

## Concerns about loyalty and insecurity

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If Singapore were invaded by a hostile power, would Permanent Residents (PRs) stay and fight?

Entrepreneur Eddie Song, 64, doesn't think so. Like many Singaporeans, he feels PRs enjoy the benefits of life here without any of the obligations.

'They can flee back to their own country if things go wrong,' he said. 'PRs are very smart, they know that they can get out of Singapore when things aren't so rosy in the future.'

It's sentiments like Mr Song's which lie behind the recent furore over the prospect of forcing PRs to become citizens.

It seems odd, at first glance, that Singaporeans want more people to take up citizenship, especially when other countries guard citizenship status so jealously.

Talking to Singaporeans and experts, however, there is a clear sense of a deep-seated insecurity about the loyalties of Singapore's more than half a million PRs.

Instead of letting PRs have an 'escape route', some Singaporeans want them to make a firm commitment to this country and become citizens.

This insecurity is also why the issue of pushing PRs to take up citizenship crops up time and again.

It was first raised in Parliament during the 2004 Budget debate by Mr Gan Kim Yong, who was then an MP for Holland-Bukit Panjang GRC, and Non-Constituency MP Steve Chia.

They proposed - unsuccessfully - that the Government should limit the PR term to five years. After this, a PR should either take up citizenship, or have his PR status revoked, but be allowed to stay on to work with an employment pass.

It came up again in April this year, when Deputy Prime Minister and Home Affairs Minister Wong Kan Seng, in a response to a question from Nominated MP Paulin Straughan, said that Singapore took a soft approach to encouraging PRs to become citizens.

The latest variation on this theme came last week, when Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong said that the Government could single out, say, 50,000 PRs and offer them citizenship. Should they refuse, their PR status could be revoked.

Although Mr Goh's press secretary subsequently clarified that his remarks were only for 'illustrative purposes' and did not represent a specific policy target, the repeated calls for PRs to make a stand for Singapore show that the underlying insecurity has not gone away.

Six years on, Mr Chia of the National Solidarity Party still stands by his suggestion in Parliament.

'There was a lot of unhappiness about the benefits and duties of citizenship,' he told The Sunday Times.

'We citizens live here. If anything happens, we can't go anywhere else. But PRs have the best of both worlds, they can pack up, go back to their own countries.

'If they take up citizenship, they'll cut their ties to their home countries and sink roots here.'

But where does this insecurity come from?

Migration expert with the Institute of Policy Studies Leong Chan Hoong argued that it has deeper social and psychological roots: the average Singaporean tends to take a zero-sum game view of loyalty.

'Some Singaporeans are not sure if a PR is really with us or just riding on the coat tails of our economic prosperity,' he said. 'They see loyalty as mutually exclusive, that you can't be loyal to more than one nationality.'

By becoming a Singaporean, they are obliged to take on the outward trappings of loyalty to Singapore: through doing National Service, for example.

Then, the task of integrating the newly minted citizen is made easier.

MP Alvin Yeo (Hong Kah GRC) expressed the sentiment of his constituents thus: 'I think it will improve acceptance among citizens, because they then feel that PRs are like us.

'Among the local community, they are saying: 'These people are treating Singapore as a hotel. Converting to citizenship shows their rootedness'.'

PRs are adamant that this insecurity is unfounded.

IT professional David Boden, 47, an American citizen who has been a PR here since 2002, put it succinctly: 'Does being a PR mean I don't believe in Singapore? That would be wrong.

'I contribute to the economy, to society. I pay taxes. I help Singapore charities, I employ people. Would you really want me to leave?'

Still, the Government has tacitly acknowledged this insecurity by increasing the perks of citizenship. Beginning last year, it has been widening the gap between PRs and citizens.

On top of existing citizen-only policies in housing, childcare and education, it has scaled back on the benefits that PRs get in health care and raised their school fees.

Part of this has to do with making Singaporeans come first, but it's also a nuanced approach to dangling the citizenship carrot.

It takes into account the fact that PRs themselves are a diverse group. Most of them are working adults and a sizeable percentage comes from Malaysia. Some have stayed for many years and started families here; some of their children are Singapore citizens.

It's also a better approach than a one-size-fits-all policy that forces PRs to take up citizenship.

For one thing, it's important not to overstate how big an issue this is.

For many Singaporeans, getting PRs to become citizens is not the key issue; instead, it's part of a larger welter of frustration at the growing presence of foreigners here.

MP Hri Kumar Nair (Bishan-Toa Payoh GRC) said: 'I'm not sure that the sentiment on the ground is that PRs should convert their status to citizenship.

'The specific sentiment on the ground is that the Government should be more judicious in how they give out PRs.'

MP Lee Bee Wah (Ang Mo Kio GRC) also said that the issue of pushing PRs to become citizens was not a hot one in her constituency.

Singaporeans like Mr Song agree. While he has no qualms about accepting highly qualified PRs, he balks at taking in just about anyone.

'I think there should at least be a language requirement before we grant someone PR,' he said.

'If they can't speak English, how can they function in our multi-racial society? How can they integrate?'

Focusing merely on the issue of converting PRs to citizens may therefore be misleading.

Moreover, a heavy-handed approach could also lead to a backlash among PRs, many of whom take a dim view of a 'forced conversion'.

As Dr Leong of the IPS put it: 'It's very hard to expect someone to give up their culture of origin because of their emotional ties to it.'

'I am sure the average Singaporean will gradually understand and appreciate the emotional challenges faced by newcomers, and why it's hard to sever such ties. But it is good to get the discussion going.'

Dr Straughan, who is a sociologist, also emphasised the emotional aspect of citizenship: 'Citizenship is not just an administrative document. It also reflects one's heritage. When you think seriously about the cultural costs, it becomes hard to give that up.'

PRs, she added, might do anything a citizen does, but still hold on to their original citizenship as a symbol of their cultural heritage.

The question is, are Singaporeans willing to overcome their insecurities to accept PRs who still feel a cultural tug from their home countries?

Or will they be able to make up their minds about what they want: for more PRs to become citizens, or for more transparency and stringency in the PR process in the first place?

And finally, would we even want to issue ultimatums on citizenship?

A policy to force PRs to become citizens could have the unintended effect of driving away talent - and create a class, not of Singaporeans-by-loyalty, but Singaporeans-by-duress.