



Singapore Perspectives 2025: Community Panel 1: Community and the State

By Harkiran Kaur

Background

The Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) held its annual flagship Singapore Perspectives conference on 20 January 2025.

The conference theme was “Community”, recognising that the world today is being pulled apart by political polarisation, economic fragmentation and a myriad other disruptive forces. As 2025 is also the 60th year of Singapore’s independence, the conference challenged Singaporeans to ask: what might bind us more strongly together as a people and a nation as we confront these challenges?

The first panel, titled “Community and the State”, featured Dr Aaron Maniam, Fellow of Practice and Director of Digital Transformation Education at the Blavatnik School of Government, University of Oxford; Professor Cherian George from the School of Communication at Hong Kong Baptist University; and Dr Joanne Yoong, Founder and Principal Economist and Behavioural Scientist at Research for Impact. They discussed how the state’s overarching presence has affected community-building in Singapore. The panel was facilitated by Ambassador Chan Heng Chee, Ambassador-at-Large at Singapore’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Before the panel discussion, a video featuring Pro Bono SG and Casual Poet Library was shown. The video depicted the two organisations’ different modes of state and community relationships, ranging from the symbiotic relationship that Pro Bono SG has with the Legal Aid

Bureau and the Public Defender's Office, to an autonomous community-led efforts of Casual Poet Library.



Caption for photo: (From left to right) Dr Joanne Yoong, Professor Cherian George, Dr Aaron Maniam and Ambassador Chan Heng Chee during Panel 1 of the IPS Singapore Perspectives Conference 2025.

Mapping Community and State Dynamics

Dr Maniam described the terms “community” and “state” as multifarious, variegated, and contested. He emphasised a need for clearer and more precise definitions as communities and states exist on various spectrums (i.e., strong or weak). He noted that communities and states may take one of four forms: (i) tribal societies that are characterised by weak states and strong communities; (ii) malignant autocracies where strong states suppress weak communities; (iii) failed systems where both states and communities are weak; and (iv) the ideal scenario where both a strong community and a strong state can coexist and mutually reinforce each other.

Constitutive Versus Exclusivist Communities

Dr Maniam said communities exist on a spectrum, extending from being constitutive to being exclusivist. Constitutive communities, he described, are those that embrace diversity and inclusivity. A critical aspect of a constitutive community is “family resemblances” — recognising the similarities that exist among different groups. Self-help groups and the local literary community are examples of constitutive communities because these groups have found ways to collaborate beyond racial and religiously defined enclaves.

In contrast, exclusivist communities operate on the principle of essentialist definitions where ideas of ethnicity, religion or culture are fixed and immutable; and membership is restricted to

those who fit these narrowly defined criteria. Dr Maniam pointed out that exclusivist communities can drive systems that reinforce social divisions, citing examples such as the South African apartheid system. Exclusivist communities are often characterised by a desire to dominate or marginalise others, rather than fostering collaboration or mutual understanding.

Constrictive Versus Enabling States

Dr Maniam added that states can also be distinguished along a spectrum from constrictive to enabling states. He outlined that constrictive states tend to adopt a paternalistic approach — by acting as control towers that withhold information and prioritising rule-setting and enforcement. This can “crowd out” both community and market forces. In contrast, enabling states focus on convening, facilitating and partnering with various stakeholders. While rule-setting and some enforcements are involved, enforcement does not dominate or define the core of their work.

Combinations of Communities and States

Dr Maniam offered a matrix of potential trajectories for Singapore for the next few decades. For example, should Singapore find itself with a constrictive state and exclusivist community, the state could act as a check on issues such as rising chauvinism. On the other hand, if the Singapore state were to become enabling with an exclusivist community, there is a risk of reinforcing nativism and echo chambers.

Another trajectory is where Singapore has constitutive communities that find themselves in competition and conflict with different parts of the state apparatus. The ideal situation would be collaboration between state and communities. Communities must not turn exclusivist, he noted, while the state must deal with the untidiness of not operating within its own vacuum. This implies that there must be more partnerships, volunteerism and networking in the governance process.

