

Living Up To Our Ideal of Multiracialism

Opinion Editorial

The Straits Times, 20 September 2013

THERE is reason to be gratified by the findings of a recent study on racial and religious harmony in Singapore. Among the indicators in the study, the absence of minority discrimination in using public services scores 9.75 out of a perfect 10 - an affirmation of the distance that independent Singapore has covered on the road to multiracialism. Scores for other indicators - such as the absence of inter-racial and religious tension, embrace of diversity, and absence of minority discrimination in the workplace - range from 7.9 to 7.5. To the extent that they accurately reflect everyday realities, the indicators offer a reassuring picture of the state of race relations in a country which suffered race riots in the 1960s.

What is evident in the study, by the Institute of Policy Studies and racial harmony advocacy group OnePeople.sg, is the strong hand of an impartial and vigilant state, which has worked hard to keep the public sphere free of racial tension born out of discrimination, prejudice and rejection. Singapore's public institutions enjoy wide and deep trust because they represent the entire population and not just the majority Chinese in spite of their demographic strength. That this situation should appear normal, when religious and racial strife is the order of the day in many countries, pays the ultimate tribute to the role of the efforts over the years aimed at forging a single nation for all.

However, it is clear that more needs to be done on the road to multiracialism. For example, 71 per cent of Chinese respondents agreed or strongly agreed that it is a good thing for Singapore to be made up of people from different racial groups, compared to 80 per cent of Malays and 79 per cent of Indians. Apart from the almost 10-percentage-point gap between the Chinese and the other races, it is troubling that a fair number of people across all races appear to be ambivalent about the bedrock need for multiracialism. To address such perceptions, it is important to impress Singapore's fundamental multiracial rationale on the young at home and in school.

Also, the private sphere falls short of the public sphere in exemplifying multiracialism. The finding that only 45 per cent had at least one close friend of another race will surprise those who believe the ethnic diversity of housing estates and places of work should make close friendships second nature. Much as the study gives reason for confidence, therefore, it should also provoke introspection among Singaporeans of all races about the ideals of multiracialism and where they collectively fall short. Multiracialism is a process: It can be reinforced as well as eroded. The outcome depends on individuals and groups as much as the state.