

Ministers, observers say racial intolerance goes against what S'pore stands for and there is room to do more

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Straits Times, 9 June 2021

SINGAPORE: Political leaders and watchers have come out against racist remarks made in an incident last Saturday (June 5) that was widely shared.

They said that while tensions and anxieties arising from the Covid-19 pandemic may have had a part to play in a recent spate of racist incidents, it goes against what Singapore stands for.

But hidden acts of racism and unconscious bias are just as, if not more, problematic, and holistic solutions are needed to tackle the issue at its root, observers told *The Straits Times* on Monday (June 7).

The series of incidents involving open displays of racist behaviour here includes an episode last Saturday where a 60-year-old Chinese Singaporean man was caught on camera making racist remarks to an interracial couple.

Business owner Dave Parkash, 26, the alleged target of the comments, later posted about the incident. Police are investigating.

In another recent incident, an Indian Singaporean woman was reportedly kicked in the chest by an assailant, who also used racial slurs against her.

In April, a video was widely shared of a woman caught making racist remarks on an MRT train.

Education Minister Chan Chun Sing said on Facebook on Monday that there will inevitably be stresses and strains arising from the unprecedented challenges brought on by Covid-19.

"It is now more important than ever, that we stand united as a community," he added.

"These incidents are striking, precisely because they go against what we stand for in Singapore," he said, noting that multiracialism is a daily lived reality and source of pride here, with people living, studying, working and going through national service alongside neighbours, classmates, colleagues and citizens of different races.

"It is a constant work-in-progress, which we never take for granted nor will we ever give up."

Mr Chan noted that about one in four marriages today is between couples of different races.

"Racial intolerance goes against our founding values as a nation, and has no place in our society. Every one of us - parents, educators, individuals - plays a part in safeguarding the treasured and hard-earned legacy of racial harmony. Our diversity has always been our strength, and we must never let it become our Achilles heel," he said.

Mr Mohamed Imran Mohamed Taib, founding board member of the Centre for Interfaith Understanding, noted that the ethno-nationalist lens by which some countries had viewed the pandemic has led to labelling and finger-pointing, contributing to the idea that viruses can be "national" as well.

This has fuelled xenophobic attitudes towards citizens of countries where Covid-19 strains have been first detected, such as India.

Home Affairs and Law Minister K. Shanmugam, in response to the latest incident involving Mr Parkash, said on Sunday that recent events have made him unsure if Singapore is "moving in the right direction on racial tolerance and harmony".

Associate Professor Leong Chan-Hoong from the Singapore University of Social Sciences agreed that the pandemic has had an impact on race relations. But long-term trends here are still encouraging, he noted, citing how one in four marriages today involves a spouse from a different ethnic background.

"This is not possible if we are xenophobic or racist - we have moved on from the violent, tumultuous years in the 1960s," he said, adding there will be a segment of the population who are uncomfortable at being in close proximity to those who are culturally different.

That being said, Dr Mathew Mathews, principal research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies, said all forms of racism - whether overtly displayed or kept hidden and subtle - are problematic and affect those on the receiving end.

They include instances when some races are characterised by unfair stereotypes. "These sometimes become self-fulfilling prophecies - for instance, I cannot do this subject well because I am of this race," added Dr Mathews.

Mr Imran said, in fact, covert acts of racism could be more problematic and dangerous than these recent open displays. This is because subconscious prejudice may go unchallenged or

uncorrected. "It can fester into more dangerous ideas that can turn ugly when there is a breakdown of law and order, as seen in other countries," he added.

The fact that more victims have, in recent months, called attention to acts of racism reflects greater awareness about what constitutes racism and why it needs to be tackled, he said.

"For a long time, we have swept it under the carpet. It's time we confront it and find ways to overcome it. The initial phase may be confusing and even messy. But all social change begins with some tensions. What matters is how we manage these tensions and direct them to lasting solutions."

Collective action is needed to deal with issues of racism, said the experts. Mr Imran noted that institutions - such as the media and schools - also have to do their part.

Nominated MP Raj Joshua Thomas noted that there were several responses to the video involving Mr Parkash that had called for the 60-year-old man to be prosecuted, but questioned if turning to the law should be the remedy for every incident involving race.

"It may end up like a game of whack-a-mole, without determining why there are these moles in the first place," Mr Thomas, who is a partner at law firm Tang Thomas, wrote on Facebook.

Singapore can consider a framework for the rehabilitation of people who express racist sentiments that threaten social cohesion, he told ST. "This rehabilitative framework could be in addition to penalties imposed by law, or in lieu of sentencing, including community service with ethnic self-help groups or other ethnic-based entities, for example," he said.

For promoting enmity between different groups on grounds of religion or race under the Penal Code, a person can be jailed for up to three years, or fined, or both.

Progress Singapore Party secretary-general Francis Yuen said in a statement on Facebook that his party strongly condemns such racist attitudes and behaviour. "Racism will tear our social fabric and cause great harm to the progress of Singapore," he said.

Minister for Culture, Community and Youth Edwin Tong told ST that racism, of any form or kind, is completely unacceptable. "We have much to cherish as a richly multiracial society, and we have to use this as a pillar of strength for our country, instead of being divided on race or indeed religious lines."

He added that the recent incidents are a stark reminder that Singapore cannot take its race relations for granted. "These relations are, and must remain, constant work in progress for us, always mindful and sensitive, as we strive to strengthen our social cohesion.

"And we must never allow racist tendencies to take root, and be normalised in our society," he said.