Sustaining Singapore's Exceptionalism: Balancing Community and State

Dr Maniam noted that the bedrock and backbone of Singapore's exceptionalism was pragmatic idealism, which emphasised the importance of operating in a place where community and state relations are mutually reinforcing. This is especially so when addressing complex issues like the environment, the creative arts and religious communities. Forces enabled by social media and digital technology could pull communities apart, leading them to become less constitutive and more exclusivist. More than ever, Singapore would need trust to manage risk and uncertainty. This means resisting the danger of self-fulfilling exclusivism, where the state is constricting in its response to the assumption that communities are exclusivist; and vice versa, where communities are more exclusivist in order to safeguard their interests against a constrictive state.

Dr Maniam underscored the need for commitment mechanisms and mutual trust building to reach the most optimal state and community relationship. He added that policies should be driven by human needs and strategic interests, rather than administrative efficiency alone. Finally, he stressed the importance of deliberative and participatory spaces in policymaking to ensure that the state and communities can thrive. For instance, he applauds the Singapore

government for taking steps in this direction by setting up the Singapore Government Partnerships Office.

The Need for a Larger “We”

The second panellist, Professor Cherian George, spoke on polarisation. Polarisation refers to the us-vs-them divides, he said, where opposing groups view one another as enemies. Without the golden rule of reciprocity, such divisions undermine the core tenets of democracy, as compromise and negotiation become increasingly difficult. To combat polarisation, he proposed the idea of building a broader “we”, which involves recognising shared needs and common identities, and fostering a sense of solidarity that embraces diverse values and viewpoints.

Dialogue and Deliberation for Depolarisation

Drawing on his research in interfaith dialogue, reconciliation efforts and citizen assemblies worldwide, Professor George highlighted evidence of dialogue and deliberation bridging divides. Carefully curated dialogue and deliberation by trained facilitators allow for listening and understanding, even as participants think of one another in hostile terms at the start. These conversations may not change an individual’s position on issues, but they tend to lower feelings of animosity. Moreover, they also increase both empathy and confidence in democracy.

Overestimating Divides and the Creation of a Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

Professor George added that it is human nature to overestimate the extent of societal divisions and the willingness or reasonableness of those with different views and values. While this misperception does not deny the reality of polarisation, it can amplify existing divides by creating a self-fulfilling prophecy, i.e., the more individuals believe others to be unreasonable or immoral, the less likely they are to trust or cooperate with them. This, in turn, makes collective decision-making and compromise more difficult, further entrenching the perception of division.

Sources of Polarisation

Professor George shared that political polarisation is largely influenced by three primary sources: (i) news media, (ii) social media, and (iii) political representatives. News and social media tend to present a skewed image of society, often focusing on conflict and sensationalism, which shapes public perception in a way that exaggerates the degree of societal fragmentation.

Political polarisation, Professor George said, is top-down and led by political elites who benefit from making differences more salient as it consolidates their power and appeals to specific voter bases. He suggested that face-to-face dialogues and deliberations could be solutions, as these approaches bypass the political representatives and media who often distort people’s perceptions of society and social relations.

The Challenge of Building Community Solidarity in Singapore

Turning to Singapore, Professor George acknowledged that the country has avoided the worst effects of polarisation, due to its long tradition of having a responsive government and the non-ethnic nature of its major political parties. The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated the need for strong and capable states. However, his view is that a state can be both competent and tolerant of vigorous competition, such as having contrary voices in civil society. He adds that it is ideal and possible for high-capacity states and vibrant societies to work together in a virtuous cycle for collective well-being.

Professor George argued that when contrarian views are shut out of mainstream media and other spaces, it reinforces the view that people need state protection from others with non-mainstream views. While this can help build trust in the state, it also creates distrust among people and leads to polarisation. Hence, he suggested that the state not retreat from its engagement with social issues; rather, it should rethink its terms of engagement.

Singapore's Development: Narratives That Shaped a Nation

In her address, Dr Yoong described Singapore as a unique blend of pragmatism and idealism, highlighting the values of goodness, virtue and a commitment to positive societal contribution. Reflecting on the nation's growth, she outlined three key narratives that have shaped Singapore's development: (i) scarcity, (ii) meritocracy and (iii) problem-solving.

