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# RSIS COMMENTARIES

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## **FOREIGN WORKERS IN SINGAPORE: Integrating or Segregating them?**

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*The recent saga over the housing of foreign workers in land-scarce Singapore has polarized Singaporeans into two camps – those calling for integration and those for segregation. Although integration is possibly the more morally defensible of the two doctrines, it is segregation that is likely to prevail in practice.*

THE RECENT saga over the housing of foreign workers in land-scarce Singapore has forced its citizens to take stock of what it means to live in multicultural harmony. Singaporeans generally appreciate the economic contribution of this transient workforce who are a cheap, but critical source of odd job labour that most Singaporeans themselves shun. Moreover, with a current 577,000 foreign workers – mainly in the construction and manufacturing sectors – and 180,000 foreign domestic maids, there can be no doubt that Singaporeans have to learn to live with these guest workers in their midst.

As such, the question is not over whether to tighten the control over the number entering Singapore but how best to manage their presence in the already densely-populated city-state. In this respect, the discussion has polarized Singaporeans into two camps – those calling for integration and those for segregation.

Although integration – giving them access to common spaces in Singapore – is possibly the more morally defensible doctrine of the two, it is segregation – the situation in which interaction between the host population and guest workers is kept to the minimal – that is the more likely option to prevail.

### **The Integration Arguments**

Aside from the obvious fact that the notion of segregation is anathema to Singapore's multicultural policy, the case for Singaporeans to be more accommodating to foreign workers has by and large been anchored by the economic logic. Singaporeans are repeatedly reminded of their critical contribution to the good life in Singapore – not only do they perform the 3D jobs (dirty, dangerous and difficult) that most Singaporeans shirk from, they do so at very low wages that keeps Singapore's economy flexible

and competitive, attracting business investments that in turn keeps Singapore's unemployment rate in check.

Appeals on humanitarian grounds have also highlighted the invaluable contributions of foreign workers to Singapore's thriving economy despite remaining marginalized and vulnerable to exploitation. In this respect, as beneficiaries of the fruits of their labour and sacrifice, Singaporeans have an ethical obligation to share their common spaces with foreign workers.

Moreover, many others also point to the irony that Singapore's meteoric rise from a sleepy fishing village to a thriving port city was built on the blood, sweat and tears of our immigrant forefathers, a significant number of whom came as penniless labourers with hopes of a better life for their dependents and themselves. They eventually sank their roots in Singapore soil and their descendents now form the core of the Singapore heartbeat. Hence Singaporeans intolerant of the foreign workers' presence have obviously forgotten their migrant roots, the argument goes.

### **The Segregation Reality**

While the integration rhetoric makes for stirring speeches and inspiring national narratives, it is not likely to win over many from the segregation camp. This is because it does not address the deeper issue at hand – the good life enjoyed by Singaporeans is premised to a large degree on the unequal treatment of the foreign worker community.

An obstacle to the genuine integration of foreign workers lies in Singapore's utilitarian immigration policy that evaluates a foreigner's worth based on his usefulness for business. Consequently, foreign workers satisfy this criterion by accepting low wages and skeletal rights to keep business operation costs competitive. They are thus allowed to enter the country to work.

However, this also means that from the get-go, they do not enter on an equal footing. This is because the very provisions that qualify them in the first place are the very same ones that undermine their odds for sustaining the level of affluence that will allow them to interact with the majority of Singaporeans as equals. As a result, policy dictates that their presence be regarded as temporary in anticipation of the challenges to integrating them fully into Singapore society.

Following from this, it is arguably a tall order to expect the relationship between Singaporeans and the foreign worker community to be anything deeper than that between a consumer and service provider respectively, to be terminated once the business transaction is completed. To alter this relationship will in turn undermine the very economic grounds on which they are allowed to enter our shores to begin with. Hence, from a cost-benefit analysis standpoint, it does not make sense for both parties to invest in forging any enduring and meaningful relationships.

### **Shared values and economic policy**

In sum, the integrationists cannot depend on humanitarian rhetoric alone to win over those who advocate segregation. This is because the problem does not lie in the lack of compassion among Singaporeans for the underprivileged – the consistently generous donations of Singaporeans to various charities bear testament to this.

Rather, the deeper issue that needs to be addressed is the grim reality that the affluence Singaporeans enjoy today is to no small degree indebted to the unequal treatment of the low and unskilled temporary workforce. Acknowledging this inequality not only requires Singaporeans to take a long hard look at their shared values, the logical course of action that follows may entail Singaporeans to compromise the material comforts they are already accustomed to.

Put differently, Singaporeans have been handsomely rewarded for closing a blind eye to the inequality built into their country's policy towards foreign labour.

If advocates of integration are serious about advancing their cause in a more convincing manner, they will have to wean the nation's economy away from this reliance on cheap labour in a manner that will not undermine the good life which is regarded by many Singaporeans as their birthright.

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