

Race-based policies should stay, but beware dangers of racial exclusiveness and ethnocentrism: Academics

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Today, 20 July 2018

SINGAPORE — Race-based policies such as the CIMO (Chinese, Indians, Malays, Others) model and the Ethnic Integration Policy should be retained, though Singapore should keep a watchful eye on them to avoid unwittingly promoting racial exclusiveness and ethnocentrism.

This was the view of two panelists at a forum on ethnic identity and culture organised by the Institute of Policy Studies and OnePeople.sg on Thursday (July 19).

Pointing out that the CIMO model has been unfairly “scapegoated”, law lecturer Eugene Tan said it is an important manifestation of how the country “recognises there are different races”, especially the minorities. Removing it might not necessarily be a silver bullet, he added.

Dr Alexius Pereira, president of the Eurasian Association, said that “recognition” of races is crucial to ensuring racial harmony and nation-building, as well as showing that “each race is not forgotten”.

While Dr Pereira said some may feel the Government is too heavy-handed in collecting and documenting an individual’s race, former Senior Minister of State Zainul Abidin Rasheed argued that such information is crucial in finding out the background of a person and his family, especially when it comes to complex situations. These could be mixed marriages, religious conversion, or religious needs in emergency situations.

However, Dr Pereira said that while “recognition functionally serves its purpose”, it can become a constant reminder to individuals that they are from a minority group, and may unintentionally come across as being condescending or an act of “micro-aggression” when groups are pressured to act a certain way.

In some cases, the state “tries to overcompensate and go all out” in order to recognise minority races, said Dr Pereira, who referred to the recent presidential election reserved for Malay candidates as an example.

Agreeing, Associate Professor Tan said that while Singapore is on a journey to become “race blind”, its policies may have to be “race conscious”, as he too cited the reserved presidency.

While ethnic-related policies have helped promote and strengthen ethnic identities, too much of it could “stifle the nation-building process”, he added.

Other questions that the panelists fielded included whether there should be more public holidays for each race, or if there should be more that reflect Singapore’s national identity. Participants at the forum also asked about how Singapore should tweak its policies going ahead, and the challenge in selecting national athletes that are representative of Singapore.

Playing a “numbers game”, and counting what “each group gets” in terms of benefits could be dangerous and set Singapore down a slippery path, said Assoc Prof Tan. One also has to be careful not to set aside meritocracy for multiracialism, or a situation of “reverse discrimination”.

For the younger generation who might share a “collective amnesia” about independent Singapore’s origins, it is important to constantly drill home the knowledge about “who we are and how we came about”, added Assoc Prof Tan.

“There are questions about the special position of the Malay community, such as the tuition fee grant, or why they are allocated land in their public housing estate for the mosque... so even as we strengthen our national identity, we need to know where we came from, what it means to be Singaporean,” he said.

The forum at The Grassroots’ Club in Ang Mo Kio was attended by about 180 people from religious groups, schools, ministries and statutory boards, as well as civic groups.