She explained that scarcity triggers various psychological responses that drive community formation based on shared affinities, while simultaneously driving competition between groups. Additionally, meritocracy and problem-solving have played instrumental roles in identifying the best and brightest individuals to find efficient ways to utilise scarce resources in addressing challenges.

From Polarisation to Polarity Thinking and Participatory Spaces

Dr Yoong noted that while these guiding narratives helped Singapore overcome its early challenges, in today's complex world, these paradigms need to evolve. She pointed out that overly rigid definitions or frameworks — which rapidly become outdated — can further lock individuals into suboptimal positions, making it difficult to break free from these constraints.

Dr Yoong introduced the concept of “managing polarities”, advocating for an approach that embraces the complexities of modern society. A potential path forward is through polarity thinking, which allows society to embrace both state guidance and grassroots' independence. She highlighted the importance of adopting an improvisational technique known as “yes, and”, instead of a “no, but”, mindset. This means that we must collectively accept that we might not solve problems quickly or easily. Instead, we move forward by managing polarities (saying “yes”) that emerge and address changes over time. Increasingly, deliberative and participatory spaces will grow in importance because the issues that the state and communities need to address will be long-term, messy and ever-changing.

Dr Yoong voiced her concerns about the practical challenges of creating such changes, underlining the need for a change in processes, an increase in social capital, commitment, a lot of hard work, and funding. For instance, she emphasised the importance of speaking the same language and translating each stakeholder's concerns to appreciate different

perspectives. This, she explains, is essential in building new support and financing mechanisms for such new “yes, and” models.

Question-and-Answer Session

Q: Could immigration policy be amended in the future to prioritise individuals with talent that can contribute to Singapore, instead of focusing on racial quotas?

A: Dr Maniam replied that policymaking involves achieving delicate balances, noting that there are instances where immigration policies can adapt to recognise diverse forms of talent and contributions. At the same time, Singapore is also limited by space — and hence, sensitive to impacts due to changes via large population injections. Dr Maniam emphasised that change will not be immediate but will likely evolve with time; this will balance different aspirations and the carrying capacity of Singapore. Professor George added that the process of policymaking is equally important as the policy itself. Noting that other countries are facing polarising views from immigration policies, Professor George said Singapore could benefit from adopting models like citizens’ assemblies to address complex and polarising issues like immigration.

Q: While Singapore is taking in so many expats, how do you think nation-building will work with such a large expat community alongside the local Singaporean population?

A: Dr Maniam said Singapore must be driven by a vision of what a better world might look like. Singapore should remain welcoming to individuals who are eager to contribute and be invested in Singapore. He also emphasised the importance of the local population to make accommodations and embrace the complexities of a diverse society, reiterating the significance of family resemblances in fostering unity and bridging cultural gaps.

Q: Could you imagine how the state might unite the current political sphere in the US and how such methods could be used to improve Singaporean society today?

A: According to Professor George, a key lesson about the resilience of a country is that it is more than just its president or ruling party. He recounted an experience of visiting rural North Carolina where he observed a grassroots organisation called Down Home North Carolina, which engages in “deep canvassing”, a method where activists go door-to-door to engage with individuals to discuss issues such as abortion. Professor George pointed out that while polarisation is often intense when it comes to national politics, grassroots groups focus on issues that transcend party lines. He argued that the commonly perceived polarisation between red and blue states is misleading, and that true polarisation is between elites and the people. He cited data from Down Home North Carolina that showed how counties where it worked had resisted the predicted red wave in the 2024 presidential election. The global lesson, he says, is the need to address the polarisation between elites who are disconnected from local realities, and the grassroots. He stressed that this divide cannot be bridged through top-down approaches, but rather through horizontal conversations.

Q: Would the panel consider recommending to the Singapore government the removal or the change of CMIO in our national identity card?

