

Relook how to integrate new migrants to preserve multiracialism, cohesion in S'pore: President Halimah

Natasha Ann Zachariah

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SINGAPORE - Relentless efforts have been made to strengthen multiracialism and forge a common national identity in Singapore.

But existing structures must be examined to see how effective they still are in integrating new migrants, said President Halimah Yacob on Monday.

There is growing concern that not all those who are new to the city state consider it necessary to mix with Singaporeans, as they can manage quite well and are very comfortable in their own exclusive social circles, she noted.

In a speech at the Institute of Policy Studies' (IPS) 35th anniversary gala dinner held at The St Regis Singapore, Madam Halimah cautioned that the Republic needs to be cognisant of subtler threats to multiracialism that may chip away at cohesion and stability over time.

While newcomers to Singapore contribute strengths and expertise that enable the country to be economically competitive, living "cheek by jowl" on such a small island means it is crucial for them to be able to socially integrate into local communities, she said.

"They must recognise that they are part of our society too, and in Singapore, we interact with, and live among, people who are different from ourselves.

"Left unaddressed, sentiments among Singaporeans that foreign talents play by different rules, and stick only to their own, may fester."

She pointed out that in Singapore's early years, everyone was "practically in the same boat", and people of different races and religions came together to forge common hopes and dreams for the future. People accepted and celebrated their differences as a source of strength, and not a cause for division.

Today, there are real and ever-evolving threats to multiracialism, and identity politics is on the rise, she said. She said: "We often cite our origin as a migrant society to reassure ourselves that we have enough bandwidth to adjust to the challenges of sharing our small city with newcomers. That may be so, but we should not overlook the difference between the two periods of migration."

Before polarisation worsens and disaffection festers and affects social harmony, Singapore needs to consider what more can be done to improve the situation, and effectively engage foreign talent in schools, workplaces and community spaces, she added.

Besides multiracialism, Madam Halimah also spoke about meritocracy and stewardship – two other issues she had outlined when she was sworn in as president in 2017 and wanted to take stock of.

Her term ends on Sept 13, and she has said she will not be standing for re-election.

Her reflections on these issues follow IPS' conference held earlier in June, entitled "Revisitings", that looked at critical issues facing Singapore such as meritocracy, pluralism and the social compact.

On meritocracy, Madam Halimah said it has facilitated social mobility in Singapore, but the conditions that contributed to meritocracy can result in inequality.

"Significant hurdles", she said, remain for those who are not academically inclined or come from poor families with less resources.

Education is still the key to social mobility, she said. But, she added, Singapore must ensure that it continues to benefit everyone regardless of their family background, and that different types of abilities are recognised.

The path developed for those who have benefited from meritocracy should not stifle late bloomers, or those who excel in non-academic areas, she added.

She said: "Meritocracy will continue to function as a filter to identify those who are gifted early and reward them with opportunities, which is good for Singapore, as we cannot adopt an attitude of pulling everyone down to the same denominator. "Our approach must instead be to try and pull everyone up by providing them with the opportunities to do so."

She applauded efforts by employers to recognise and reward staff who may not have academic qualifications, but are skilled workers needed by the economy.

But she added that it remains a test to see if the labour market will be successful in levelling the playing field.

"The effectiveness of these efforts, that is, whether they will lead to good jobs, better pay and careers depends a lot on employers playing their part too. If (there is) little change and employers still seek academic qualifications, then the inequality will continue," she said.

Stewardship, or recognising that people are accountable to one another and to their future, was another value that she highlighted.

She said she was glad to have witnessed the strong spirit of care and togetherness among Singaporeans in the face of tough challenges, in particular, during the pandemic.

Many stepped up on their own by distributing groceries or cooked food, while organisations that were part of the Partners Engaging and Empowering Rough Sleepers (PEERS) Network and Safe Sound Sleeping Place (S3P) provided temporary shelter spaces during the Circuit Breaker period, she noted.

Looking ahead, she said the Forward Singapore exercise led by the country's fourth-generation political leaders to revisit the social compact is a way for Singaporeans to share their aspirations and build consensus on the country's priorities.

“The needs of Singaporeans will become more diverse as our population ages,” said Madam Halimah. “Younger generations of Singaporeans have different ideas of what they envision our society should be and want greater say in shaping Singapore’s future.”

During a dialogue moderated by IPS’ 11th S R Nathan Fellow and former interim CEO of SPH Media Trust Patrick Daniel, Madam Halimah answered questions on a range of issues – from her concerns for low-wage workers to causes she is passionate about.

She said that raising awareness about mental health, and helping people with disabilities, are two issues that are close to her heart.

Asked by Mr Daniel to give a “short answer” about her plans after she steps down from her role, she said, without missing a beat: “I’m retiring.”

However, she added, it would not be so easy for her to let go and “cut off completely” some of the causes she has been championing.

She said she would continue to do so in different capacities.

“If I can lend my voice, I will do that. Most certainly, in whichever way I can contribute, I will do so because I think everyone has a role to play in our society.”