailed study and extensive dialogue between the government and our various communities”. “It cannot be rushed, nor should things be changed simply based on who shouts the loudest,” he said.

The 48-year-old, viewed as one of three ministers likely to succeed Lee, also addressed one of the third-rail topics when it comes to discussions on race in Singapore – the ruling People’s Action Party’s (PAP) long-held assertion that the country is not yet ready for a non-Chinese prime minister.

He was asked about the matter by the event’s moderator, Shashi Jayakumar from the RSIS.

In response, Wong pointed to surveys he said showed that a significant proportion of Singaporeans were more comfortable with a prime minister of their own race.

“I wish it were not so, but the survey results are as they are, so a [member of an ethnic minority group] who wants to be prime minister should be aware of these attitudes,” he said. “It doesn’t mean that he, or for that matter she, can’t be a prime minister, but these are the realities on the ground.”

Wong added that he was not saying that Singaporeans should accept these attitudes as they are but should work hard to change them. He said he looked forward to a day when Singapore had a prime minister from such a group.

Asked about the CMIO framework, which commentators in the ongoing national debate have suggested should be scrapped, Wong said: “Consider this: if we were to discard CMIO, does it mean that people will start forgetting about their ethnic identities or paying less attention to their ethnic identities? Will that happen? If we were to ignore racial differences, does that mean that the differences do not exist? It’s not so clear to me.”