A: Dr Maniam explained that identity encompasses multiple dimensions. He explained that he could either view the CMIO (Chinese, Malay, Indian, Others) classification as the definitive representation of his complexity or choose to embrace the multitudes of his identity without allowing a single administrative label to define him. While acknowledging that the CMIO label is imperfect, he noted that the CMIO classification was never intended to capture the entirety of one's complexity. For Dr Yoong, the argument for strictly categorising people by race and ethnicity has become less tenable as hybrid identities have become more prevalent. However, she also acknowledged the risk of over-emphasising these evolving classifications; offering individuals too much freedom to choose their identity labels could become a source of undue pressure. She recognised that although the CMIO framework may not be ideal, it continues to serve a functional purpose. Hence, it is unlikely to disappear soon.

Q: A vibrant state clearly requires people who can think critically and pragmatically. But are we seriously promoting this when our media avoids discussing many controversial issues; and more importantly, when initiatives like the Yale-NUS partnership that were specifically aimed at promoting critical thinking, are abandoned?

A: Professor George said critical thinking is a practice that must be developed over time, but students and citizens often lack the freedom or opportunities to practise it actively. Ambassador Chan asserted that while universities do teach critical thinking, its effectiveness depends on the engagement between tutors and students, with smaller classes offering more opportunities for meaningful interaction. Professor George also highlighted the value of Yale-NUS's student governance model, which allowed students to have the autonomy to self-organise, fostering leadership and critical thinking beyond the conventional academic structure. With the closure of Yale-NUS, students lost that model and will now be subjected to the more rigid governance framework of NUS, where activities must be approved by the central administration, changing how critical thinking is practised. Dr Maniam cautioned against underestimating the public's ability to think critically. He shared an example of a housing policy discussion group he had facilitated, where a homeowner expressed the dilemma of her flat's value to appreciate while hoping for lower property prices for her son, illustrating how deliberative spaces can cultivate critical thinking. Dr Yoong also raised concerns about the loss of institutions like Yale-NUS. She emphasised the need to democratise liberal education where such faculties can grow at various levels of institutions.

Q: How do we balance social cohesion domestically with being passionate about polarising global causes (e.g., Palestine, LGBTQ, "woke" vs conservative)? Who decides where the line is?

A: Professor George talked about the importance of discussing the boundaries of tolerance in society, warning that freedom can be misused and ultimately undermine the very freedoms it seeks to protect. He highlighted reciprocity as the golden rule, explaining that individuals must respect each other's right to freedom and equality. Professor George also said the line must be drawn when someone seeks to harm or refuses to respect another's equal freedom and equality. In such cases, he suggested that the state may need to intervene to protect these fundamental rights. Dr Maniam added that his limit is when individuals refuse to listen and only seek to be heard, undermining open dialogue. Reflecting on the golden rule, he highlighted

several key principles that have shaped his views. First, he said that individuals should not impose burdens on others that they would not be willing to bear and that privileges must be accompanied by shared responsibility. He also emphasised the importance of judging others by their impacts rather than intentions, and cautioned against judging one's group by its best examples while judging others by their worst, because this approach hinders community building. Dr Yoong said the key limit in discourse is genuine listening. She warned that the most harmful response is when people claim to listen but dismiss or distort the message, and considered such superficial engagement as where the line should be drawn.

Q: You discussed how Singapore embraced these strategies to make a more inclusive society that embraces differences. So, do you think as an expert in your field these strategies can be effectively applied to other countries with different cultural and political structures, or like more of the developing countries and what challenges might arise from this?

A: Dr Yoong replied that the strategies are fundamental for human interactions and must be applied consistently within specific contexts. Professor George noted that polarised societies often reveal a divide between political representatives, media influencers and grassroots connections — highlighting the global challenge of bridging this gap. However, he also mentioned that this challenge presents an opportunity for mutual learning, as nations can gain valuable insights from one another's approaches. Dr Maniam addressed the challenge of building horizontal trust and social capital, recognising that contextual differences will always play a role. He noted that it is far easier to harbour animosity towards groups than individuals, emphasising that fostering human relationships is key to strengthening community, no matter the context.

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