

How loyal are S'poreans?

Loyalty and pride remained stable, but two in three said national unity would be affected by foreign immigrants

Leong Wee Keat

Today, 2 August 2010

About nine in 10 Singaporeans (93 per cent) polled think the Republic is a better country than most other countries, according to a new report card on national pride.

This result is an improvement from the 85 and 84 per cent of Singaporeans who said so in 1999 and 2005, respectively.

An Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) survey also found two in three respondents felt the world would be a better place if people from other countries were more like them.

IPS interviewed 2,016 citizens last year, a representative sample, to probe their feelings.

The survey found national loyalty and pride held relatively steady between 2005 and 2009, even as Singapore's economy and population were more exposed to global trends and migration.

Sociologist Tan Ern Ser, who conducted the study with Dr Gillian Koh, felt the stable scores are "good signs" that Singaporeans are "not fair-weathered" people.

Interviews were conducted between February and May last year and Dr Koh said the economic recession did not affect attitudes.

But Singaporeans' chest-thumping attitudes took a slight dip when they were asked about their willingness to sacrifice for their country.

For example, four in 10 said they would not take a pay cut or pay heavier taxes for the nation. "It's harder to sacrifice than say you identify," Associate Professor Tan noted.

Some groups also did not score high during the survey.

For example, national loyalty and national pride weakened for those with higher socio-economic status. Chinese and younger respondents also had marginally weaker scores.

Political observer Eugene K B Tan raised another concern that the survey findings indicated Singaporeans' national pride is intertwined with the Republic's economic achievements.

The Singapore Management University law lecturer asked: "Does it mean that if this economy doesn't do well, our sense of pride and identification weakens then?"

Singaporeans' reactions to new immigrants in the society also gave policy-makers food for thought.

Close to two in three respondents (63 per cent) agreed national unity would be affected by their presence. In 1998, only 38 per cent agreed or strongly agreed such a policy could be a threat to unity, with 29 per cent choosing the neutral category.

This category was dropped as an option for the respondents for the latest study.

IPS research fellow Dr Leong Chan Hoong was not surprised by the survey findings. He pointed out the “differentiation” Singaporeans make between a foreigner and a “foreign talent”.

Singaporeans’ acceptance of foreigners increased when viewed with the lens of the “economic imperative” — 66 per cent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the Government is right to increase the number of foreigners working in Singapore if the economy needs it.