

Singaporeans more open-minded now

Study also finds that Chinese and Christians are now more accepting of other races, faiths

Feng Zengkun

The Straits Times, 31 March 2012

A new study claims that Chinese people and Christians in Singapore have become more likely to accept other faiths and races in the past four years.

Singaporeans in general are now more likely to be open-minded, said Dr Norman Vasu and research fellow Yolanda Chin from the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies at Nanyang Technological University (NTU), who led the project.

The survey was conducted last year before the recent spate of online racist posts. The researchers interviewed 2,100 citizens and compared the findings to an identical survey they conducted in 2007.

They singled out Malay, Christian and Chinese respondents for analysis in the latest survey because of several high-profile cases of discrimination in the past four years. In 2010, a Christian pastor was caught on video disparaging Buddhism and Taoism.

A year later, former prime minister Lee Kuan Yew sparked a controversy by asserting that Singapore could integrate all races and religions except Islam. He said he 'stood corrected' for the statement after community leaders refuted it.

The racial and religious views of the Chinese interviewees were important because the community forms an overwhelming majority, said the researchers.

They found that the probability of a Chinese Singaporean or Christian accepting people of other races and religions as teachers, neighbours, bosses and political leaders rose from 40 per cent to 70 per cent.

Malay interviewees remained as likely to be open-minded - the probability was 70 per cent in both surveys.

The interviewees in the surveys were Chinese, Malays and Indians; and there were Hindus, Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, Taoists and free-thinkers among them.

The respondents were asked in face-to-face interviews how they felt about people of the three races and various beliefs. The researchers used statistical tools to account for the influence of education, age, housing type and social circles on the answers.

Dr Vasu acknowledged that the positive findings could be due to political correctness but sociologists said Singaporeans have become more bold and honest due to national discussions on race and faith.

Dr Mathew Mathews, a research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), cited the national soul-searching in 2009 after a group of Christians took over leadership of the secular Association of Women for Action and Research (Aware).

Later that year, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong devoted a substantial part of his National Day Rally speech to religious tolerance.

The sociologists credited the influx of foreigners and economic downturn in recent years for the improved relations.

'During the downturn, a lot of religions were helping people of other faiths. By nurturing others regardless of faith, you build acceptance,' said Associate Professor Kirpal Singh from the Singapore Management University's School of Social Sciences.

More expatriates of different races have also led to greater diversity within religious institutions. 'Direct experience with people of other races helps with acceptance,' Prof Singh added.

Dr Gillian Koh, an IPS senior research fellow, said new government initiatives have built stronger bridges between different communities.

In 2006, a year after the London terrorist bombings, PM Lee launched the Community Engagement Programme, a network of community leaders who organise events to help prevent racial and religious conflicts.

But some feel the NTU report may have missed its mark.

The survey defines an inclusive Singaporean as someone who is willing to 'interact' with people of other races and religions.

'But some of the questions do not measure interaction directly. For example, one question asks whether you would mind having a neighbour of a different race or religion. But you may have such neighbours and not interact with them at all,' said Assistant Professor Daniel Goh from the National University of Singapore's Department of Sociology.

The conflation of Malays and Muslims within the survey is another problem, some noted. They said the researchers' analysis should have been focused on Muslims and not Malays as Mr Lee Kuan Yew's controversial statement was about the religion and not the race.

National University of Singapore sociologist Tan Ern Ser added: 'While we should continue to be vigilant on ethnic and religious issues, my own sense is that the relatively more troubling spots are in terms of class and nationality.'

Prof Singh noted that warm relations could easily sour in the wake of sudden events. 'After the Sept 11 terrorist attacks, Americans, even the open-minded ones, changed their views about Muslims around them,' he said.

But all the sociologists said the report reflected well on Singapore, especially after the recent cases of young adults posting racist comments online.

'Very often, the moral outrage over high-profile cases distracts us from the everyday and routine interactions between ethnic groups and faiths,' said Dr Terence Chong, a sociologist at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.

'This study shows our multicultural ties have been resilient in the past four years.'