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Multiculturalism in Singapore: The Ties that Bind and Blind

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The state of inter-racial and inter-religious relations in Singapore came under scrutiny in a recent study by the Centre of Excellence for National Security (CENS) at the S Rajaratnam School of International Studies. The findings, as disclosed in this commentary, hold that inter-racial and inter-religious relations in Singapore are more than robust, with benchmarks far exceeding similar figures in other developed countries.

IN TODAY'S “age of terror”, it is not unusual for multicultural societies to harbour fears of social fragmentation along ethnic and religious lines. Singapore is no exception. It is unlikely that the controversial debate over what has sometimes been described as – correctly or incorrectly – a “clash of civilizations” will be resolved anytime soon. Nonetheless, Singapore’s response to this challenge to plurality needs to be calibrated with a sense of proportion to avoid well-meaning but pessimistic over-reactions.

To arrive at a calibrated response, meaningful strategies to strengthen inter-communal relations will first require a better understanding of the degree to which members of the public are willing to interact with one another. Put more succinctly, even before meaningful deliberation can begin on how to encourage the different groups in society to integrate better, it would be fruitful to appreciate whether they are willing to integrate with each other in the first place.

Multiculturalism in Singapore: An Encouraging Report

Admittedly, benchmarking an acceptable level of integration is a very arbitrary exercise. For example in the Pew Global Attitudes report *The Great Divide: How Westerners and Muslims View Each Other* conducted in 2006, it was noted that “even in the wake of the tumultuous events of the past year, solid majorities in France, Great Britain and the United States retain overall favourable opinions of Muslims”. The “solid majorities” in France, Great Britain and the US were 65%, 63% and 54% respectively.

If such levels are “solid majorities” in developed Western nations, what then may be considered a tolerable yet acceptable level of integration for Singapore? Singaporean sociologist Tan Ern Ser has noted that “from a policy perspective, a 80% positive figure would suggest that the ethnic relations formula used has been successful, though policy-makers may hope for even better results”.

A recent survey was done by the Centre of Excellence for National Security (CENS) to examine the attitudes of Singaporeans towards inter-racial and inter-religious interaction. The survey suggests that policy-makers’ hope of more than 80% positive responses is no mere castles in the air. The views of a

nationwide random sample of 1,824 Singaporeans were solicited to assess their willingness to interact with members of each of the main racial (Chinese, Malay, Indian, ‘Others’) and religious (Buddhist/Taoists, Muslims, Hindus, Christians, minority religions and Free-thinkers) groups. The survey looked at a range of scenarios encompassing the private and public spheres as well as the majority-minority composition of the Singaporean state. With a benchmark of an acceptable level of inter-communal engagement set at the very high threshold of no less than 90% -- an extremely rigorous threshold by any measure – the results show Singaporean multiculturalism to be very positive on the whole.

The State of Race and Religion

Encouragingly, inter-racial and inter-religious ties were consistently sturdy in the public sphere. In the social, economic, political and security domains where interdependence is key, the survey shows that the concepts of race and religion did not play an important role in the choices Singaporeans make. For example, with a more than 90% probability, the findings indicate consistently that race and religion did not have any bearing on the choices Singaporeans made vis-à-vis their next-door neighbour, co-worker, Member of Parliament or policeman.

The only two circumstances under which race and religion played a prominent role in decision-making – indicated by a less than 90% approval of inter-communal interaction – were in the personal sphere (namely pertaining to marriage partners), and with regards to majority-minority status. For example, in terms of willingness to marry someone of a different race, the approval rate peaked at 52% for the percentage of Malays willing to marry a Chinese. For inter-religious attitudes, the lowest acceptance rate amongst all religions was by the Free-thinkers of which 55% were receptive to a Hindu majority. Nonetheless, this 55% would be considered a “solid majority” by Pew standards.

Race and Religion Unpackaged

The findings also indicated variations in the reception of each racial and religious group by those of a different communal background. An assessment of overall attitudes along racial lines indicated the Chinese were consistently the most preferred race while the most receptive of other racial groups was the category of the ‘Others’. Interestingly, although the Chinese were on the whole the most preferred racial group, they were the least receptive to non-Chinese. Encouragingly, the remaining three racial groups attain an equal degree of acceptance by those of a different race as them.

With regards to religion, on the one hand, the Buddhists/Taoists and Free-thinkers appeared to be the best received religious groups and, on the other hand, the Muslims the least. Although the Buddhist/Taoists were among the best received group, they were the least receptive of non-Buddhist/Taoists. In contrast, the Hindus were in general the most receptive of those of a different religious background as them.

Overall, it should be emphasised that the prospects of any racial or religious biases manifesting themselves in different contexts (if at all) were very slim owing to the high acceptance threshold of 90% employed by the survey.

The Future of Multicultural Singapore

Undoubtedly, the survey’s findings showed that Singapore’s inter-racial and inter-religious relations may not be absolutely perfect. However, it is important to view the survey results with a clear and rational mind. If the results are considered in its entirety, it is not only encouraging but also impressive that there is a high degree of civility in the common and shared spaces in the public sphere.

The report has shown that Singaporeans by and large may still be conservative when it comes to inter-

racial and inter-religious marriages. Some may also harbour a preference for their racial or religious group as the majority of the country. Such findings are not surprising. On the whole, with the rigorous threshold employed in the survey to detect faint signals in inter-communal relations, Singapore's multicultural fabric is both robust and healthy. It is not an exaggeration to hold that other developed states would be envious of such results.

Hence, it can be surmised that the current state of inter-communal relations among Singaporeans reflects a healthy acceptance of living with diversity. Singaporeans are not just an integrated lot. They are also, more importantly, comfortable with the idea of integration. This is not a justification for complacency. Instead, the survey findings should be a reference point for a critical introspection of Singapore's multicultural condition crucial for evolving strategies for sustaining the current communal cohesion.

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