

## Anti-foreigner sentiments stir bloggers to action

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***The Straits Times***, 21 June 2012

One group plans YouTube chat show; another to hold 'show and taste' roadshow

SEVERAL bloggers, worried by the rise in anti-foreigner sentiments among Singaporeans, plan to launch two projects separately to help foster a sense of understanding.

One is a YouTube chat show on national issues that will take off next month, with xenophobia as the opening topic of discussion. The show is called Online/Offline.

About 16 bloggers are behind it, including familiar online names such as former editor Ravi Philemon of sociopolitical website The Online Citizen, editor Andrew Loh of sociopolitical website Public House, social issues film-maker Martyn See and political blogger Alex Au.

The other project, Culture Kitchen, is a roadshow featuring the food, culture and histories of the nations Singapore's migrant workers are from.

The series will get off the ground in the middle of August with a 'show-and-taste' of Bangladesh at a restaurant.

Singaporeans' dislike of foreigners can increasingly be found both online and offline, said Mr Philemon, a social worker, 'and most of us bloggers feel it is the most pressing issue that has not yet been addressed'.

'There are websites that seem to be driving these ultra-nationalist, anti-foreigner sentiments, and when you see something like that, you get worried,' he said. 'I've also heard friends remark about foreigners. They feel they have lost out in work and school to them.'

Mr Philemon declined to identify the websites. But online sites such as The Temasek Times and TR Emeritus often highlight the issue of foreigners in Singapore.

The outpouring of rage was particularly stark after the recent Ferrari accident, with some netizens directing their attacks against all mainland Chinese nationals residing in Singapore.

A speeding Ferrari driven by a mainland Chinese man had slammed into a taxi last month, killing the cabby and his passenger. The Ferrari's driver also died.

Mr Philemon said the xenophobia discussion will be taped on Sunday, with Mr Loh, Mr See, Mr Au, Chua Chu Kang GRC MP Zaqy Mohamad and himself discussing the issue. The edited version will be uploaded on YouTube by early next month to 'involve a wider audience', he added.

Blogger Adrianna Tan, who is leading the Culture Kitchen series, said she was inspired by a takeout restaurant in Pittsburg called Conflict Kitchen, which raises awareness about countries the United States is in conflict with, like Iran, by serving the food of these countries for a rotating six-month period.

Ms Tan hopes to take the event to the heartlands by either serving food from a food truck or opening temporary stalls in community centres.

As Singaporeans love food, the medium 'will reach across all socioeconomic classes', she said. Political observers feel the two projects are emerging signs of a maturing society with an active citizenry. Mr Arun Mahizhnan, deputy director of the Institute of Policy Studies, noted that the lead taken by the bloggers shows there are 'rational and concerned citizens' who inhabit cyberspace.

Dr Terence Chong, senior fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, added that such efforts would help generate discussion on whether the trend is 'genuine xenophobia, or if the anger is more politically complex, like an unfulfilled social contract'.

He noted that Singaporeans face a number of anxieties, including competition with foreigners for jobs and resources. They also see permanent residents and new citizens who did not do national service enjoying the same benefits as native Singaporeans.

The Government has tried to address problems like housing and transport by expanding infrastructure, pointed out former Nominated MP Siew Kum Hong. 'But it will take a few years before the situation can normalise.'

Meanwhile, 'more citizen-driven initiatives would be good, because they help to set and reinforce the social norms against xenophobia', he said.