

Racial and religious harmony 'remains strong'

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RACIST online postings about Malay void-deck weddings and Indians needing to be in separate train cabins hogged headlines last year.

But a study has found that racial and religious harmony remains strong, despite these incidents that threatened to damage Singapore's social fabric.

Fewer than 10 per cent of 4,131 Singaporeans surveyed said they had often been upset in the past two years by situations that could potentially lead to racial or religious tension.

These instances could range from being insulted for one's racial customs or religious beliefs, and being challenged about one's religion, to undesirable attempts to convert one to another religion.

No specific examples were put to the people interviewed for the study by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) and racial harmony group OnePeople.sg.

But two incidents stood out last year.

In March, Nanyang Polytechnic student Shimun Lai, upset at the congestion on an MRT train, wrote on her Facebook and Twitter accounts that Indians needed their own form of transport or to be in separate cabins from others. She also likened them to dogs.

In October, former NTUC staff member Amy Cheong made headlines for posting a racist rant on Facebook about Malay weddings.

But the study found that overall, six out of 10 Singaporeans agreed or strongly agreed that the country is free from both racial and religious tension.

Seven out of 10 agreed that they did not experience any religious or racial tension in their daily lives.

Principal investigator Mathew Mathews of the IPS, as well as OnePeople.sg, said the findings are a credit to government policies that foster harmony, such as ethnic housing quotas that ensure the proportion of residents in HDB blocks mirrors the national demographic. "It's nice to see these fruits of nation-building policies," Dr Mathews added.

Sociologist Tan Ern Ser, who was not involved in the study, said he believes most Singaporeans are not racists.

"I'm not suggesting that Singaporeans are entirely free of racial prejudice. But the Amy Cheong case shows there are strong social and legal sanctions against deviants," added the National University of Singapore don.