

Singapore's CMIO race model an administrative tool to manage policies: IPS panel

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SINGAPORE - Singapore's Chinese-Malay-Indian-Others (CMIO) system of ethnic classification is essentially an administrative tool for the Government to manage policies around race, which remains a key element of people's identity.

One example is the Ethnic Integration Policy (EIP), which sets quotas for public housing flats owned by each racial group in a block or precinct. It still exists because the risk of enclaves forming remains, and society here has yet to evolve into a more mature, "utopian" state where differences do not matter.

These were points made by a panel on Monday (Jan 24) at the annual Singapore Perspectives conference organised by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), held at Marina Bay Sands Expo and Convention Centre and streamed online.

Dr Kalpana Vignehsa, a research fellow at the think-tank, had asked from the floor if Singapore was ready to move past labels such as CMIO "to accept that in real life, identities are a lot more porous and fluid".

Panellist and deputy secretary at the Prime Minister's Office Strategy Group, Ms Cindy Khoo, said the Government was under no illusion of trying to categorise people into neat boxes, pointing to inter-ethnic mixing and the example of a Chinese person being adopted by a Malay family and raised as a Malay.

"But... for a sizeable proportion of people, they still align into those boxes," Ms Khoo said. "And unfortunately, to be totally realistic, race is a very important identifier when people form their sense of identity."

She added that the Government was both cautious and fearful about people drawing differences along ethnic lines and the societal problems that could arise, such as the racial riots in Singapore's history.

"We want to be able to manage this, so having (CMIO) labels allows us to administer policies... It's a piece of information that allows you to take action."

How this stance evolves comes down to the extent to which the Government needs to keep intervening and managing such issues. And the day when people no longer use race or skin colour as an identifier is the day when policies that differentiate by race would be meaningless, said Ms Khoo.

The EIP, for example, will become less and less relevant as people naturally choose to live in diverse neighbourhoods, she added.

"Today, the fact that there are still a lot of applications that potentially could be rejected - because they have met the quota - means that there is still a tendency for people to want to congregate in a way that we think doesn't promote cohesion and a shared lived experience in a neighbourhood," said Ms Khoo.

"This is one situation where the policy is responding to what society requires."

Speaking at a dialogue later, Minister for National Development Desmond Lee acknowledged that the EIP has "rough edges" but stressed its importance in enabling estates "to be microcosms reflective of the ethnic diversity of Singapore".

"This is important because if you don't live together, don't meet each other in the lift, in the corridor, in the markets and the shops; if you see fewer of Singaporeans of different ethnic communities, then I think your lived experience will inform a lot of thoughts, emotions, and may feed into prejudices. Because we caricature what we do not see, who we do not meet," he said.

"So physical spaces are important, and the policies that foster the diversity in those physical spaces are important."

At the earlier panel, moderator and IPS deputy director of research Gillian Koh also pointed out the contrast with the private sector, where there is "a proclivity to cluster" among certain groups.

The other panellist, Associate Professor of Sociology Ho Kong Chong from the National University of Singapore, said the way forward was perhaps not so much focused on labels such as CMIO but the idea that "citizenship needs to be experienced in order to be real".

"How do we develop a strategy that both insists on common things that we agree on moving forward with regard to identity and belonging, but at the same time be flexible enough because our society, our city is changing so fast?" he said.

"I think that is the challenge."