

Citizenship test a good idea but what should it cover?

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Observers suggest areas such as core values and language competency

What is Hari Raya Puasa? Who is Mr Lee Kuan Yew? Can you recite the pledge?

These are some of the questions that new immigrants should be asked and be able to answer before they can become citizens.

Academics, political watchers and community leaders who commented on Jurong GRC MP Halimah Yacob's suggestion in Parliament on Monday that there should be a citizenship test have tossed up a mix of topics ranging from national history to social norms.

And it looks like there could be quite a bit of studying on the cards for aspiring citizens if the idea is taken up.

'Citizenship is a privilege, not a right, and should be earned,' Madam Halimah said yesterday.

Explaining the need for such a test, she told The Straits Times that newcomers must show commitment to Singapore, and a preparedness to be responsible members of society.

A test will ensure that newcomers read up and talk to people to learn about key facets of Singapore life. This will help them understand society and integrate better, she added.

Mr Seah Kian Peng, the Marine Parade GRC MP who chairs the Government Parliamentary Committee for Community Development, Youth and Sports, agreed, saying: 'Just as we ask Singaporeans to welcome, adjust to and accommodate new citizens - which is important - the new citizens should, in turn, also consciously put in more effort to learn about Singapore and integrate into our community.'

Observers also agreed that newcomers should know the basics of Singapore's history, people, cultures, religions and political system.

But academics like Dr Terence Chong, a fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, are quick to point out that knowledge alone will not make for good citizens. He said: 'Like any test, we can cram for a citizenship test and forget everything when we walk out of the exam hall. Generation upon generation of Singapore students have turned this into an art form.

'Rather, it is how much our everyday practices are shared and how much our cultural routines gel with each other.'

This is why Madam Halimah wants newcomers to understand the core values that underpin society here.

These values - meritocracy, multiculturalism and a multi-religious society - hold society together, she stressed.

Anchoring the test to these values allows for a two-way evaluation process, law academic Eugene Tan added.

The values will help the authorities determine if an applicant is suitable, just as an applicant can decide if Singapore society is for him, he said.

The observers also feel that a basic proficiency in the English language would be helpful.

But Institute of Policy Studies research fellow Leong Chan Hoong said minimum standards may be difficult to determine, pointing out: 'Not every Singaporean can speak good English, and what if the new citizen is better off speaking Singlish than English? Would you consider that as an indication of being more adapted or integrated?'

Citizenship tests, some with language requirements, are common in countries with high volumes of immigrants, such as the United States, Britain and Australia.

The one in the US involves a civics test on American history, politics and geography, and an English language test.

'Citizenship tests tell us more about how Singaporeans see themselves than what they expect of new citizens,' Dr Chong said. This is because the tests define the 'ideal Singaporean' in the eyes of locals.

Dr Leong said such tests may discourage some from becoming citizens.

But the flip side is that the effort put into preparing for a test may lead to successful applicants who are more inclined to participate fully in society.

He said a test will provide an objective criteria for what a prospective citizen ought to grasp.

Agreeing, Mr Jiang Ler, 40, executive president of the Hua Yuan Association, a group for new immigrants, said: 'It gives people a direction to work towards.'

But those interviewed were split as to whether the test should be a written one, part of a face-to-face interview, or a combination of the two.

Interviews allow an applicant to be questioned in detail. Their body language can also be observed, said sociologist Tan Ern Ser.

Mr Tony Du, 53, president of the Tian Fu Club, a networking group for Chinese immigrants, said written tests may not produce accurate results as they allow the book-smart to score well.

For Prof Tan, the attitude a newcomer has towards Singapore is more important than the knowledge he may possess.

'It is also crucial to find out how they have been contributing to Singapore and their attitude in this regard,' he said.

'Playing in our team is not the same thing as playing for our team, even if we would like to believe so.'