

Harder to be a minority than a majority in multi-racial society: Lawrence Wong

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SINGAPORE — It is important for the majority community in Singapore to do its part and be sensitive to the needs of minorities, Finance Minister Lawrence Wong said on Friday (25 June).

Delivering a speech on “multiracialism and faultlines”, Wong said in any multi-racial society everywhere in the world, it is harder to be a minority than a majority.

Wong cited some challenges faced by certain racial groups in Singapore such as job discrimination, landlords specifying exclusion of potential tenants based on race, and comments about racial stereotypes.

“And when they do happen, they cause real hurt, which is not erased by lightly dismissing them as casual remarks or jokes,” said Wong, who was speaking at a forum on race and racism in Singapore jointly organised by the Institute of Policy Studies and S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies.

Wong noted there have been several “worrying” incidents recently including a Chinese man who kicked an Indian woman while uttering racial slurs, a Chinese man who confronted an inter-racial couple, a Chinese woman who hit a gong to disrupt an Indian neighbour from carrying out a prayer ritual, and a Malay woman who was jailed for hurling racist insults at an Indian bus commuter.

“These racist acts are unacceptable. I feel the hurt caused. Like all of you, I wish these incidents had not happened.”

Wong said he believed people who are from the majority community in Singapore understand the issues faced by the minority community, and urged them to do more to make their minority friends, neighbours, co-workers feel comfortable. At the same time, minorities have recognised that the majority community has legitimate needs and concerns, he added.

Singapore must continue with its approach of mutual accommodation, trust and compromise, Wong said.

Singaporeans should be upfront about the “racialised experiences” that various groups feel, and be prepared to have “uncomfortable” and “civilised” discussions.

“But we should not insist on maximum entitlements and rights for our respective groups; construe every compromise as an injustice that needs to be condemned; or put the worst interpretation on every perceived slight or insensitivity,” Wong said.

If one group were to jostle “aggressively” to assert its identity and rights over others, other groups might also start to jostle back, he added.

As such, Wong expressed hope that all groups calling for change will be conscious about their approach, and called for expansion of space for agreement and deepening of cross-cultural understanding.

On its part, the government will continue to update its policies on race, and other policies that help to strengthen racial harmony in Singapore.

“To conclude, this government will never waver in our commitment to promote harmony among all races, and ensure that all Singaporeans enjoy full and equal opportunities in life,” Wong said.