

Singapore Perspectives Conference 2021: Reset Identities and Cohesion

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Reset



Caption for photo: Dr Mathew Mathews introducing the panellists for the fourth forum on Identities and Cohesion.

The fourth forum, on [“Identities and Cohesion”](#), was moderated by Dr Mathew Mathews, Principal Research Fellow and Head of the Social Lab at the Institute of Policy Studies. The session began with speakers Professor Joel Kotkin, Presidential Fellow in Urban Futures at Chapman University, and Ambassador Mohammad Alami Musa, Head of Studies in Inter-Religious Relations in the Plural Societies Programme at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies. The panel featured discussants Ms Mei Lin Fung, Chair and Co-Founder of People-Centered Internet, and Associate Professor Daniel Goh, Deputy Head of the Department of Sociology and the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, National University of Singapore. Dr Mathews opened the forum by questioning how Singaporeans, who generally enjoyed social cohesion now, would see this cohesion and harmony in Singapore play out in the next decade amidst shifting identities and increasing diversity. Speakers and discussants considered the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, migration patterns, and international movements on the Singapore society.

Opening Remarks by Professor Joel Kotkin

Professor Joel Kotkin presented the development of identity formation in the West. He spoke on the difference in migration patterns and the way identities are expressed in Europe and the US. He directed the audience's attention towards the changes in attitudes towards race and ethnicity in America, citing the increasing rate of acceptance of interracial marriages, along with greater diversity in the workplace and at social gatherings, describing the phenomenon as "multiculturalism of the streets". Professor Kotkin also observed the effects of immigration across American states and noted class issues that had arisen over time.

Opening Remarks by Ambassador Alami Musa

Speaking on Singapore's national identity formation, Ambassador Alami Musa presented the silent threats undermining cohesion in Singapore. For example, international movements can breed sentiments of exclusivism and intolerance within the state. He showed conflicting opinions among people who felt that religion contributed to public reason and morality and those leaning towards non-religious sentiments. He offered three areas that the state can work towards forming a cohesive nation: building a dialogical society; having a negotiated and mediated secularism; and having an enriched *modus vivendi* that would equip people with psychological reflexes and a new frame of mind to face the unknown.

Discussion and Q&A

Discussants Associate Professor Daniel Goh and Ms Mei Lin Fung built on the points presented by Professor Joel Kotkin and Ambassador Alami Musa. Intersectionality, importation of ideas and identities, and the integration of immigrants into the Singapore society were issues that Professor Goh deemed to be prevalent in the near future regarding cohesion. Ms Fung invited the audience to consider the structural changes, namely, the digital revolution that could affect identity formations in Singapore. She noted how the "digital tsunami" would change all manner of communication and present new ideas to the public.

The issue of racial harmony being affected in the pandemic was surfaced by the audience, given reports of groups of immigrants being negatively affected. For Professor Kotkin, this issue should be seen through the lens of class rather than race as one's economic standing will determine how one is affected by the economic impacts of the pandemic. He explained that the "digital tsunami" caused the issue's racial aspect to be highlighted over the class issue.

The participants also posed questions on the usefulness of importing ideas, such as ideas of White and Chinese privilege, into the local space. According to Professor Goh, borrowing ideas imported from the US, for example, and applying them to the local context, might result in harmful effects. He suggested looking towards the indigenous intellectual traditions relevant to society as an alternative to importing concepts. Ms Fung advocated for a more dialogic society, which she asserted could bypass the importation of ideas.

Other participants raised queries on the appropriate models relevant to the Singapore society to balance tolerance between groups of people and assimilation. For the speakers, technology has allowed people to enjoy access to inputs from around the globe, who may therefore feel less pressured to adopt the identity of their immediate surroundings. The speakers asserted that people should have the freedom to choose their respective identities and the extent to

which they assimilate into their society. Ambassador Alami Musa and Professor Goh spoke on the fact that people on the island have enjoyed the idea of multiculturalism for centuries, even before colonialism, and warned against having one specific identity into which Singaporeans should assimilate. Professor Goh noted that the Chinese-Malay-Indian-Others (CMIO) model is evolving to consider the demands of people who want a nuanced approach to their cultural identities. Ms Fung and Professor Kotkin also outlined the benefits of understanding and appreciating one's cultural roots and origins. Professor Kotkin said that the internet cannot substitute the values, morality, and experiences of one's cultural roots.

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