Sleepwalking To Disharmony?

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Independent Singapore was born out of the political quest for civic identity and loyalty to trump narrow sectarian identities. But are we now sleepwalking to disharmony, even as we continue to affirm the value of multiracialism in Singapore?

This provocative question is pertinent in light of the findings from Indicators of Racial and Religious Harmony, a joint Institute of Policy Studies and OnePeople.sg survey. The survey is probably the most comprehensive study on the state of ethnic relations here: Generally healthy, although there are areas of concern to pay attention to.

After close to 50 years of nation building, multiracialism cannot be just a mere slogan or a factual descriptor of the presence of different races. It has to be about the fundamental commitment to fair and equal treatment of all races at all levels of society. Beyond our laws, public policies and institutions being race-blind, Singaporeans have to be committed to these values.

The survey demonstrated that we did well in indicators that had a strong public sphere/space element. However, we did not do as well in indicators that had a closer nexus to the private sphere and how we viewed Singaporeans of other races.

Tensions Can Be Healthy

Singaporeans appreciate and value social harmony, denominated in the survey by the absence of inter-racial and religious tension. But this premium on harmony need not mean that there must always be an absence of disagreements and unhappiness, which are inevitable in our heterogeneous society in the throes of socio-economic transformation.

Unless it poses a clear and present danger, tension can be healthy and should not be seen as something that needs suppressing. The process of managing conflict is important: How we seek to restore equilibrium can either be instrumental (harmony at all cost) or purposive — in the latter, we strive to improve our understanding and attend to the underlying causes of tension.

Don't get me wrong — harmony is to be preferred over conflict. But let us not valorise harmony such that tension is portrayed solely as a threat. This prevents us from using it as an opportunity for meaningful engagement.

Tolerance Is Fragile

Have we learnt the lessons of multiracialism and harmony well, but without having imbibed the core values of multiracialism?

The four indicators where we did not fare as well (but still positive overall) suggest a lack of meaningful engagement or interest in colour-blindness, intercultural understanding and interaction.

If our harmony is built on tolerance only, then our ethnic relations are fragile and might not withstand severe stresses, such as in the event of a terrorist attack or a prolonged economic crisis.

As such, we should be concerned about the minority perception of exclusion and discrimination in our society. For example, close to 20 per cent of respondents believed that Indians and Malays had to work harder compared to other races to have a basic, decent life in Singapore.

Slightly more than 30 per cent of respondents believed that Indians and Malays had to work harder to reach top positions in their organisations. The undermining of our meritocratic ethos subverts our multiracial credentials.

A robust multiracialism is predicated on our having cross-cutting ties. It is worrying that only 45 per cent of respondents had at least one close friend of another race.

What is astonishing is that almost 80 per cent of respondents either somewhat agree, or agree/strongly agree that when they know a person's race, they have a good idea of what some of their behaviour and views are like!

Collectively, these findings suggest that we know how to conduct ourselves in the public sphere that is aligned with the multiracial stance. But, in the private sphere, the innermost thoughts and values that we hold may imperil multiracialism, since they invariably affect how we will act, particularly in a crisis.

It is these enclaves of closed minds — in which we seek to exclude others who are different or to exclude ourselves from others — that will work against the endeavour to build a cohesive society. We really need to go beyond tolerance and forbearance to seek genuine understanding and protection of Singapore's diversity.

Majority Should Reach Out

The survey consistently found that minority respondents, compared to Chinese respondents, held more positive attitudes towards embracing diversity, colour-blindness, inter-cultural understanding, social acceptance and cross-racial friendships.

While minorities are more likely to be sensitive to issues surrounding diversity, relations can take on a new level if the majority ethnic Chinese community takes the lead in improving inter-ethnic understanding.

Much less is at stake, and it's always easier for the majority to reach out, as their actions are less likely to be seen as threatening or undermining the status quo. Given that three-quarters of

the population are ethnic Chinese, it is crucial for Chinese-Singaporeans to appreciate that they may, unwittingly, be less sensitive of the interests, concerns, and fears of the minorities.

Certain groups generally outperform others on the various measures in the survey. Attributes include being young, better educated, living in better housing types. If so, is there an age and class dimension to the ethnic state of play? Are some groups more predisposed to the desired behaviour for harmony? I am not so sure, and we could examine why that is so.

Or, is this a situation in which survey respondents from these groups tended to give the politically correct answers (that is, this is how we ought to conduct ourselves), rather than answers that are closer to their true feelings. In short, is there a gap between belief and action? Knowing the "right"answers must be accompanied by doing the right thing.

Which Identity?

The survey makes it quite clear that, for most Singaporeans, race and religion still matters. But let us not be fixated by them. We all have multiple identities, with context determining when one identity is more relevant at any given time.

Let us see, rather, how we can further strengthen our civic identity as Singaporeans — this must be the over-arching identity that takes precedence. Let us endeavour to appreciate and celebrate our commonalities, even as we manage the differences.

The management of markers of race, language and religion in Singapore has been characterised by top-down, coercive control and pre-emptive strikes against threats to harmony. This control by the State should not result in our not taking personal responsibility for ensuring that diversity works for us.

Let us strive to entrench equality, inclusiveness, non-discrimination and fair play as integral to what Singapore stands for.

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