

PR numbers down for first time in 20 years

Janice Heng

The Straits Times, 29 September 2011

The number of permanent residents (PRs) in Singapore has fallen for the first time in 20 years, according to latest government figures.

There were 532,000 PRs at the end of June, 9,000 fewer than last June.

One reason for the decline is Singapore's tighter immigration policy, said another government report that was also released yesterday.

But the pool of PRs is the only group to shrink.

Total population and the number of citizens and non-residents have all gone up this year.

The population has risen to 5.18 million. This is an increase of about 2 per cent from 5.08 million the year before.

Similarly, the number of citizens has gone up to 3.26 million. The increase is less than 1 per cent from a year ago, when it was 3.23 million.

The rise is proportionally steeper for non-residents - foreigners who are working, studying or living here but not granted PR status. Their numbers have risen nearly 7 per cent to 1.39 million. Previously, it was 1.31 million.

These figures were released by the Department of Statistics yesterday.

At the same time, the National Population and Talent Division (NPTD) issued a report, in which it attributed the fall in PR numbers to official policy.

'Due to the tightened immigration framework, the growth in our PR population has slowed significantly since 2010,' said the report.

PR growth peaked in 2009, when the number rose 11.5 per cent to 533,200, from 478,200.

Last year, the growth rate slowed significantly to just 1.5 per cent. This year, the number of PRs shrank 1.7 per cent.

In March last year, then Deputy Prime Minister Wong Kan Seng said in Parliament that Singapore would move to raise the quality of immigrants.

The NPTD publication suggests that new PRs and new citizens are more educated than their existing counterparts, although the bases for comparison differ.

Of new PRs aged 20 and older, 78.2 per cent have post-secondary education. This compares with 74 per cent of existing PRs who, however, are aged 15 and older.

Of new citizens aged 20 and older, 69.7 per cent have post-secondary education. Only 44.1 per cent of citizens aged 15 and older are similarly qualified.

MP for Moulmein-Kallang GRC Edwin Tong said the fall in PR numbers is not a surprise, given the tightened policy.

'The fall reflects greater reluctance to grant PR status, as compared with the case in previous years,' said Mr Tong.

He expects the PR population to dip further before levelling off in the next few years.

Dr Leong Chan Hoong, a research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies, agrees but adds that the reasons for the fall in PR numbers are not clear-cut.

'The fall could reflect a number of things,' he said.

More of them are taking up citizenship in recent years. At the same time, the number of newly minted PRs has been falling.

From 2001 to 2005, Singapore saw an average of 8,300 new citizens a year, many of whom would previously have been PRs.

But from 2006 to last year, the average number of new citizens a year is 17,950 - more than twice that of the preceding five years.

As for newly minted PRs, the tighter immigration policy has caused their numbers to drop to 29,265 last year.

This is almost half the 2009 figure of 59,460, which is already fewer than 79,167 in 2008.

But tighter immigration policy may not be the sole factor driving down the total number of PRs in Singapore.

An NPTD spokesman cited other factors, such as death, people losing their PR status and PRs being absent from Singapore for more than 12 months.

Dr Leong pointed out that the economic uncertainty of recent years might have caused companies to relocate - and PRs to move out with them.

'It's a matter of both the economic attractiveness of Singapore as well as the government policy,' he said.

In the expatriate community, anecdotal evidence suggests that it is harder to get PR status nowadays.

British junior college teacher Nicola Perry, 50, said a friend applied recently and was turned down. 'But she plans to try again.'

She added that foreigners do not seem to be discouraged by the Government's stricter turn. 'I think people are still quite keen to become PRs here.'