

No silver bullet to solve racism; community groups can step up to bring people together: Shanmugam

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SINGAPORE - There is no silver bullet for solving racism, but Singapore has had a fair amount of success over the years, Home Affairs and Law Minister K. Shanmugam said on Sunday (Sept 29).

"But we have not arrived at a post-race nirvana either," he added, saying examples from other countries show how quickly things could go south.

Speaking to around 170 participants at a dialogue on race relations, Mr Shanmugam stressed that achieving true racial harmony requires more than just government efforts.

Ground-up activities by volunteer and interfaith groups, and others, are crucial in promoting interaction between people of different races and religions, and help build bonds across Singapore's diverse communities, he said.

While recent surveys have shown that relations between people of different races are improving, the fault lines that exist in society will not disappear in the coming decades, he added.

He cited what first prime minister Lee Kuan Yew had said of these fault lines: "If we are aware of it, it is like living with an earthquake fault. We can build buildings which may be able to stand the shocks."

Mr Shanmugam said processes have to be fair for the public to have trust and confidence in institutions and in the system. "When people lose faith in the system, they will then seek to undermine or overthrow the entire system, even at considerable cost to themselves," he said.

Sunday's event was titled Regardless of Race - The Dialogue and organised by OnePeople.sg - the national body promoting racial harmony - and media organisation CNA.

Discrimination at the workplace, changing norms and political correctness were among the topics participants raised at the four-hour session at the Asian Civilisations Museum, which included a panel discussion.

In his speech, Mr Shanmugam noted that some people were unhappy when PAP leaders said that Singapore was not ready for an Indian PM. He pointed to a 2016 survey by CNA and the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) that showed most respondents prefer a prime minister of the same race as them.

He added that the Government has taken steps to remove race as a factor from election rally rhetoric, such as introducing GRCs. There are also clear rules that bar political parties from practising race-based politics to win votes.

The minister noted views that the model of identifying people as Chinese, Malay, Indian, or Others (CMIO) prevents integration, saying: "The CMIO classification - by being frank, honest, direct and recognising that we are different - has actually helped build trust."

He said the 2016 survey found 69 per cent felt the model helped build trust, and 71 per cent believed it helped safeguard minority rights.

Mr Shanmugam also spoke about striking a balance between individual freedoms and the power of the state. To ensure stability, the Government in the early years put in place frameworks and processes designed to secure racial harmony through "a fairly tough set of laws that structured how people dealt with race and religion".

These have had some success, he noted, pointing to a survey by the Institute of Policy Studies and OnePeople.sg done last year.

It found that more Singaporeans now have close friends of another race compared with five years ago, and are also more trusting of those from different races or religions. But the same survey also found a slight increase in racial minorities perceiving workplace discrimination, such as when applying for jobs or seeking a promotion.

More work must be done in this area, and issues around racial discrimination have to be discussed, said Mr Shanmugam.

But in a multiracial society, "free and open discourse is not magically going to lead to enlightenment and truth", the minister said, adding that it is often more likely to increase tensions.

He said that while people are free to express their opinions on race and religion, "there needs to be a certain discipline where you don't denigrate other people".

The minister also fielded questions on issues such as the role of race in politics.

On the recent "brownface" controversy, he said: "If they had done a video that expressed what they felt without having to attack the Chinese, there's nothing wrong."

He was referring to a parody rap video by YouTube artist Preeti Nair and her brother Subhas, who were given a conditional warning by police last month after the clip, aimed at calling out racism by Chinese Singaporeans, was itself deemed to be racist.

Mr Shanmugam said then that the Government had ordered the video to be taken down, as leaving it up would mean that other videos with racially offensive speech would also have to be permitted.

The siblings had made the video in response to a controversial ad promoting e-payments that showed Mediacorp actor Dennis Chew portraying four characters, including a Malay woman wearing a tudung and a man with visibly darker skin named K. Muthusamy.

On Sunday, Mr Shanmugam said of the video: "As a policymaker... I have to ask myself: If we let this go, then what are the consequences not for the Chinese... (but) for Malays and Indians?"

The blowback may not be direct, but over time the tone of the discourse in society would change if such videos are permitted, he added.

Mr Shanmugam was also asked why the rap video was the subject of a police investigation but not the advertisement that had triggered it.

He replied: "Whether (the ad was) in good or bad taste, that's a matter for advertising standards. As far as the police are concerned, it's a question of whether it crosses the line to become offensive in a way that can create more trouble eventually."

During the dialogue, clips of the rap video and its lyrics were screened, along with another video of Ms Nair, better known as Preeti, dressed in a cheongsam and riffing on Chinese New Year customs.

Mr Shanmugam asked the audience whether it would be similarly offensive if an Indian person were to dress up as a Chinese person for entertainment purposes, to which an audience member raised the factor of power dynamics between majority and minority races.

The minister responded that the Government cannot apply different rules around free speech to different groups.

"It cannot be when the Chinese do it, you intervene (but) only allow it when the Indians and Malays do it. Either we intervene for all, or we intervene for no one," he said.