

## **Expand the CMIO model to accommodate people's desires on how they want to be identified: Panellists**

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- Singapore's CMIO model to categorise ethnic groups can be expanded to take into account how Singaporeans want to be identified, Mr Mohammad Alami Musa said
- He was speaking at the Singapore Perspectives 2021 conference
- Another speaker Daniel Goh said the model is a good starting point to explore Singapore's complexities but should not be made rigid
- Associate Professor Goh also questioned the usefulness of "Chinese privilege" as an academic concept to understand race relations in Singapore

It might be time for Singapore to rethink the way it categorises ethnic groups by perhaps expanding on the Chinese-Malay-Indian-Others (CMIO) model, academics at an online forum said on Thursday (Jan 14).

They were responding to a question from the audience on whether the CMIO model should be adjusted or abandoned in place of a single Singaporean identity. This was at the Singapore Perspectives 2021 conference organised by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), a think tank at the National University of Singapore (NUS).

One of the panellists, Mr Mohammad Alami Musa, who is Singapore's non-resident Ambassador to Algeria and president of the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (Muis), said that the CMIO model could remain but be expanded to accommodate the diverse aspirations of how people want to be identified culturally or ethnically.

Mr Alami, who is also the head of studies in inter-religious relations at the S Rajaratnam School of International Studies' plural societies programme, said that humans cannot run away from the fact that they are culturally embedded, and to just have one single identity would result in losing much of the richness in Singapore's diversity.

Noting that discussions on the issue have been going on "for a long time", he added: "We haven't really got a good formula for this but I think we need to think carefully. And people who don't want to be any cultural group, what do you do with them?"

Associate Professor Daniel Goh, another panellist, said that the CMIO model is a good starting point from which to get into the richness and complexities of Singapore's diversity.

"We should not let it become a grid, which will become very rigid, as you know, something that is imposed on everything, making sure everything must have CMIO in it," the deputy head of NUS' sociology department said.

The panellists, who were discussing the theme of identities and cohesion, also talked about various other issues surrounding multiculturalism in Singapore, including the concept of "Chinese privilege".

The term is largely understood to refer to the dominant position of ethnic Chinese people in Singapore society, which grants them advantages in areas such as employment opportunities.

It is a term adapted from "white privilege", which refers to the dominance of white Americans in the United States.

While the import of the idea is itself not a problem, Assoc Prof Goh said that the more pertinent issue is whether Singapore's own intellectual traditions are able to absorb and adapt it in a way that makes it relevant to society and history here.

"The problem with the concept of 'Chinese privilege' is that it is under-discussed, under-specified. I think those who want to advance this idea and use it in social sciences, to use it in public discourse to understand some of the realities of racism and prejudice in Singapore, they have to specify it," Assoc Prof Goh said.

He added that "Chinese privilege" cannot be equated with "white privilege", because the US had a very different history with regard to race relations compared with Singapore.

"Singapore is a post-colonial country with racial categories that are left over by colonial structures, by the British and the way they saw and stereotyped different native people in Malaya," he said.

Assoc Prof Goh said his worry is that Singaporeans do not focus enough on their own intellectual traditions and "the borrowing wholesale of ideas and concepts from other places" will not be well-adapted.

He added that many discussions about Chinese privilege and the examples brought forth to illustrate it have already been discussed in existing academic works but couched as "racial prejudice", "racial stereotyping", "racial discrimination" or "structural or institutional racism".

"In terms of concepts, the usefulness of 'Chinese privilege' is not there," he said.