

Casinos, Sars Top List of Best Remembered S'pore Events

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The three events most Singaporeans remember in the nation's history have been revealed in a new survey to be the opening of the two casinos in 2010, the 2003 outbreak of the deadly Sars virus and the spate of major MRT breakdowns about three years ago.

Conversely, among the least remembered events were the 1963 security crackdown Operation Coldstore, the 1987 Marxist conspiracy and the 1974 Laju ferry hijacking by terrorists.

These were the findings of a recent Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) survey of 1,500 Singaporeans, conducted through face-to-face interviews between last August and October. Survey participants were shown a list of 50 historical events selected by researchers - from the founding of modern Singapore in 1819 to the 2011 General Election - and asked if they were aware of each.

The survey showed Singaporeans were highly aware of key political events like former prime minister Lee Kuan Yew crying on TV on Aug 9, 1965, as he recounted the train of events that led to Singapore becoming independent after separation from Malaysia.

Events detailed in textbooks, like the landing of Sir Stamford Raffles here in 1819 and the Japanese Occupation in World War II, were also among the 10 most remembered events. About nine in 10 said they were aware of them. In comparison, fewer than one in five remembered Operation Coldstore and the Marxist conspiracy.

The IPS survey, highlights of which will be discussed at a seminar today, aims to identify the historical events that Singaporeans remember best as they mark 50 years of independence this year. It is the first study of its kind here.

Lead researcher Leong Chan-Hoong of IPS said the findings "give an idea of what could resonate as historical narratives for future generations of Singaporeans". He said the results show Singaporeans are more likely to recall recent events, adding: "The human tendency is that you tend to remember the bad things."

National University of Singapore historian Tan Tai Yong, who was not involved in the study, said: "Events in the 1960s or earlier are not likely to feature in people's consciousness unless they had a very direct impact on their lives, or whose stories are repeated in school curriculum, mass media or in public platforms."

He added: "We have always been focused on economic development and more concerned about what the future holds."

The researchers also sought to explore how far citizens believe these events are important to them and to future generations of Singaporeans. Here, events like the official launch of the MRT in 1988 and Changi Airport's opening in 1981 topped the list.

The survey also found citizens of certain races had deeper memories of events with an impact on their community. About 81.1 per cent of Malay respondents recalled the uncovering of the Jemaah Islamiah terrorist plot in 2002, compared with 64.9 per cent of Chinese and 63.9 per cent of Indians and other races.

Conversely, a larger proportion of Chinese were aware of the merger of Chinese-medium Nanyang University with then University of Singapore in 1980. The launch of the bilingualism policy in 1966, once controversial, was now regarded positively.

Dr Leong said the results show Singaporeans do not have just one view of their past. "They perceive the Singapore Story in different ways, shaped by ethnicity, age and background. Different strands of historical narratives make up the collective Singaporean identity," he added.