

## **S'pore's multiracial model does not require any community to give up its heritage, traditions: Lawrence Wong**

**Hariz Baharudin**

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SINGAPORE - To achieve racial harmony, Singapore did not ask any of its communities to give up parts of their culture, and instead embraced the diversity they offered, said Finance Minister Lawrence Wong.

**Speaking at a forum on race and racism organised by the Institute of Policy Studies and the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies on Friday (June 25), Mr Wong held up Singapore's model of multiculturalism, which he said is distinctive and different from that of other nations.**

"We did not set out to achieve racial harmony by creating a monolithic society. Our multiracialism does not require any community to give up its heritage or traditions," he said at the forum live-streamed from the University Cultural Centre Theatre at the National University of Singapore in Kent Ridge.

He stressed that Singapore does not devalue diversity, but instead accepts and celebrates it.

Multiracialism does not mean forgetting the separate identities that people have, and does not require the erasure of culture differences and histories in favour of a "bland and homogenised broth", he added.

"Instead, it enjoins us to embrace our inheritances, respect those of others, and go beyond them to encompass a national identity and shared purpose," said the minister.

Singapore's way differs from the French way, which insists on assimilation into one master language and culture. People there have to speak French, accept French ways and assimilate into French society, he pointed out.

On its part, Singapore has decided to encourage each community to take pride in its own cultures and traditions, while also seeking common ground and strengthening a shared sense of belonging and identity.

Mr Wong recounted how the late theatre doyen Kuo Pao Kun had likened culture to trees. "This is what we are constantly striving to do. Go deeper to strengthen our cultural roots; and at the same time, reach higher to cross-pollinate with other cultures, and thus develop a stronger shared Singaporean identity," he said.

The country's bilingualism policy is an important part of its approach to multiracialism as it allows children here to access traditions that the vernacular languages carry, said

Mr Wong. This is so they would know who they are, instead of becoming "pale imitations of Europeans or Americans".

There is much effort to preserve these languages, and Mr Wong noted that this involves steps such as insisting schoolchildren study their mother tongues, devoting resources to maintaining vernacular language standards, and helping to sustain vernacular media here.

Parliament provides simultaneous translations in all four of Singapore's official languages as well, even though all MPs can understand and speak English well.

"It is an important practice which we continue to uphold - not least to let the world and our own citizens know that we are not to be confused with the West and Westerners, though English is our language of business and we are connected to the world," said Mr Wong.

He quoted what Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said at the opening of the Singapore Chinese Cultural Centre in 2017, that "being Singaporean has never been a matter of subtraction, but of addition; not of becoming less, but more; not of limitation and contraction, but of openness and expansion".

### **The reason for SAP schools**

In his speech, the minister acknowledged criticism from some quarters that the Government's policies to preserve and develop cultures could make Singapore more race-conscious and detract from multiracialism.

The Special Assistance Plan (SAP) schools are sometimes cited to make this point, he said, adding that he understands the concerns surrounding them.

He gave the assurance that the Government wants young people to interact with those in other communities, and make friends among all races. It will continue to see how multiracialism can be strengthened across all schools, he pledged.

But the minister asked critics of SAP schools to consider if society here would be better off if standards of spoken and written vernacular languages were to fall, and Singaporean Chinese, Malay and Indian cultures were to wither and dissipate.

"For that is the primary reason for the SAP schools. They were pure Chinese-medium schools before. We retained some of them in this new form so we can still have a sufficient number of bilingual and bicultural students, equally strong in English as well as Chinese," said Mr Wong.

He noted that similar to SAP schools, Singapore has programmes in a few schools to enable students to deepen their proficiency in Malay and Tamil, and to nurture their bicultural interests.

These include madrasahs, or religious Islamic schools, strong vernacular media, as well as a variety of Chinese, Malay and Indian cultural organisations.

Such organisations and efforts should not be done away with on the grounds of perpetuating racial consciousness and not being inclusive of others.

"For that is not what we mean when we pledge ourselves to become 'one people, regardless of race, language or religion'. The Singaporean is not only the English-educated cosmopolitan, up to date with the latest trends in London, Paris or New York," said Mr Wong.

"The Singaporean is also our fellow citizens who are more comfortable in Mandarin, Malay, Tamil, or other languages, and who have different cultural perspectives and views."