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Rethinking Racial Harmony in Singapore

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With Racial Harmony Month just around the corner, Singaporeans can expect to be treated to a sensory feast of their multiracial and multireligious heritage usually involving traditional dresses, customary dishes and unique cultural practices. Although well-intentioned, an important question remains: Does commemorating Racial Harmony do more harm than good to the project of multiracialism in Singapore?

It is possible to argue that commemorating racial harmony may have raised an awareness of inter-racial 'realities' that may not have existed before. Thus, paradoxically, to have true enduring racial harmony, Singapore may have to start conceiving of a day when racial harmony day is superfluous.

The Genesis of Racial Harmony Celebrations

Racial Harmony was first commemorated in 1997 when National Education (NE) was introduced into schools. Celebrated on 21 July, it commemorates the race riots that broke out in 1964 during a procession marking the Prophet Mohammed's birthday. Being among the four core events celebrated by schools every year since, it represents a day for "schools to reflect on, and celebrate our success as a harmonious nation and a society built on a rich diversity of culture and heritages" as enshrined in the NE message "[w]e must preserve racial and religious harmony: though many races, religions, languages and cultures, we pursue one destiny."

Prior to this initiative, the history of Singapore taught in schools was chiefly weighted towards the country's economic and social development up to the Japanese Occupation. As such, most young Singaporeans were only cursorily aware of Singapore's tumultuous 1964 race riots. This was alluded to during then PM Goh Chok Tong's Teacher's Day speech in 1996 when he observed the following,

"Most of our school leaders – our Principals and Vice-principals – lived through the pre-independence period. They will remember those difficult times. But many of our teachers – as many as 40% of them – were either too young to remember those critical years or were born after 1965. They too must learn and acquire the sense of history and shared destiny that we have to inculcate in our students. We will make a massive effort to reach out to all our teachers. Our older teachers will themselves have to revive their memories of those tumultuous times and share them with their younger colleagues."

The Problems with Celebrating Racial Harmony

Although well-intentioned, taking into consideration that there were no specific threats to Singapore's multiracial and multireligious social fabric when NE was introduced, the annual commemoration of Racial Harmony Day may have inadvertently made Singaporeans see the issue of race as a fault line they may not have recognized prior to its inception. After all, threats only become existential if it is perceived and believed to be so by those it threatens.

The identification of racial and religious differences as a possible fault line has been further exacerbated in the wake of 9/11 as well as the disruption of the *Jemaah Islamiyah* (JI) network in Singapore. The need to celebrate and respect racial diversity in Singapore has gained new impetus, so the logic goes, as it will act as a bulwark against the threat of terrorism.

However, by explicitly linking the need for strong inter-racial bonds to counter the terrorist threat, the link between terrorism and unstable race relations may be unwittingly reinforced. Of course, the suggestion here is not for Singaporeans to stick their collective heads in the sand in order to pretend that real problems do not exist. The suggestion here is that inter-racial relations have moved on and are very different from the times of the Maria Hertogh riots and the 1964 race riots.

Thus, the constant reference to the current JI threat in the same breath as these turbulent moments of Singapore's past brings to attention that the spectre of race riots is as real today as it was then obscures the fact that inter-racial relations then and now are very different. By placing these contextually different historical events together, one is more likely to regard fellow Singaporeans through racial lenses while also perpetuating a sense of insecurity.

Moreover, celebrating racial harmony in its current manner may also belay the attainment of true harmony due to the manner in which it is celebrated. The majority of such events often consist of cultural performances attended by participants in ethnic costumes. While this allows for the interaction of people of all hues in a non-threatening environment to foster closer bonds, it does not accurately reflect the natural setting in which the different races interact on a daily basis. In fact, the constant compartmentalization of Singaporeans into their CMIO (Chinese, Malay, Indian Others) moulds may accentuate stereotypes of each race and discipline individuals into focusing on each other's skin colour while, ironically, being constantly reminded to look beyond the superficial.

Not all efforts at celebrating Singapore's heritage will lead to this end. Nevertheless, taking into consideration the current global climate, to advocate inter-racial cohesion by accentuating simplistic stereotypes of the different racial groups serve more harm than good. This is because in order to bring to attention the differences between races that have to be bridged, there is a tendency to resort to stereotypes to illustrate its existence before work can be done to eradicate it.

Reconstructing Racial Harmony

If not Racial Harmony Month, what then? One alternative would be to celebrate and share Singapore's diverse heritage via the very 'lived' and 'real' celebration of the various festivals throughout the year.

In conjunction with this shift in focus, rather than the strengthening of racial bonds in superficial settings, Racial Harmony Month could also be replaced with a month that commemorates another aspect of NE – community involvement projects. This aspect of NE nurtures active citizenship, social responsibility, compassion and leadership skills through voluntarism in all areas of Singapore life, ranging from community service to the less privileged, responsibility for the environment, and an awareness of shared democratic civic duties. Such a focus would serve as a better vehicle to strengthen trust between Singaporeans in their capacity as Singaporeans rather than their hyphenated identity.

Admittedly, although the drive to instill these values and responsibilities are to some degree in place, it has not been accorded the degree of attention and coordinated effort as Racial Harmony Month. If social resilience is to bind Singaporeans beyond the era of terrorism, instituting active civic participation that transcends racial boundaries while instilling a sense of ownership and belonging to the community may serve the nation better in the long run. Such a move at strengthening social cohesion will encompass all potential fault lines – including that of race – as the root rather than the symptoms of potential threats to the social fabric will be treated.

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