

## **Majority now aware of race, religious issues, but study flags new fault lines**

*40% in IPS survey link trust in Govt to how issues of immigration, class, LGBT are tackled*

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A large majority of Singaporeans are aware of the seriousness of race and religious issues, and feel the Government has done enough to manage these divisions.

But fault lines have emerged on class, immigration and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) rights, where more Singaporeans, especially younger ones, want to see greater state involvement and public discourse.

These emerging issues, if mismanaged, are also seen to affect Singaporeans' trust in the Government the most, compared with race and religion.

These and other findings from a study of public opinion on fault lines in Singapore, carried out by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), were released yesterday.

Based on a survey of about 4,000 citizens and permanent residents last year, the study noted that about a third of the respondents identified race and religion as having the potential to result in violence in Singapore if not managed properly - significantly more so than class, immigration and LGBT issues.

Yet only about a quarter tied race and religion to trust in the state and politicians, compared with almost 40 per cent who said trust levels in the Government would likely fall if class and immigration issues are mismanaged.

Close to half of both younger and older respondents felt there should be more state involvement in immigration, reflecting possible higher levels of xenophobia and job insecurity in recent times, regardless of age, said the researchers.

These results could mean that citizens now accord the Government more responsibility to do more to manage class differences and immigration issues, they added.

"People may feel that the Government already has clear policies and frameworks that are fairly robust when it comes to race and religion. But perhaps for immigration, socio-economic status and LGBT issues, people might want the state to be more involved in managing those issues," said IPS senior research fellow Mathew Mathews.

This is unlike in the early years after independence, when the focus was on surviving communal politics.

Besides Dr Mathews, the other researchers were IPS research associate Melvin Tay and research assistant Shanthini Selvarajan.

**YOUTH LESS KEEN ON MORE GOVT INTERVENTION ON RACE AND RELIGION**

Just over a fifth of young people aged between 18 and 25 surveyed wanted more state involvement in race issues, compared with one-third of those aged above 65.

Similar results were observed for religion.

This could be due to the lived experiences of the older generation, who experienced the Maria Hertogh and 1964 race riots, said researchers.

The former took place in 1950, after a court decided that a child who had been raised by Muslims should be returned to her Catholic biological parents.

In 1964, clashes took place between the Malays and Chinese amid rising ethnic and political tensions.

For older Singaporeans, these events drove home the need for a robust state apparatus to intervene and keep the peace, added the researchers.

Significantly more Malays and Indians (about 40 per cent each) wanted greater state involvement in race issues than Chinese (24 per cent) - a sign that ethnic minorities are more likely to perceive or experience discrimination than the majority. A similar trend was seen for religion.

In addition, people of minority races with a university degree and above desired more state intervention than their less-educated counterparts, showing that increased education results in greater awareness of, and desire to resolve, racial and religious issues, said the study.

## **MINORITY RACES, YOUTH MORE LIKELY TO PROBE POTENTIAL DISCRIMINATION**

When asked how they would respond after getting an e-mail or phone message that a business had refused to serve people from a certain race or religion, nearly half of both Malays and Indians said they were likely to investigate the issue, compared with 37 per cent of Chinese.

About 30 per cent each of Malays and Indians were also more likely to take the allegation seriously by reporting it to the authorities, compared with 13 per cent of Chinese.

Younger Singaporeans would also be more proactive in tracing the source of such a message, with two-thirds saying they would check with their friend who sent it, compared with only half of respondents aged 65 and above.

This could be because younger people aged 18 to 25 are more sensitive and concerned about discrimination. Being digital natives, they are likely to investigate matters further, said the study.

Overall, the study showed that an overwhelming 92 per cent of respondents believed the Government had done well to improve racial and religious harmony.

An example of vigorous state intervention to combat social divides, it said, can be seen in the area of religion - where a range of hard and soft legislation like the Internal Security Act, Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act, and the Inter-Racial and Religious Confidence Circles has prevented potential discord and wider conflict.

But while seven in 10 aged above 65 agreed that the Government is responsible for racial and religious harmony in Singapore, only half of respondents aged 18 to 25 felt this way, it added.

The researchers said this shows older Singaporeans may attribute greater responsibility to the state, or believe these fault lines are most effectively managed by strong government intervention.

But going forward, younger generations could prefer a more community-driven approach to race and religion.