

## **Singapore Perspectives conference: S'pore not beset by political polarisation, but class, culture divides a concern: Panellists**

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Studies may indicate low levels of political polarisation in Singapore, but the twin threats of class and cultural divides remain - and to tackle these deepening fault lines, the country may have to adopt a "communitarian" model of democracy unique to it.

Panellists at the last of a series of nine virtual forums at the Singapore Perspectives conference organised by the Institute of Policy Studies came to this conclusion on Tuesday (Jan 19), as they discussed the future of Singapore politics against the backdrop of rising populism and polarisation around the world.

Such polarisation, however, does not seem to be the case in Singapore, and with little evidence of any change over time or over generations, said Dr Roberto Foa, co-director of Cambridge University's Centre for the Future of Democracy.

He pointed to a 2020 study by global pollster YouGov, showing slightly over 10 per cent of Singaporeans saying that they would not be close to anyone with a differing political ideology.

During the session, which was moderated by Banyan Tree Holdings executive chairman Ho Kwon Ping, Dr Foa also presented new, previously unpublished raw data on the muted presence of identity politics in Singapore.

Only New Zealand registered a lower percentage of agreeable responses to the question on whether one would reject someone of a different religion as a neighbour; Sweden and Brazil registered a lower percentage for a similar question on whether one would reject a neighbour of a different race.

However, a high proportion of Singaporeans - over 70 per cent - expressed support for strong limits to reduce immigration, placing the Republic in the top five below only Malaysia, Indonesia, Philippines and Taiwan.

Dr Foa, who is also director of the YouGov-Cambridge Centre for Public Opinion Research, noted that this sentiment was largely driven by economic concerns over jobs, inequality and the cost of living.

Dr Terence Chong, deputy director at the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, later noted the presence of an entrenched class divide in Singapore society.

"People from different social classes are mixing less with each other," he said. "It becomes easier to view each other unsympathetically, and if you are at the lower end of the economic ladder, it becomes easier to believe that those at the top are just not interested in your well-being."

He added that studies have shown that children from middle- and upper-class families are ensured a headstart in life while their peers from working-class families play catch-up.

"Meritocracy also has psychological consequences, one of which is that one has to know one's place in society. After all, if one has a mediocre job, or draws an unattractive salary, the unavoidable inference is that one either lacks the merit, or is not hardworking enough," he said.

"It is not hard to imagine how such frustrations can fester among working and lower-middle class communities, making them vulnerable to populism, and the politics of resentment."

Clashes of cultural values are also on the rise here, said Dr Chong, pointing to what he described as a new wave of progressive values such as woke culture, cancel culture, cultural appropriation and heightened sensitivity to racial stereotyping and discrimination.

"Much will depend on whether we are able to put aside the things which divide us and focus on the things that we share in common," said Dr Chong.

Ms Zuraidah Ibrahim, deputy executive editor of Hong Kong's South China Morning Post, warned against the framing of such issues using terms like "politics of resentment".

"We risk delegitimising what could be genuine sentiments of grievances faced by communities that are at a great disadvantage compared to the rest of us," she said. "We have to be careful about over-generalising certain global trends and superimposing them on the Singapore situation ."

Mr Aaron Maniam, deputy secretary at the Ministry of Communications and Information, outlined a proposal for a Singaporean-style democracy that could help mitigate further divisions in society.

He suggested a "communitarian" model drawing on complex identities from different sources, mixed with more traditional democratic notions of protecting individual rights.

Such a system would mean that aside from the key act of voting, there would be, on a daily, regular basis, a participative, collective learning approach to living.

This, he said, "would allow us to have a space within which disagreements can actually coexist with one another, even while we commit to a larger national project that is the future of the space and country that we all live in".

Mr Maniam was later asked by an audience member how opposing values such as around lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) rights could coexist in such a democratic ideal.

"It's very easy to hate a category. It's much harder to hate a human being, when they're in front of you and you've grown up with them, and there is that sense of personal interaction and encounter," he replied. "It needs to start with the personal... not just waiting for the system to transform."