

Singapore GE2020: Race - New views and conversations on an age-old societal divide

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Singapore's vision of a multiracial society is enshrined in its national pledge: "One united people regardless of race, language, or religion."

Even though the Republic has made significant progress in realising this vision, the recent general election put the spotlight on long-held assumptions about race and language in politics and campaigning. Younger voters also signalled greater openness towards discussing race issues, in a way that generations before them would have considered taboo or polarising.

In a country that has four official languages, eyebrows were raised when the Workers' Party (WP) did not send a representative to a televised live debate in Mandarin - given that former party chief Low Thia Khiang was known for his fiery Teochew speeches that had attracted its traditional Chinese base in the first place.

The WP, Singapore Democratic Party, National Solidarity Party and Reform Party also did not send Tamil-speaking representatives to the party political broadcasts, in part due to the general lack of new Tamil candidates and speakers fluent in that language.

WP candidate and now Sengkang GRC MP Raeesah Khan came under investigation after two police reports were made against her for Facebook posts in which she suggested that the authorities discriminated against minorities. Her case drew the ire of younger voters who felt she was unfairly targeted.

The WP, led by Mr Pritam Singh, picked up a second GRC in Sengkang, while a minority-heavy WP slate in Aljunied did not prevent it from scoring a hat-trick, after having wrested the constituency from the People's Action Party (PAP) in 2011.

Meanwhile, in Jurong GRC, Senior Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam's team won a thumping 75 per cent of the vote - the highest GRC vote share for the PAP this year - leading some to ask why the popular politician had not been considered as a potential prime minister.

The issue of race in this GE even led to a police report being filed against Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat for remarks he made last year, that Singapore was not yet ready for a non-Chinese prime minister. The police later said it had consulted the Attorney-General's Chambers, which advised that no offence had been made.

THE GENERATION GAP

Singapore has seen race riots in the past - from the Maria Hertogh riots in 1950, to clashes between Chinese and Malays in the 1960s.

For decades, the official narrative has been: Race relations are highly sensitive and must be carefully discussed in public. Preserving racial harmony is essential to Singapore's stability, which in turn ensures investor confidence and creates jobs.

"Whether (the instability) came from communalism, from the left or any sort of instability, we cut down on that in order to achieve certain goals for society," explained Law and Home Affairs Minister K. Shanmugam at a dialogue on race last year.

While many Singaporeans still tiptoe around discussing race publicly, surveys have shown that young Singaporeans are more willing to have difficult conversations on this issue.

Acknowledging this, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said in an online rally on July 8 that while the country has emphasised racial tolerance and harmony so far, it can do better and go beyond that.

"But we should do it carefully, and we should discuss between the young ones and the older ones so that we gradually get a meeting of minds," he said.

Analysts say generational differences may have to do more with approach than substance.

"All understand the importance of healthy inter-racial and inter-religious ties in Singapore. Where they differ is on how to achieve such outcomes," says Singapore Management University law don Eugene Tan.

He says the older generation, having experienced the race riots in the 1960s, regard race and religion as highly sensitive topics unsuitable for "mass consumption".

"On the other hand, younger Singaporeans who live in relative calm and stability feel such issues should be more openly discussed, because that is how better understanding can come about."

National University of Singapore sociologist Tan Ern Ser says the divide also has to do with education.

He thinks that because the younger generation are more likely to have attained at least post-secondary or tertiary education, they would have encountered broader perspectives on race issues.

"They would be more open to recognise the presence of racial prejudice, discrimination and inequality in Singapore," he says.

A QUESTION OF LANGUAGE

Political parties paid varying degrees of attention to language representation during the hustings.

Explaining the PAP's approach, Mr Shanmugam had said it takes all four official languages "very seriously". While not all parties fielded Tamil speakers, the PAP did so to show the Tamil population that they are respected and valued, he added.

But analysts do not think language was a deal-breaker.

Institute of Policy Studies senior research fellow Mathew Mathews says that while some do want official speeches to be made in a language they are familiar with, they may overlook this if they have other concerns, such as having more opposition voices in Parliament.

Also, he says, more is expected of the incumbent than the opposition. "The status of the four official languages is something that the Government has tried to ensure since independence.

"If the PAP in its campaign did not show its support by ensuring that it had speakers of all languages, there might have been much more unhappiness."

Dr Nazry Bahrawi, a senior lecturer at the Singapore University of Technology and Design, says Chinese Singaporeans seem to be more forgiving of the candidates' less powerful command of Mandarin, perhaps because many themselves struggle with it.

