

'To be part of us, your sons must serve NS'

IPS study finds 7 in 10 Singaporeans saying that National Service is important to integration but fewer new citizens think so

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SINGAPORE - For many male citizens, National Service (NS) has long been an integral part of what makes them Singaporean.

And a recent study conducted by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) has shown that a large majority of Singaporeans born here - both men and women - see NS as an important factor in deciding whether to accept new citizens as part of them - more specifically, whether their sons perform their NS obligations.

Interestingly, the study found a substantially lower proportion of foreign-born citizens who felt the same way.

According to the researcher who led the study and other experts *Today* spoke to, the gap in perceptions raises larger policy implications and ought to be addressed.

The findings of the IPS study, which involved about 1,000 Singaporeans born here and another 1,000 foreign-born Singaporeans, were released yesterday: Seven in 10 of the Singaporeans born here said it was important that the son of a new immigrant complete NS, when it comes to "deciding if an immigrant will be accepted and viewed like other local-born Singaporean citizens".

In contrast, 43 per cent of the foreign-born citizens surveyed felt so.

The study, led by IPS research fellow Leong Chan-Hoong, was conducted between July and December 2010.

Door-to-door interviews were conducted with participants. A quota sampling method was used to ensure the sample was representative and only one person per household was interviewed for the study.

While there were perception gaps in other areas - including relationships with workplace colleagues and the ability to speak conversational English which were deemed more important by Singaporeans born here, compared to foreign-born Singaporeans - the biggest "incongruence" was the views on the importance of NS in terms of integration.

Said Dr Leong: "The areas of incongruence are the areas for potential flash points as this is where we see the greatest gaps between the two groups (of participants)."

Dr Leong said he was not surprised by the large discrepancy in views on the importance of NS. He noted that Singapore-born participants see performing NS duties as a "symbolic" gesture of integration into the Singapore society.

The findings provide policymakers some food for thought and Dr Leong suggested that the authorities consider disallowing second-generation Permanent Residents (PRs) from renouncing their PR status to avoid serving NS. There should also be greater transparency in terms of the number of foreign-born citizens who has served NS, Dr Leong said.

He also felt that the issue of NS must be emphasised heavily in the PR-selection process so that the applicants will be fully aware of their obligations and rights upon receiving PR status.

The Ministry of Defence (MINDEF) had recently reiterated - in reply to readers' letters published in newspapers - that (NS) is "mandatory for PRs, just as it is for Singaporeans".

Those who renounce their PR status will face the "adverse consequences" when they subsequently apply to study or work in Singapore, it added.

It is understood that PRs who renounce their PR status would unlikely be granted PR again in Singapore and they would not be able to obtain a work visa here.

First-generation PRs who are able to contribute to Singapore economically immediately upon the grant of PR status are administratively exempted from NS, according to MINDEF.

Dr Leong, who presented his findings at an IPS seminar, reiterated during the seminar: "The hard truth is that NS imposes a great sacrifice not just on national servicemen but also on the families ... citizenship should come with some kind of privileges ... (but) it is then only fair that the (second-generation PRs) should contribute to Singapore by means of performing NS."

Noting that one-third of second generation male PRs gave up their PR status before serving NS, Dr Leong suggested that parents who want to apply for PR for their children should have to put up a security bond for them.

Speaking to Today, National University of Singapore sociologist Tan Ern Ser reiterated that "doing NS is not just an indicator of integration, but an indicator of fairness of treatment, something which local-born (Singaporeans) consider important in regard to our immigration policy".

Associate Professor Tan, who is also a faculty associate at IPS, said that removing the option for second-generation PRs to renounce their PR status before serving NS "would put PRs on par with citizens in terms of NS liability". "It would eradicate the feeling of unfair treatment in this aspect," he said.

Nominated Member of Parliament Eugene Tan, however, pointed out that it is important to consider the keen competition for high-quality immigrants before making any policy changes. Noting that many Singaporeans view NS as an act of loyalty, he suggested that the Government enforce the "adverse consequences" more strictly for those who renounce their PR status before serving NS.

Some member of the public have also suggested community service in lieu of NS for first generation PRs but the experts felt that such a move could backfire as community service could be perceived as an easy way out.