# 52 years of multiracialism — where does S'pore go from here?

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SINGAPORE — Few countries in the world have a history so deeply intertwined with racial and religious issues as Singapore.

The very birth of the Republic in 1965 was precipitated by two series of deadly racial riots the previous year, involving clashes between Malays and Chinese on the island when it was part of the Federation of Malaysia. Dozens were killed, with scores of others injured in these fights.

Barely four years after Singapore was separated from Malaysia, communal riots broke out again in 1969 and lasted for a week, killing four people and injuring 80 others. Within a span of 19 years, Singapore had witnessed no less than four serious communal clashes, including the 1950 Maria Hertogh riots which erupted following a court ruling that gave the custody of a girl to her biological Dutch Catholic parents after she had been raised as a Muslim for eight years.

These tumultuous events bookending Singapore's early years of independence left an indelible mark on the national psyche. For generations, Singaporeans grew up with constant reminders of the fragility of the racial and religious harmony which the country enjoys, and the importance of preserving it. Race and religion were considered taboo topics, and strict laws such as the Sedition Act and the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act were put in place as the Government went to great lengths to prevent history from repeating itself.

As Singapore marks its 52nd birthday today, it has much to celebrate — including the multiracialism and multiculturalism that have made the Republic the envy of other countries where racial strife and tensions continue to tear society apart.

But as Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong reminded last month, it took a lot of work by Singaporeans to get here. In a Facebook post on the eve of Racial Harmony Day — which falls on July 21, to mark the date of the first series of riots in 1964 — Mr Lee described Singapore as a "rare and precious example of (a) multiracial, multi-lingual and multi-religious society where people live harmoniously together".

"This is not by chance. The Government and the different communities worked hard together to make this happen," he stressed.

Singapore has come a long way in achieving and maintaining its racial and religious harmony, but not without challenges and flashpoints which have occurred from time to time, including the 2013 Little India riots which involved hundreds of foreign workers.

After more than half a century of nation-building, some have argued that Singapore should strive towards becoming a "race-blind" society, and roll back some of the race-based policies such as the Group Representation Constituency system, as well as the Housing and Development Board's ethnic integration programme.

But as observers and community leaders told TODAY, the Republic is still far from "having arrived" as a society where race and religion are no longer fault lines. Dr Alexius Pereira, first vice-president of the Eurasian Association, called race blindness a "false expectation", while Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) senior research fellow Mathew Mathews said it was "probably naive" to believe that Singapore can "completely remove race as a marker of our identity".

Mr Lee said as much in November last year at the parliamentary debate on the changes to the Elected Presidency (EP) scheme. "Many of us want to be race-blind. We feel that we ourselves are race-blind. We are understandably uneasy about any suggestion that perhaps we are not so," he said. "I am heartened that is our ideal and aspiration but at the same time we have to be realistic about where we are today."

Citing a survey of 2,000 Singaporeans conducted last year by Channel NewsAsia and the IPS, Mr Lee pointed out that "at least a significant minority of Singaporeans consider race as a factor when they vote, and will not vote for somebody of a different race to be President".

Next month, Singapore will hold its inaugural reserved Presidential Election, as a hiatus-triggered model to ensure minority representation in the presidency kicks in.

The model was recommended by a Constitutional Commission headed by Chief Justice Sundaresh Menon. The commission had noted that many contributors during its public hearings had emphasised that the ultimate destination for society should be a "race-blind community where no safeguards are required to ensure that candidates from different ethnic groups are periodically elected into Presidential office", but it seems to be "common ground" that Singapore as a society "cannot affirmatively say that she has already 'arrived'."

The implementation of the model — which was among several changes to the EP scheme — was borne out of "fundamental necessity that the Presidency be multiracial", Mr Lee said. The Prime Minister also stressed that due to shifting geopolitics and the threat of terrorism, Singapore needs to hold fast to the values of multiracialism and multiculturalism, more so than ever before. At the same time, the Republic's population is becoming increasingly diverse, with the proportion of the resident population classified as "others" having risen the most among all ethnic categories in the last decade, based on figures from the Department of Statistics.

In TODAY's National Day special, we celebrate Singapore's multiracialism and multiculturalism, and look at what needs to be done to take the country's racial harmony to the next level, as the population becomes more diverse and Singaporeans become more at ease with talking about the once-taboo topics of race and religion.

We also profile the efforts of various individuals to promote greater understanding and appreciation of the different cultures, and examine the impact of Singapore's cultural diversity on its food, arts and sports.

As the observers and community leaders TODAY spoke to pointed out, the peace and harmony among people of different races and religions in Singapore ought not to be taken for granted. Indeed, few countries in the world have managed to emerge from devastating racial conflicts, to become a shining model of racial harmony within a generation. Singapore has done it.

The question is whether Singaporeans can take their nation a step further, and build on the strong foundation and foster a society that not only tolerates racial and religious differences, but goes out of its way to embrace them. Perhaps then, Singapore will have truly arrived.