

Removing CMIO race framework may result in worse outcomes: Shanmugam

Ng Wei Kai

The Straits Times, 5 February 2025

SINGAPORE – Eliminating the Chinese-Malay-Indian-Others (CMIO) administrative framework will result in the Government not being able to identify and address the differences between racial groups, which may worsen outcomes, said Law and Home Affairs Minister K. Shanmugam.

Mr Shanmugam told Parliament on Feb 5 that there is hard evidence overseas that demonstrates this, raising the example of how France has banned the collection of race-based data since 1978.

He said racial tensions remained, and France has seen a surge in race-related offences in recent years.

He added: “I don’t want to draw a simple, straight-line conclusion from France banning collection of race-based data to its racial situation today, but it is one point of reference among several such points in a multi-faceted and complex issue.”

Mr Shanmugam added that the Government’s view is that the lack of race-based data prevents measuring and understanding the difficulties that different races face in different areas, and prevents effective intervention to resolve those issues.

He said: “Our model of multiculturalism, multiracialism with the data and framework we have has worked quite well for us so far.”

He was responding to a question from Progress Singapore Party Non-Constituency MP Leong Mun Wai, who had asked when the Government plans to review the CMIO model and what form such a review will take.

The model has been adopted by the PAP Government since before independence, but its relevance has been debated in recent years.

In January, Minister for Culture, Community and Youth Edwin Tong said at an Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) conference that the model should constantly be reviewed to reflect Singapore’s increasingly complex multicultural landscape, and acknowledged ongoing debate about whether it adequately represents the country’s evolving identity.

Mr Shanmugam on Feb 5 also acknowledged this debate, adding that some have advocated removing the CMIO framework entirely.

He said: “They have claimed that the framework is overly simplistic and rigid, in our increasingly complex and heterogeneous society.

“There is some truth to this.”

However, race remains a key identifier for many, he added. He cited a 2021 IPS study on national pride and identity which found that 87 per cent of Singapore residents considered race important to their identity.

He also cited a 2021 CNA-IPS Survey On Race Relations, which also found that more than 60 per cent of Singapore residents felt that the CMIO policy helped to preserve racial harmony and should be retained.

He added that many successful policies, such as the Ethnic Integration Policy (EIP), which mandates a certain level of racial representation in public housing estates, are built on the model.

Other policies such as group representation constituencies (GRCs), which mandate minority representation in Parliament, are also built on CMIO.

Still, the Government has continually reviewed the CMIO framework to ensure its relevance, Mr Shanmugam added.

He raised the example of how it has been adjusted over the years, for example to allow registration of double-barrelled races.

He said: "But we have been cautious about moving away from the framework. It has worked well for us and has helped us to forge a more harmonious set of race relations in our society today."

Mr Shanmugam also reiterated that Singapore's approach to multiracialism has always been to openly recognise differences, while actively building mutual respect and fostering understanding between the different racial groups in the community.

The CMIO framework is an integral part of this approach, he said.

He added that individuals can register their race based on lineage, and there are currently more than 200 different races that Singaporeans are registered under, but for the purposes of policy administration, these races are categorised into four groups based on the size of the communities – Chinese, Malay, Indian and Others.

He said: "So the CMIO framework does not prescribe one's racial identity, but helps us to administer race-based policies and programmes that promote social cohesion, identify those who need help, and safeguard the rights of minorities."

Mr Shanmugam also questioned Mr Leong's agenda in raising questions on the framework, saying that he and his party had previously criticised the EIP in Parliament and had made comments with racist undertones against Indians regarding the Singapore-India Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement.

In response, Mr Leong said his party supports the EIP, but believes that the policy creates economic disadvantages to minorities.