

Singapore's racial and religious harmony soars to new heights – Is unity its secret to success?

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SINGAPORE: In the past five years, Singapore has seen a significant improvement in its racial and religious harmony, with a growing number of people rating the nation's diversity as high or very high, according to a recent study reported by *The Straits Times*.

Released by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) and OnePeople.sg, the study also highlighted a rise in trust between different racial groups, as well as a stronger belief in the benefits of racial diversity. These positive trends signal that Singapore's commitment to multiculturalism remains strong.

Rising trust and appreciation for racial diversity

The study, conducted between April and August 2024, revealed an increase in both trust among different races and recognition of the advantages of a diverse society. Dr Janil Puthuchery, chairman of OnePeople.sg, pointed out that Singapore is progressing in terms of social cohesion, trust in institutions, and racial harmony. He also noted that Singapore's standing is high compared to many other countries and cities globally.

The results of the study also showed a generational shift in attitudes. Younger Singaporeans, particularly those aged 18 to 35, expressed a greater appreciation for learning from other races. Around 70% of them agreed that they could learn a lot from different racial groups, compared to just 58.8% of those aged 51 to 65. However, younger respondents also expressed higher perceptions of discrimination, with a significant proportion believing that Malays and Chinese had to work harder than others to achieve a decent life in Singapore.

Cross-racial friendships on the decline

While overall racial harmony has improved, one concerning trend identified in the study was a decline in cross-racial friendships. The proportion of people with at least one close friend from another race decreased from 55.5% in 2018 to 53.2% in 2024, though this is still higher than the 45.6% recorded in 2013. Dr Mathew Mathews, IPS' principal research fellow, attributed this decline to a broader trend of shrinking friendship circles, with Singaporeans reporting fewer close friends overall. This reduction in social connections could limit opportunities for cross-racial interactions and may require targeted efforts to address.

Trust gaps persist across racial groups

Despite the overall rise in trust among Singapore's racial communities, significant gaps remain. While 77.6% of respondents expressed trust in Chinese Singaporeans during a national crisis, only 69.7% trusted Malays, 68.6% trusted Indians, and 67.4% trusted Eurasians. This trust gap suggests that there is still work to be done to bridge divides and ensure greater social cohesion. In particular, minority racial groups were less likely to rate the country's racial harmony as highly as Chinese respondents, with fewer Malay and Indian participants expressing strong trust in the state of harmony.

The need for ongoing multicultural policies

While the study highlighted notable progress, it also underscored the need for continued government intervention. Dr Puthuchearry emphasized that policies like the Ethnic Integration Policy and group representation constituencies remain essential, as they help maintain a balanced and inclusive society. The study's findings suggest that different racial and religious groups continue to experience issues of discrimination in distinct ways, which justifies the persistence of race-based policies to support greater inclusivity.

While Singapore has made significant strides in enhancing racial and religious harmony over the past five years, challenges remain, particularly in areas like cross-racial friendships and trust disparities. These ongoing concerns suggest the need for deeper reflection and more inclusive policies to foster a truly harmonious and unified society.