

Tackling racism: Chinese majority must ‘do its part to be sensitive, conscious’ to needs of minorities, says Lawrence Wong

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SINGAPORE — Racism still exists in Singapore and is “among us”, be it on the streets, in the neighbourhoods or workplaces, Finance Minister Lawrence Wong said on Friday (June 25), as he stressed the need to tackle racism wherever it exists in society.

In order to move forward on the issue, people must first recognise that it is harder to be a minority than a majority in a multi-racial society like Singapore, which is why the majority has to do its part to be sensitive and conscious to the needs of minorities, Mr Wong said.

The country must also continue with its approach of mutual accommodation, trust and compromise — not by staying silent or piping down about prejudices, but by being upfront and honest about the racialised experiences felt by various groups.

On its part, the Government will engage widely and update its policies on race and those that strengthen racial harmony here, Mr Wong added.

He was speaking at a forum on race and racism organised by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) and the S Rajaratnam School of International Studies.

Mr Wong was invited as he had addressed the topic of racism previously and had penned an opinion piece in April for The Straits Times titled "Racial prejudice still exists in Singapore but people here do live peacefully together", IPS said.

In his keynote speech, Mr Wong pointed out that the Government has seen “significantly more cases” of racist incidents this year than usual that ended up amplified on social media.

These included a Chinese man who attacked an Indian woman in the chest in May, a polytechnic lecturer who confronted an inter-racial couple, and a Chinese woman filmed hitting a gong to disrupt her Indian neighbour’s prayer ritual.

Condemning these acts, Mr Wong said that the Government had been tracking racist incidents and the stress of the Covid-19 pandemic could have contributed to the greater number of cases in the past year. Such incidents had declined gradually over the decades, until now.

Mr Wong said: “We would be fooling ourselves if we believed that racial and religious harmony were the natural order of things. It does not fall ready-made from the sky. There is nothing preordained about a multiracial society.”

MINORITIES HAVE IT HARDER

Mr Wong said it is crucial that Singaporeans acknowledge that minorities face difficulties in all aspects of daily life compared with those in the majority community, ranging from renting a home to finding a job.

“These things do happen, not always, and perhaps not even often, but sometimes. And when they do happen, they cause real hurt, which is not erased by lightly dismissing them as casual remarks or jokes,” he said.

He urged the Chinese majority to do more by taking the extra step to make minorities feel comfortable, treating others in the way they would like to be treated and teaching children to do the same.

It also means reminding family members or friends “who may slip up from time to time.”

The Chinese community, too, is not monolithic, he said.

“Sometimes, people talk about ‘Chinese privilege’ in Singapore. There may well be biases or blind spots that the Chinese community should become aware of and to rectify. But please understand that we still have a whole generation of Chinese Singaporeans who are more comfortable in the Chinese (language) than English (language) and who consider themselves at a disadvantage in an English-speaking world.”

Many would thus object to being characterised as having this privilege, he said.

MUTUAL ACCOMMODATION, TRUST AND COMPROMISE

Mr Wong then urged people to speak up and be prepared to have “uncomfortable discussions” about racism in order to listen to one another and understand all points of view.

However, participants should work towards mutual accommodation, trust and compromise, instead of insisting on “maximum entitlements and rights for their respective groups, or construe every compromise as an injustice that needs to be condemned”, he said.

They also should not “put the worst interpretation on every perceived slight or insensitivity”.

If this happens, it will not take long for other groups to react aggressively, as has been seen in other countries where identity politics have taken root and where parties are emboldened to “up the ante and make greater demands”.

This is a lose-lose situation for both the minority and majority groups, Mr Wong said. “We end up fuelling our worst tendencies — our tribalism, hostility and vengefulness.”

NOT A MONOLITHIC SOCIETY

In his speech, Mr Wong also said that race has always been a fundamental issue for Singapore — if it was not, Singapore would never have separated from Malaysia and become an independent and sovereign state.

“Our 23 months in the (Malaysian) federation showed the tendency of each race to emphasise its identity, its rights and its primacy, often at the expense of other races.”

It took the nation’s founding generations to build a “Singaporean Singapore” into existence, taking difficult and drastic steps such as changing electoral rules for minority representation or detaining Chinese chauvinists to achieve this fundamental national ideal, he added.

While Singapore has made much progress, it is not yet immune to the siren calls of exclusive racial and cultural identities.

“Neither have we reached a “post-racial” state. Surely recent events have, if anything, confirmed our caution,” he said.

Stressing that Singapore did not set out to create a monolithic or a “melting pot” society, which would require all races to assimilate into one lingual and cultural identity, the nation instead desired to “preserve, protect and celebrate” its diversity.

This is achieved by encouraging each community to take pride in its cultures and traditions, and by expanding the common space and strengthening this “shared sense of belonging and identity”.

Mr Wong said: “This is our distinctive philosophy of multiracialism. We do not devalue diversity, but accept and celebrate it. Multiracialism in Singapore doesn’t mean forgetting our separate racial, linguistic, religious and cultural identities.

“It doesn’t require us to erase our rich inheritances in favour of a bland and homogenised broth. Instead, it enjoins us to embrace our inheritances, respect those of others and go beyond them to encompass a national identity and shared purpose,” he added.

GOING BEYOND RACE

Mr Wong then acknowledged that younger Singaporeans have grown up in a different context from their parents and grandparents, in a society where one in five marriages are inter-racial and people are less conscious of racial differences.

Thus, there are people who feel that it is time to move towards a “race-blind” society by removing all rules and practices that underline race in various ways, such as the Group Representation Constituency rules, the Housing and Development Board’s Ethnic Integration Policy, and Special Assistance Plan schools.

Mr Wong said: “Indeed, I share these aspirations. Perhaps I am young enough to feel the idealistic instincts of the millennials and old enough to understand the caution born out of the experience of my parents’ generation.

“But we can all agree that our multiracialism is not perfect and we have to keep working at it deliberately, to reduce our imperfections step by step.”

Mr Wong said that Singapore’s policies are not cast in stone, noting how the authorities are reviewing whether Muslim nurses can wear the tudung or religious headwear with their uniform.

Constant adjustments and repeated checks have to be made to get the balance right on policies.

For instance, some have called for the authorities to go beyond the Chinese, Malay, Indian and Others framework, but he said that there are still concerns if demographic proportions were to shift dramatically.

There are new citizens who will take time to understand Singapore’s multiracial approach and there is a transient population who work here but can create frictions within communities from time to time.

“We understand these concerns. So we continue to review and update our work pass policies, too, to ensure that they meet our economic needs, help Singapore to grow and prosper, and yet fit into our social context.”