The Singapore Perspective; Racial and religious harmony a hard-fought state of affairs

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BUILDING a sense of national identity across heterogeneous racial groups has always been one of the foremost challenges for the Singapore nation-state.

At dark moments of the national history, racial tensions have threatened to split the country asunder, like 1969's racial riots that left four dead and 80 injured.

Over the past four decades, a combination of assimilation and legislation have prevented racial differences from stymying the formation of a national identity.

From independence in 1965, a central tenet of the fledgling state was that it would be a "Singaporean Singapore", with all four racial groups - Chinese, Malay, Indian and Eurasian - on equal footing.

Hence, there are four official languages in Singapore: English, Chinese, Malay and Tamil.

But in recognition of the Malays as the indigenous people of Singapore, Bahasa Melayu is Singapore's national language, and the language of the National Anthem.

The Housing Board's racial quotas prevented the formation of ethnic enclaves in public housing estates while presenting the opportunity for inter-racial socialising from a young age.

At the same time, strict laws in the Sedition Act make it a criminal offence "to promote feelings of ill will and hostility between different races or classes of the population of Singapore".

Those arrested under the Act in recent years include a couple who mailed pamphlets denigrating Islam and teens making racist comments on an Internet forum.

Similarly, the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act forbids religious leaders from "causing feelings of enmity, hatred, ill will or hostility between different religious groups".

Christian pastor Rony Tan was given a warning by the Internal Security Department in 2011 for making disparaging remarks about Buddhists and Taoists.

These strict laws have been criticised by some as creating an artificial sense of racial harmony.

Because the topic of race and religion has been made so taboo by legislation, honest conversation about enduring prejudices - and thus the possibility of real maturation into a post-racial society - is impossible, some say.

But the Singapore Government has defended its staunch legislation as necessary to ward off communal conflict.

Said former Home Affairs Minister S. Jayakumar in 2009: "I worry that an entire new generation which has never experienced communal conflict may believe that we have

nothing to worry about, that our present religious harmony is a natural state of affairs and will never be under threat.

"I worry that people don't realise how fragile racial and religious harmony is. It is foolhardy to take these things for granted and become complacent."

Despite the progress over the past four decades, there are issues that many say remain obstacles in the way of a "Singaporean Singapore".

Some decry the practice of stating race on identity cards, while others point to the lack of Malays in top positions in the Singapore Armed Forces.

The Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) conducted a wide-ranging survey of 4,000 Singaporeans recently on attitudes towards race and religion. Preliminary findings show that an overwhelming majority agree that hiring should be race-blind and that it is good for Singapore to be made up of people from different racial groups.

But at the same time, most of the respondents do not have close friends of different races.

Presenting the findings at a speech earlier this year, IPS director Janadas Devan said that they indicated that "we haven't arrived at some multi-cultural nirvana".

"Singaporeans, it would seem, are ideologically committed to diversity. But they do not always live out that ideology in their everyday lives."