

CMIO model still relevant as S'poreans 'value importance of race': Study

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SINGAPORE – Amid calls from various quarters for Singapore to ditch its long-standing Chinese-Malay-Indian-Others (CMIO) framework, a survey has shown that the model is still relevant as Singaporeans - including younger ones - still value the importance of race, its researchers say.

The survey, which involved about 2,000 Singaporeans and permanent residents, was conducted by Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) and Channel NewsAsia.

Among other findings, six in 10 respondents indicated that race is important to them. Suggesting a close link between the Singaporean identity and the four main racial groups enshrined in the CMIO framework, more than 90 per cent of the respondents said they were more accepting of new citizens from these ethnic backgrounds, rather than say, new citizens from Arab or African heritage.

The study also showed that celebrating the cultural festivals of the respective ethnic groups ranks highly as a top marker of what makes a person Chinese, Malay, Indian or from the Others category.

It found that being able to read, write and speak in their mother tongue is an important racial indicator, with researchers noting that this could be as a result of the CMIO model being incorporated into public policies.

While there has been research showing that millennials are placing less emphasis on race, the survey noted that a high percentage of Singaporeans aged 21 to 25 view speaking and writing in their mother tongue, for example, as an important racial indicator. “The fact that even among our millennials, they care about some of the core markers of their identity... That tells us that ethnicity and how we identify ourselves as ethnic individuals continue to be important for many Singaporeans,” said the study’s lead researcher Dr Mathew Mathews.

The roots of the model can be traced back to 1824, when the first census was produced.

Asked about the debate surrounding the CMIO model, Dr Mathews, who is a senior research fellow at IPS, said the study showed that minorities here “seem to care quite a bit” about preserving their traditions and cultures. Having the framework is essential to achieving that goal, he said. Without such a structure in place, there is a possibility that the minorities would have to conform to the practices of the majority race, he added.

However, the researchers pointed out that as the country’s society diversify - with the number of inter-racial marriages going up - Singaporeans ought to be more embracing of people who fall outside the main racial categories.

The solution is not doing away with the CMIO model in an attempt to ensure Singaporeans are more inclusive. Instead, more awareness should be raised on the need to be more open to people of varied backgrounds.

"When you think about the whole intent of the CMIO model, it is not to separate people, but to make sure that different groups will be properly respected, their rights will be preserved," said Dr Mathews.

"The answer is not dismantling the framework, the answer is to ensure that all the communities continue to be embracing (of others)."

RACE-BASED POLICIES 'STILL NEEDED'

The findings showed that race-based policies, such as the reserved Presidential Election (PE), are still necessary, said Dr Mathews, in response to reporters' questions on whether the study validates the need for such policies.

Noting that "ethnic identity continues to be important", Dr Mathews said that race-based policies not only preserve the cultures of minorities, but also ensure they are represented.

He cited the recent PE - Singapore's first reserved election which was won by Mdm Halimah Yacob in a walkover victory - as a "good example".

Dr Mathews added: "Hopefully, someday a Malay will be able to contest in an open election and the election will be based on qualifications and the abilities (which) the person has and there's nothing to do with race. But that's what we hope for... everybody hopes there will not be another reserved election."

Despite arguments from some quarters that Singaporeans are no longer fixated on race, Dr Mathews said the study is a reminder that racial identity does indeed matter to Singaporeans.

Race-based policies are meant to ensure "every one of our races in Singapore will be able to feel that they do not have to give up their particular culture, their language, what they feel is valuable to them", Dr Mathews said. "When it comes to protection of minorities, it's still an important aspect," he added.