

Filipino Group Heartened by Support

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The Straits Times, 20 April 2014

S'poreans back plans for Philippine event, slam earlier criticism as xenophobic

Organisers of an upcoming Philippine national day celebration, which initially drew flak online, say they appreciate the outpouring of support they have received from Singaporeans since.

"We are heartened, grateful and happy to receive support from Singaporeans as they have done in the past," members of the Pilipino Independence Day Council Singapore (PIDCS) told *The Sunday Times* by e-mail yesterday.

"We have not received any further hate or provocative e-mail or threatening calls for that matter," they added.

Earlier last week, some netizens had lambasted plans to hold the celebration at Ngee Ann City's Civic Plaza on June 8.

The Facebook page "Say No to an overpopulated Singapore" criticised the event and urged people to protest on PIDCS' Facebook site. As a result of the protests, the organisation took down its own post on its event.

The committee of about 20 volunteers also said that they received anonymous phone calls demanding the event's cancellation.

Since then though, other Singaporeans have shown their support online for PIDCS, deriding the criticism as "xenophobic" and wishing the organisers "the best" for their event.

A Facebook user, Yim Kuan Low, wrote: "Please know that these people are a minority, and there are many Singaporeans who hope you will continue with your event and have a wonderful time."

Both Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong and Acting Manpower Minister Tan Chuan-Jin have also denounced the criticism.

Mr Tan branded it as "not acceptable, repulsive even", while Mr Lee urged Singaporeans to be "generous of spirit and welcome visitors into our midst, even as we manage the foreign population here".

Singaporean Luz Mesenas, who hails from the Philippines and has been a regular at the annual event, said that she is worried that people may turn up to disrupt it.

The 58-year-old, who is a self-employed publisher, also said the event is just good-natured fun.

"There are so many Filipinos living and working here, and a lot of them get homesick. This event is a chance for them to hang out, listen to music and watch the cultural dance and the

comic performances. It goes on for half a day and it's very enjoyable," said Ms Mesenas, who has lived here for 14 years.

"They are not trying to invade Orchard Road."

Organisers told The Sunday Times that they had chosen Ngee Ann City as the venue as it is "in an area that is popular and accessible".

Previous editions of the event have been held at places such as Hong Lim Park, and it has been an annual affair since the mid-80s.

The use of the Marina Bay Sands and Singapore Flyer in posters is an "artistic expression" to show that the event is held here, the organisers said.

"It would be inappropriate if the poster does not show anything that symbolises Singapore. The skyline is used as it is not regulated, unlike the Merlion."

Academics such as psychologist Leong Chan-Hoong from the Institute of Policy Studies said that the reaction was "not resentment towards Filipinos personally" but to "how more than a third of people on our island are foreigners".

He added: "This is a perfect event for a cosmopolitan city, but at a less-than-perfect timing given the socio-political climate here."

Dr Leong also noted that the hostility came mainly from a small group of people.

"The majority of Singaporeans still feel that these workers need space to celebrate... This is a public space. As long as they don't misbehave or leave behind a mess, it is fine."

Humanitarian Organisation for Migration Economics executive director Jolovan Wham noted how many Singaporeans hire Filipino domestic workers who "make great contributions to our community".

"We should not begrudge them a space to celebrate," he added.

The organisers now hope to draw a line under the furore.

"We would like to avoid further comments and escalation of the matter," they said.

As for the event in June, which is expected to draw a 10,000-strong crowd, they added: "Everyone is invited to join the celebration".

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