

Most Singaporeans Unaware of Coldstore: Poll

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The debate over a contentious episode in Singapore's history may have hogged the headlines in recent months, but the average Singaporean does not know about the large-scale security crackdown in 1963 that saw 113 leftist politicians and others rounded up.

A recent survey by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) showed that just 16.6 per cent of the 1,500 citizens polled were aware of Operation Coldstore in 1963, and 18.5 per cent were aware of Operation Spectrum in 1987 when 16 alleged Marxists were detained for subversion.

"Operation Coldstore does not affect our routines and we are not reminded of it like we are of Raffles when we drive past Raffles Hotel," said Mr Kwa Chong Guan, a senior fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies.

The legitimacy of Operation Coldstore has been the subject of an ongoing debate of late, with several former detainees and historians arguing that the crackdown was politically motivated and the Communist threat was hyped up.

But the Government has criticised these activists' attempts as distorting Singapore's history to serve their political agendas.

Mr Kwa said that the revisionist attempts "have not stirred a majority of Singaporeans who are more concerned about the continuity of the story of Singapore's economic development into the 21st century as a global city".

Other historians say these episodes are also fairly distant for most people to recall, and are not discussed as extensively as others.

The survey found that a larger share of graduates, those who are older, and those who are better-off were aware of these crackdowns.

"Private property dwellers are generally better educated and more aware of historical events," said IPS senior research fellow Leong Chan-Hoong, who led the study. Singaporeans tend to have less interest in historical events of a political nature, he added.

Other events that less than half of those polled knew about include the People's Action Party split in 1961, and opposition politician J.B. Jeyaretnam's victory in the Anson by-election in 1981.

"Political events aren't bread-and-butter issues which affect people's everyday lives... political events tend to have effects that are further away in the future, so people may think they are less important," said Dr Leong.

Other events given low billing were policies that were heavily debated when they were introduced.

They included the merger of Chinese language university Nantah and the University of Singapore in 1980, and the controversial scheme in 1984 to give graduate mothers incentives to have children, which was later shelved.

But 75 per cent of those polled were aware of the launch of the "Stop at Two" family planning campaign in 1970, which was reversed in the 1980s.

Historian Tan Tai Yong is concerned that the survey findings suggest many Singaporeans lack a good grasp of the nation's history.

"Having more knowledge of our past and understanding the meaning of historical events to our development as a society and country will become important as we mature as a nation," he said.