

'Sayang' citizens, make them feel secure

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Dr Mathews advocates a better social safety net and clear housing and education policies that ensure reasonable standards for citizens. -- ST PHOTO: NG SOR LUAN

THE Government needs to sayang Singaporeans more, even as it keeps the country's doors open to new immigrants.

That is Dr Mathew Mathews' starting point. The Malay word 'sayang' means to 'love'. Otherwise, it is easy for resentment to build up among locals who may view new arrivals as rivals for scarce goods, such as jobs and homes.

Dr Mathews, a research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies, says the Norway tragedy shows that while governments may embrace multiculturalism and espouse a vision in which minority groups are equally treated, respected and accommodated, some segments of the population may not share that view.

'There may be a disconnect between what the government feels is important for the nation and how citizens view their lived-in realities,' he warns.

That may be true of Singapore, as it struggles to manage economic-driven needs to bring in foreigners and the unhappiness that creates among some locals.

Says Dr Mathews of new immigrants: 'While the Government wants to accommodate them and accepts that it will take considerable time for them to integrate into local social life, segments of local-born Singaporeans do not share these beliefs, partly because new immigrants pose a threat to their economic livelihood.'

'It is important to help this group of Singaporeans feel secure, before trying to engage them to become more accepting of new immigrants and to respect their cultural differences.'

On how this should take place, he advocates a better social safety net, possibly with some form of unemployment insurance that allows Singaporeans to 'maintain some dignity when they lose their jobs'.

There should also be 'clear housing and education policies' that ensure reasonable standards for Singaporeans, who will then feel assured that policies will always take into consideration their needs.

Adds Dr Mathews: 'The attack reminds us that if the source of the resentment towards a cultural group is not properly checked, it will have disastrous consequences - someone or some groups are likely to feel they have to engage in very dramatic acts to get the needed attention to resolve the problem.'

This is but one challenge that lies ahead for Singapore's multiculturalist framework.

Compared with the models adopted by most Western countries, where discussions about the rights of various groups often evolve organically as minorities push for recognition of their interests, Singapore has what Dr Mathews calls a 'top-down' approach.

It is the Government that sets the agenda and the parameters to determine what should - or should not - be the rights of the various groups, he observes.

'Our model is not one where we ask everybody to air his personal cultural preferences; rather the idea is that we already have a system that's harmoniously working and the minority is supposed to find its way and accommodate within that paradigm.'

For instance, the determination that Tamil is the official mother tongue for Indians studying in schools here, or the establishment of self-help bodies for the four main ethnic groups.

This state-led approach has worked for Singapore, but looking ahead, the 39-year-old believes there will be messier negotiations as more immigrants enter the country, and more inter-marriages take place.

'I think we are increasingly recognising the fact that culture has broadened beyond just four official categories.

'We're recognising that there are many, many groups and we accept the fact that they have a right to practise their own cultural practices, they would like to use their own language, assert their uniqueness.'

Singapore, he says, is in a very interesting time of flux.