

Keeping faith with multiracialism

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FOR 50 years, Singapore's patchwork of races and religions has been held together by a strict legal framework that not only mandates integration but also harshly punishes those who try to rend the social fabric.

But as the nation reaches middle age, the approach that has made it a beacon of inter-racial harmony in a world riven by ethnic tension is coming under unprecedented pressure.

The two factors of an unfettered cyberspace and a growing empowerment and assertiveness among Singaporeans are strong currents which threaten to upset the status quo.

While Singapore has always had strict laws against those provoking ill-will and hostility between the races, these laws have almost never been invoked until the past decade - a testament to the stability that had been achieved. The section of the Sedition Act which makes it an offence "to promote feelings of ill-will and hostility between different races or classes of the population" lay dormant since its inception in 1948 until 2005.

But in the past 10 years, no fewer than 16 people have been investigated either under the Sedition Act or the Penal Code for race- and religion-related offences.

Many of them were young bloggers making thoughtless remarks but some of them - like then National Trades Union Congress staff member Amy Cheong - were working professionals who nonetheless failed to think twice about showing their racism on social media.

The spate of incidents has spurred hand-wringing and soul-searching among Singaporeans.

Some worry that a new generation, for whom violent racial riots are just a social studies lesson, is taking for granted Singapore's hard-won social cohesion and sacrificing it to the millennial altar of thoughtless self-expression.

Others believe the currents are exposing the limits to the Government's approach of legislated multiracialism, and revealing that it was a form without content.

Was Singapore's multiracial project all along just a flimsy house of cards, and can it survive another 50 years?

Singapore was forced to leave Malaysia in 1965 because its founding leaders would not accept a system in which the races were unequal. The nation's early years were marred by volatile racial tension, spurring the creation of a system that required the different races to live, work, serve national service and even run for elections together.

The Housing Board has quotas on the proportion of homes in a public housing estate that can be owned by specified races, a move that ensures no minority-race enclaves could form in these estates.

The Group Representation Constituency scheme requires a team of electoral candidates to have members from the minority races, to guarantee that these races are represented in Parliament.

In the urgent quest to build a heterogeneous nation, every group was asked to make - and accepted - sacrifices.

For example, the Chinese gave up Mandarin as the lingua franca (common language), while the Malays accepted that religious dress could not be worn in certain public-sector jobs.

But, conscious of the push- and-pull of racial and religious identity, the Government found concessions for each group.

Special Assistance Plan (SAP) schools where the Chinese language would still dominate were created, while subsidised land for mosques and fully-funded tertiary education for Malay/Muslim students were guaranteed.

Thaipusam, together with Panguni Uthiram and Thimithi (fire-walking festival), became the only religious foot processions allowed since 1964.

All the while, the Government took pains to convince Singaporeans of its philosophy behind these decisions.

"We focus on our commonalities rather than accentuate the differences," said Deputy Prime Minister [Teo Chee Hean](#) in 2013.

Where the desire of racial and religious groups can be accommodated without encroaching on what government leaders call "the common space", they are allowed, or a compromise is found.

For example, Malay/Muslim women can wear the headscarf, the hijab, in public-sector jobs like teaching, or as National Day Parade participants. But they cannot wear it with their uniforms as nurses in public hospitals or as policewomen.

And while musical instruments cannot be played during the Thaipusam procession, there are a few static points along the route where music can be played.

But in recent years, more people are chafing against the seemingly arbitrary nature of these rules and hankering for more space to practise their customs and traditions.

Whether leaders from the Chinese community wanting more SAP schools or Malay/Muslim women desiring to wear the hijab with all uniforms, growing religiosity and self-expression are pushing against the perimeters of the Government's common space.

Last year, three Singaporean men were arrested at the Thaipusam procession for various offences after they clashed with policemen who stopped them playing traditional Indian drums.

Some analysts believe the Government's 50 years of tight policing of the OB markers of race and religion has left a new generation unaccustomed to - or unaware of - the balancing act required in a society with diverse races and religions.

The Government sees itself as adjudicator over competing forces and protector of the common space. But its central position has also bred an ignorance among the groups themselves of the snowballing effect that could ensue if their demands were granted.

Some believe the recent string of arrests and charges for promoting racial ill-will has also revealed that sensitivity to other groups is no more than skin-deep among Singaporeans.

But the invoking of harsh laws against thoughtless, off-hand comments in itself preserves a superficial state of affairs, some say.

"(There is) the unintended effect of limiting frank exchange for fear of provoking a violent reaction or being prosecuted. People avoid asking difficult questions and having a dialogue for fear of being branded racist or, worse still, starting a racial riot," said Institute of Policy Studies researcher Mathew Mathews.

Then there is a third force in the form of the steady stream of foreigners and immigrants coming to live and work in Singapore, bringing with them new customs and cultures. One of the 16 individuals investigated in the past 10 years under laws forbidding the promotion of racial ill-will was a Filipino nurse, Ello Ed Mundsel Bello, who faced charges over his anti-Singaporean comments on Facebook.

From 2006 to 2010, a foreign influx boosted the population by one million, giving rise to a sense of disorientation among locals and contributing to an electoral setback in the 2011 General Election for the ruling People's Action Party.

The pace of foreign inflow has been calibrated by the Government since 2010, and has dropped from 80,000 a year in 2011 to 20,000 last year. But the foreign contingent in Singapore is still the largest it has ever been.

In 2013, the nation was stunned by a riot in Little India where mobs of foreign workers set police cars and emergency vehicles ablaze. The shocking scene brought to mind, for some older Singaporeans, the racial riots of 1964 and 1969 in which 40 people died. But the riot did not cause any deaths and calm was restored within an hour. The catalyst for it was the death of an Indian worker at the wheel of a bus. But the authorities said alcohol intoxication played a big role.

Observers added that the different cultural framework of workers from India and Bangladesh - including a traditionally antagonistic relationship with law enforcement - contributed to the escalation of the incident.

A wide-ranging law forbidding public drinking after 10.30pm across the island, and also in the day on weekends in Little India and Geylang, was passed by Parliament in March. The law had

its detractors, especially among younger Singaporeans who saw it as a draconian response that would dampen the vibrancy of the city's nightlife.

Such backlash, tension and debate are now de rigueur in Singapore's public sphere, and will continue to be on issues of race, religion and culture.

For it is the growing diversity of views and beliefs among Singaporeans that is the ultimate source of pressure on the Government's current approach.

The once near-unanimous belief in legislated multiracialism has given way to competing views over whether the Government is doing too much, too little, or not the right things at all. But Singapore approaches this state of flux from a position of strength.

After all, debates over multiracialism and multi-culturalism are global ones, with many countries confronting far more urgent and violent situations.

The fundamentals of Singapore's multiracial project - not just equal treatment for all groups, but an equal responsibility placed on all groups to compromise, adjust, accept and tolerate - remain strong.

This steadfastness is not an innate one, but must be continually re-examined and nurtured by each new generation.

As former ambassador to the United States Chan Heng Chee wrote earlier this year, integration is "not a condition one can take for granted".

"It is not as if a society can cross the bar to become an integrated society, and then that integration cannot be undone or frayed," she said.

A harmonious multiracial and multi-cultural society took 50 years to build, but its rending could take far less time.