

The race issue: How far has Singapore come?

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The date is July 21, 1964 - barely a year since Singapore became part of the Federation of Malaysia.

A procession is held to mark Prophet Muhammad's birthday, starting at the Padang and ending in Geylang.

But the festive occasion will soon turn sour. A scuffle breaks out between Malays in the procession and Chinese bystanders, escalating into nationwide violence. By the time a 13-day curfew was lifted, 23 people died and 454 people were injured. Singapore would later learn it was an orchestrated attempt to stir up racial tensions.

Two months later, another riot breaks out after rumours spread that a Malay trishaw rider was killed by a group of Chinese men, with 13 dead and 106 injured.

Fast forward to today and modern, independent Singapore is celebrating 50 years of prosperity and relative peace. Now, July 21 is notable as Racial Harmony Day, when young generations of Singaporeans go to school decked in racial garb and are taught the virtues of respecting diversity.

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said last month that no matter the progress over the last 50 years, it would be "complacent and dangerous" to be lulled into a false sense of safety that race and religion matters are no more the divisive issues they once were.

The Constitution of a newly independent Singapore had set the tone of what was to come. Article 152 says it is the responsibility of the Government "constantly to care for the interests of the racial and religious minorities in Singapore".

It also recognises the "special position of the Malays, who are the indigenous people of Singapore".

Founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew had, in 1965, promised to build a multiracial nation. He said on Aug 9 that year: "This is not a Malay nation; this is not a Chinese nation; this is not an Indian nation. Everyone will have his place, equal: language, culture, religion."

He also rebuffed language agitators who were lobbying for a constitutional guarantee of the status of the Chinese language in spite of assurances that all four major languages are official and equal.

But developments in neighbouring countries continued to have some effect in the early years. When severe rioting between Malays and Chinese broke out in Kuala Lumpur on May 13, 1969, tensions spilled over, but the authorities acted quickly to contain the disturbance.

Policies bear fruit

Various policies implemented over the years have enabled the peaceful co-existence that Singapore has come to be known for today - the Republic emerged top out of 142 countries in the annual Legatum Prosperity Index, released last week, for tolerance of ethnic minorities.

A bilingual policy was started in 1966, with English becoming the lingua franca. And in 1970, the Presidential Council for Minority Rights was established to scrutinise laws, so as to ensure there is no discrimination against any ethnic minority groups.

To ensure adequate minority representation in Parliament, the Group Representation Constituency (GRC) system has been in place since 1988. It requires political parties to field at least one minority candidate in each GRC team.

The Housing Board in 1989 also introduced the Ethnic Integration Policy that mandates a quota for minorities in HDB estates, so as to prevent racial enclaves from forming.

Although economic growth had benefited Singaporeans from all communities, by the 1980s, Malay community leaders were concerned that theirs was lagging behind in education. This led to the formation of self-help group Mendaki to help lift the community.

In the 1990s, other ethnic-based self-help groups were set up - the Singapore Indian Development Association (Sinda), the Chinese Development Assistance Council (CDAC) and the Eurasian Association. There have been questions over the need for such self-help groups, but the Government has said it would not be a good idea for them to merge or operate under one umbrella. This is because certain community problems can be dealt with only by leaders from those communities.

It is still a work in progress - there are concerns that while the Malay community has made many strides, they still lag behind in areas like education and employability. To its credit, Mendaki has made much progress in helping the community through programmes catering to lower-income groups.

The ethnic-centric focus of the four self-help groups, however, has not stopped them from joining forces to help the wider community. They recently said they will set up a joint venture to run 30 school-based student care centres to better support the holistic development of children, especially those from less-advantaged backgrounds, by tapping the resources of all the groups.

This, in a sense, is a microcosm of Singapore, which pledges to be colour-blind in its meritocracy and economic growth by providing opportunities for all. And for the most part, Singaporeans have been happy to share the fruits of the Government's economic growth policies and not rock the boat.

A study on race by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) and OnePeople.Sg in 2013 found that more than 90 per cent of the 2,000-plus Chinese respondents said they were comfortable with Indians and Malays as neighbours and employees - and about 85 per cent as close friends.

Pushback by minorities

Yet as the country becomes more affluent and the racial wounds of decades past are increasingly forgotten, some are voicing dissatisfaction at other racial groups, and their views are amplified by social media.

This has also generated a pushback, notably from minorities. Independent scholar and activist Sangeetha Thanapal has used the term "Chinese privilege" to refer to behaviour of Singaporean Chinese, which she says is akin to "White privilege" in Western countries - not being able to see things from the viewpoint of others who are not in the majority.

Sociologist Mathew Mathews of the IPS also observes in a recent commentary that some minority Singaporeans are not comfortable in their own skin. He says: "They are more likely to be sensitive to the fact that they have physical attributes and cultural practices which differ from those of the majority. Minorities often consider how those of the majority view them."

And time and again, cracks have appeared. At least 16 people have been investigated, either under the Sedition Act or the Penal Code, for race or religion-related offences in the last 10 years.

This, after the section of the Sedition Act making it an offence "to promote feelings of ill-will and hostility between different races or classes of the population" had been dormant from its inception in 1948 until 2005.

In 2012, former National Trades Union Congress employee Amy Cheong was sacked for her online diatribe against Malay weddings in void decks, and she fled to Australia after the resulting furore.

Some criticised the authorities' reaction in these cases as heavy-handed, but officials have always been mindful that isolated incidents can easily get out of control.

And two years ago, they did: the death of a foreign worker run over by a bus in Little India sparked a riot by about 300 people. In the process, 54 officers and eight civilians were hurt, 23 emergency vehicles were damaged, including five that were torched. It was contained within a few hours, and while the riot was not linked to race, some of the ensuing online rhetoric vilified the South Asian rioters on account of their race.

Just last week, a Facebook post that was critical about the Malay language drew a stern rebuke from Pasir Ris-Punggol GRC MP Zainal Sapari, who wrote: "In today's age, racism is beyond basic comprehension and should not be allowed to take root in our society."

That these sentiments are hidden under the surface of a seemingly cohesive society is a sign that Singapore, despite the progress made, is "nowhere near being a race-blind society", says law don Eugene Tan, who has done research on ethnic relations here.

"Bubbling beneath our civil veneer, there are prejudices and stereotypes which occasionally surface to trigger bouts of soul-searching," adds ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute sociologist Terence Chong.

Starkly, the 2013 study also made headlines for the finding that more than one in two Singaporeans did not have a close friend of another race.

"We have sound principles in place but practice and realisation is the real challenge in some domains more than others," says social anthropologist Lai Ah Eng of the National University of Singapore.

"Some people and groups are downright ignorant and biased, others merely tolerate, but others are proactive in understanding and being appreciative."

As Singapore moves forward, it should seek to reduce the number of those in the first category and expand on those in the last.