"So when Mr Pritam Singh apologised to voters for not fielding a candidate for the Chinese debate because 'the quality of the proficiency required to participate in a live debate is of a higher order', this probably resonated with voters".

But expectations were different for the Malay candidates, he says, noting that WP candidate Fadli Fawzi was widely praised by the Malay community when he read a pantun (Malay poem) on Nomination Day, while linguistic faux pas from PAP candidates like Wan Rizal Wan Zakariah were turned into memes on social media.

TOWARDS RACE-BLIND POLITICS?

For some, the strong showing by ethnic minority candidates in the election is proof that Singaporeans look beyond race when casting their vote.

Pointing to the minority-dominant Aljunied team, IPS' Dr Mathews says that with its members having served in Parliament for a while, voters may identify more with the opposition platform that they run on than their race, having seen them debate policies in Parliament.

"Voters seem to appreciate a diversity of political opinions rather than a diversity of ethnicity, which could be superficial. This suggests a level of maturity on the part of Singaporean voters," says Dr Nazry.

Dr Walid Jumblatt Abdullah, assistant professor at Nanyang Technological University's School of Social Sciences, says Mr Singh and Mr Tharman champion issues at the national level and rarely ever talk about "Indian issues".

"That is perhaps why they are viewed favourably across the board.

"This does not mean that race completely does not matter in voting - but it does call into question how much," he says.

What about the incident involving 26-year-old Ms Raeesah?

Dr Nazry thinks the issue was not race per se, but the PAP's response.

"We need to consider that she was WP's youngest fielded candidate.

"The police reports that were filed against her angered some voters not because of her critique of Singapore's race relations, but because they were incensed by what they considered gutter politics," he says.

He adds that some voters may have swung to the WP in Sengkang because they perceived that she was being "bullied".

RE-IMAGINING RACE CONVERSATIONS

Dr Walid says one must not automatically assume that conversations on race are divisive.

"The Government would do well to understand that people do want to engage in such conversations," he says.

"When people cross the line a little, the first instinct should be not a tough sanction, but rather, to advise and generate more conversation as to why a particular action or speech is wrong."

Dr Nazry notes that younger Singaporeans, in particular, did not like how the Government came down hard on those who asked difficult questions - rightly or wrongly - about whether certain races or groups of people are treated differently under the law.

He referred to local YouTuber Preeti Nair, known as Preetipls, and her brother Subhas, who last year were given a conditional warning by the police over their controversial online rap video, made in response to a "brownface" advertisement featuring Mediacorp actor and DJ Dennis Chew.

As for Ms Raeesah, the older of her two Facebook posts was written two years ago, leading some to question the close timing of the police report to Polling Day.

"The case of Raeesah Khan is instructive here, but so too were the examples of Preetipls and Subhas. Going hard on these people sends the message that the 'victimised' are to be punished further," Dr Nazry says.

Schools are a good starting point to evolve the conversation on race, says SMU's Professor Tan, but teachers must be adequately trained to handle such conversations.

During the debate on the ministries' budgets in March this year, it was announced that secondary schools would engage students on contemporary issues - including race and religion - fortnightly.

Education Minister Ong Ye Kung said on Thursday that the Ministry of Education is training more teachers who can specialise in this and can facilitate such discussions.

Prof Tan also asks whether the GRC system ought to be reviewed. Set up in 1988, GRCs seek to ensure that the minority races in Singapore will always be represented in Parliament. At least one of the MPs in the group representing a GRC must belong to a minority racial community.

"But the notion of a hyphenated-Singaporean is increasingly seen as outmoded, especially for younger voters," he explains, referring to the country's longstanding Chinese-Malay-Indian-Others framework, which officially classifies people according to their ethnicity.

As PM Lee had said in his online rally, it would not be realistic to treat one another in a completely colour-blind way - what some Western academics term a "post-racial" society.

At the same time, Singaporeans are still reminded of their racial identity in their daily interactions, from the imprint on their identity cards to job applications.

It is in this context that Singapore could aspire towards a "post-racialised" - rather than post-racial - society, says Dr Nazry.

"It means that we should not make race our primary identity marker that dictates the way policies and laws are made. It also means we must tackle racial discrimination."

Says Prof Tan: "We may never attain a post-racial society, but that should not stop Singapore and Singaporeans from coming as close as possible to nurturing a state of affairs where conversations on race and religion are no longer taboo and seen as divisive."