The threads that bind and threats that will tear S'pore apart

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EXPECT the topic of social cohesion to be a key theme at tomorrow's National Day Rally, say analysts.

The situation is complex and complicating it further is the growing pool of foreigners and new residents.

Non-Singaporeans make up more than one-third of the population of 4.8 million.

They cited three reasons:

One, the economic crisis has led to a chorus of complaints about foreigners taking jobs away from Singaporeans.

Two, overseas events, like the violent clashes in Xinjiang province last month between Uighurs and Han Chinese, have brought home the reality of how ethnic tensions, when allowed to simmer, can rip apart a community.

Three, at least four Cabinet ministers - including Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong - have made the need for Singaporeans to unite across racial and religious lines a key theme in their National Day speeches to their constituents this month.

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong will probably spend some time on the need to be a unified society, as well as to highlight trends and threats that could rip the society apart.

The worrying issue appears to preoccupy him, as he said in his National Day message last week: 'Unity is key to our success in many fields. We must work hard to strengthen it, and to bridge potential divides within our society, be it between Singaporeans and new arrivals, between rich and poor, or most fundamental of all, between the different races and religions.'

Mayor Zainudin Nordin, of Central Singapore District, points out that the issue is not new but needs to be raised for Singaporeans to reflect on as the society here becomes more diverse.

'The issue of social cohesion deals with key values we have had since Independence and are embodied in our Pledge,' he says, referring to the Pledge's call to be 'one united people, regardless of race, language or religion'.

From time to time, these bonds that bind Singaporeans have been put to the test.

For instance, the 2001 discovery that members of regional terror group Jemaah Islamiah were planning bomb attacks here led to some Muslim Singaporeans being viewed with suspicion.

Most recently, President S R Nathan in his address to Parliament in May highlighted the need for all groups to practise tolerance, restraint and mutual respect in order to live peacefully in a multi-racial, multi-religious society.

He cited the April takeover of women's group Aware by a group of Christian women who felt the civil society organisation was moving in a pro-gay direction.

There was heated public debate on religion, secularism and homosexuality. The old guard later regained control of Aware.

The incident, however, shows that secular groups can also be a potentially divisive force, says Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) research fellow Azhar Ghani.

The Government has been nimble in spotting the danger, he adds, pointing to the warning in the President's Address.

President Nathan had, on the need for restraint, said: 'This applies not just to religious groups venturing into the secular domain, but also to secular groups which want to strongly push their views and change our social norms.'

As Singaporeans become more cosmopolitan, they tend to take the country's social cohesion for granted, says Mr Azhar.

New national challenges, such as an ageing population, declining birth rates and rising costs, top their agenda.

But in matters like race and religion, the reality is that people react at the gut level, he points out.

He foresees Mr Lee reiterating existing policy positions on race and religion, reminding people that Singapore is a secular state and reassuring religious groups that no amount of lobbying will change the markers of Singapore's social norms.

But the situation is complex and complicating it further is the growing pool of foreigners and new residents.

Non-Singaporeans make up more than one-third of the population of 4.8 million.

They add up to 1.68 million, of whom 70 per cent are foreigners working here. The rest are permanent residents.

Government leaders have repeatedly explained the need for them, saying multinational companies need skilled workers from all over the world and that foreigners help create jobs for citizens.

The latest effort was two days ago, when Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew bluntly said that 'without the immigrants, Singapore will decline'.

However, they can cause cracks in society.

One key challenge is the integration of non-English-speaking foreigners into Singapore society, says Ms Yolanda Chin, an associate research fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies.

Many of them work in the services sector, come from China and form a significant number of new citizens.

Non-Mandarin-speaking Singaporeans feel these newcomers 'are not putting in enough effort to communicate in our lingua franca, English', she notes.

IPS research fellow Leong Chan Hoong feels the rally could be 'a good point to discuss public issues like integration, which requires political consensus to proceed further'.

In previous rallies, PM Lee had spoken about the need for immigration to mitigate the effects of an ageing population and a low birth rate.

Dr Leong says the Government now faces the uphill task of striking a balance 'between promoting Singapore as a welcoming and inclusive global city for talent from the world over, and yet one that accords a special place for citizens and is committed to nation-building'.

It therefore has to focus on trying to dispel any perceived sense of relative deprivation between foreigners and local-born Singaporeans, he adds.

The rally will be a key opportunity for the Government to assure both groups that together they deserve - and have - a place in the Singapore sun

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