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Ties that Bind and Blind: Scorecard of Singapore's Multicultural Bonds

By Yolanda Chin and Norman Vasu

Synopsis

Given recent events involving race and religion in Singapore between 2007 and 2011, it may be tempting to wonder if Singapore's multicultural harmony has possibly been strained. A study by the Centre of Excellence for National Security at RSIS argues this is not the case.

Commentary

IN LIGHT of several incidents touching on race and religion in recent years, it may be tempting to wonder if Singapore's multicultural harmony has possibly been strained. Such events included but are not limited to a senior pastor of the Lighthouse Evangelism church making disparaging remarks about Buddhists and Taoists in 2010 and former Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew calling into question the desire of Muslims to integrate in Singapore in the book *Hard Truths to Keep Singapore Going*.

In an attempt to more systematically discern if there has been such unease, the Centre of Excellence for National Security (CENS) at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) conducted a study of two questions pertaining to the social fabric of Singapore: (1) Have Singapore's multicultural ties been resilient between 2007 and 2011? (2) Were Malays, Christians and the Chinese consistently less inclusive than non-Malays, non-Christians and non-Chinese respectively between 2007 and 2011?

Singapore's multicultural ties resilient between 2007 and 2011?

Multicultural resilience is defined as the ability of a multicultural society to maintain or strengthen its inter-racial or inter-religious ties in the event of challenges to social harmony. The CENS study assessed Singapore's multicultural resilience by comparing and contrasting the strength of multicultural ties in 2007 and 2011. Singapore's multicultural ties can be said to be resilient if the strength of its multicultural ties is either maintained or increased over this period of time.

The strength of multicultural ties is measured with an Inclusiveness Index. The Inclusiveness Index tracks the proportion of civic multicultural Singaporeans, that is, individuals who are receptive towards interacting with all the main three races (Chinese, Malays and Indians) and five religious groups (Buddhists/Taoists, Muslims, Hindus, Christians and Free-thinkers) across a range of contexts in the public sphere. Data for the Index is derived from surveys conducted in 2007 and 2011 with a sample size of 1,763 and 2,111 Singaporean citizens respectively.

Hence, it can be held that Singapore possesses multicultural resilience between 2007 and 2011 if and only if the Inclusiveness Index for Singaporeans is maintained or increased over this period of time.

The definition of civic multicultural Singaporeans includes, but is not limited to, idealised multicultural Singaporeans. Idealised multicultural Singaporeans can be thought of as a subset of the larger category of civic multicultural Singaporeans. Idealised multicultural Singaporeans are receptive towards interacting with all the main races and religious groups across the full range of contexts in both the public and private spheres. Examples of contexts in the public sphere include one's choice of neighbour and Prime Minister whereas private sphere examples could include one's choice of spouse and close friends.

Therefore while idealised multicultural Singaporeans are by definition civic multicultural Singaporeans, civic multicultural Singaporeans are not necessarily idealised multicultural Singaporeans.

The findings on attitudes in the private sphere are pertinent to the degree that it is arguably a good indicator of integration and trust as it often involves cultivating emotional and physical ties on a voluntary basis. While this is so, the questions pertaining to interaction preferences in the public sphere would have far more policy-making implications. This stems from two reasons – legislative efficacy and political prudence.

Firstly, with regard to legislative efficacy, the modern state, while possibly interested and concerned with attitudes in the private sphere, has more room for legislative manoeuvre for issues pertaining to the public sphere. For example, it would be far more straightforward for a state to ensure that minorities are represented in Parliament than it would be for the state to ensure that different racial groups are willing to marry each other.

Secondly, with regard to political prudence, justifying intervention in the public sphere with legislation would be far more palatable to the general public where intervention may be defended with the argument that private autonomy has to be often balanced with the greater public good. Conversely, even in the context of Singapore where the government has often been charged with being too willing to intervene in private sphere choices, resistance from the general public can be overwhelming.

Hence, while modern states do attempt to some degree to legislate the mores and predilections of its people, the energies of government in a world competing for its attention and resources would arguably be best directed at public sphere issues.

To this end, the Inclusiveness Index for Singaporeans increased by between 65% - 69% in 2011 from between 45% - 50% in 2007. Hence, the study found Singapore's multicultural ties have been resilient between 2007 and 2011 as the findings decisively indicated an increase in the Inclusiveness Index for Singaporeans.

Malays, Christians, Chinese less inclusive than non-Malays, non-Christians, non-Chinese between 2007 and 2011?

This study is also interested in the level of inclusiveness of three specific groups (as opposed to all others) – the Malays, Christians and Chinese. These three groups arguably have been involved in incidents pertaining to race and religion not just between 2007 and 2011 but also over the years such that their commitment towards multicultural harmony in Singapore may be called into question.

Any of these three groups can be deemed consistently less inclusive if and only if they are decisively less inclusive in both 2007 and 2011. In this respect, there is insufficient evidence to suggest this to be the case. Therefore, Malays, Christians and the Chinese have been no less inclusive than non-Malays, non-Christians and non-Chinese respectively over the same period.

Moving Forward

It would be arguably naïve to either expect that Singapore will not experience continued incidents involving race and religion or not have emotionally-charged debates surrounding such matters. As such, rather than be swept up by such moments, this study has sought to survey Singaporean attitudes to inclusiveness from a higher vista unencumbered by the persuasiveness of the lived moment, one that may be influenced by the anecdotal and emotive rather than the representative and dispassionate.

In conclusion, this report offers a good grade to what is effectively a scorecard of multicultural bonds in Singapore.

Yolanda Chin is Research Fellow and Norman Vasu is Assistant Professor at the Centre of Excellence for

National Security (CENS), S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University. "The Ties that Bind and Blind: A Report on Inter-racial and Inter-religious Relations in Singapore (2012)" is available at www.rsis.edu.sg/cens/.