

'Dangerous and complacent' if racial and religious harmony taken for granted: PM Lee

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Racial and religious integration is an ongoing challenge, said Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong on Sunday (Oct 4), as he stressed that what Singapore enjoys today is not "a natural state of affairs".

No matter the progress made over the last 50 years, it would be unwise to assume Singaporeans no longer need to be careful when discussing race and religion issues, he said.

"That is dangerous and complacent," said Mr Lee. "Because race and religion remain sensitive and difficult issues, in some ways even more complicated and difficult today."

This is seen in how, from time to time, there has still been the need to "smooth over emotions and manage prickly incidents that have a racial tinge".

He cited examples, such as the offence taken when somebody makes a racial post on social media, or religious rites for funerals or births especially when there is a mixed marriage, or when family members convert from one religion to another, which may result in disputes in a family.

Mr Lee was speaking to community and religious leaders at a conference organised by OnePeople.sg, which is themed 50 Years Of Harmony: Reflections & Aspirations.

Singapore also remains susceptible to spillover effects from the external environment, including jihadist terrorism - in particular, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

"Singapore must be on guard," he said. "We must be very careful so that if (a terrorist attack) happens it won't pull our fabric apart," he said.

This, he said, is why there is a must to nurture racial harmony and strengthen inter-religious ties as much as possible now.

But Singapore still has some way to go, he said. He cited a OnePeople.Sg and Institute of Policy Studies joint study that showed that while most Singaporeans subscribe to racial and religious harmony, in reality, we are "not there yet" in terms of the number of friends one has of different race and religion.

As Singapore celebrates its Golden Jubilee, Mr Lee said, we must continually remind ourselves about the importance of racial and religious harmony.

"For the younger ones who have been lucky not to have such racial strife before, we have to constantly remind them about how precious this harmony is, how unusual and rare it is," he said.

This was a point also made by Ambassador Chan Heng Chee in her keynote speech earlier. She had said, referring to the "mantra" of racial and religious harmony: "Some things are not fashionable, but it is important to keep repeating them."