

Singapore must signal 'resolute commitment' to upholding diversity, opposing discrimination, says S. Iswaran

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SINGAPORE - Singapore must signal its resolute commitment to upholding diversity, promoting tolerance and opposing discrimination, amidst the divisive rhetoric that has emerged around the world, Communications and Information Minister S. Iswaran said on Thursday (July 19).

Speaking at a forum on ethnic identity and culture organised by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) and OnePeople.sg, he said this was one of the ways Singapore can build on its "multiculturalism project", which is still a work in progress.

In addition, every individual must be able to cultivate a sense of belonging that transcends their ethnic identity, he said, and develop a deep and genuine interest in Singaporeans of other ethnicities.

And at a societal level, Singapore must encourage greater social mixing between different ethnic and cultural groups, so that people can naturally forge strong bonds regardless of race, language or religion.

Mr Iswaran pointed to a survey on race relations conducted by IPS and ChannelNewsAsia in 2016, which showed that while almost all Singaporeans felt that people from all races should be treated equally, 60 per cent had heard racist comments and over 40 per cent held negative stereotypes about different races.

"While we can take pride in what Singapore has been able to accomplish as a multicultural nation, we cannot take it for granted nor presume that the work is complete," he said.

When it comes to the individual's ability to hold both a strong ethnic and national identity, Singapore seems to be doing relatively well, he noted.

He cited another study by IPS and CNA last year, which showed that overall, 49 per cent of respondents identified with both their ethnic and Singaporean identity simultaneously, compared with 35 per cent identifying more with their Singaporean identity and 14 per cent identifying more with their ethnic identity.

"Thus, being a young nation with a strong Singaporean identity need not be at the expense of our deep ethnic and cultural roots," Mr Iswaran said. "These two facets of our identity can, in fact, be symbiotic and draw strength from each other."

However, he added, this national identity is incomplete if Singaporeans do not have a keen understanding and appreciation of fellow Singaporeans who are culturally different to ourselves.

He noted that the same survey last year found that while most of the respondents were interested in experiencing other ethnic cultures, ranging from trying their cuisine to learning their languages, there was a relatively lower level of actual inter-cultural exchange and engagement.

"This is why our policies to promote communication, understanding and social interaction between people of different racial and religious backgrounds remain as relevant and important as ever," he said.

"We must ensure that Singaporeans are immersed in a diverse everyday environment, and remain curious about each other's cultures."