

SINGAPORE

Chinese-Malay-Indian-Others categorisation a hindrance to cohesive society: Ho Kwon Ping

By Amanda Lee, TODAY
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TODAY reports: The rigid categorisation hinders cohesiveness in diversity, says businessman Ho Kwon Ping.

PHOTOS



CAPTION

SINGAPORE: The traditional Chinese-Malay-Indian-Others (CMIO) categorisation should be dropped, so as to maintain cohesiveness in diversity, which is a challenge the Republic has to overcome in order to achieve its dreams in the next 50 years, said prominent businessman Ho Kwon Ping.

Such rigid categorisation hampers Singapore's ability to deal with an increasingly vocal and diverse society, where there are multiple identities and more complex sub-ethnicities, he said, citing same-sex couples and intra-ethnic differences between immigrants and locals as examples.

"Race and class and a consensus on social issues are becoming increasingly complex and intertwined in Singapore," said Mr Ho, who is executive chairman of Banyan Tree Holdings. He was addressing about 560 people including students, young working professionals and civil servants at his fifth and last lecture as S R Nathan Fellow, organised by the Institute of Policy Studies.

"The CMIO model ... has helped to create common ground among those of different tongues and dialects, but it also has had the effect of oversimplifying the diversity that is our social mix," he said. "How we define people often shapes how they behave, so the less we pigeonhole people, the more chances we have for a cohesive diversity."

Mr Ho cited the example of New York City, where there is no fixed preconception of people. Despite their diversity, all New Yorkers love the city, he noted.

Similarly, Singaporeans must learn to embrace one another as individuals and not as categories, he said. "Without stereotypical expectations, we can accept and appreciate each person as different, but from whom we can learn new things."

Mr Ho identified improving social mobility as another challenge.

Though a meritocratic system based on academic grades has served Singapore well in the past 50 years, the Republic is "in danger of being a static meritocracy that sieves people based only on a narrow measure of capability within single snapshots of time and, from thereon, creates a self-perpetuating elite class".

Citing statistics on the backgrounds of those in prestigious schools and Public Service Commission scholarship recipients, and showing that the majority came from privileged families, Mr Ho said: "Ironically, the original social leveller and purest form of Singapore-style meritocracy — our educational system — may perpetuate intergenerational class stratification, rather than level the playing field."

Affirmative action for disadvantaged groups is not a solution, because that would bring about "the start of an unending process of affirmative actions that will only demean and discredit our meritocracy in the long run", he added.

While non-graduates can now take on jobs previously open only to graduates, Mr Ho said the Civil Service could do more to take the lead on social levelling. For instance, the Administrative Service — the elite among public servants — should change its recruitment criteria, replacing academic pedigree with psychometric and other aptitude tests.

The third challenge for Singapore to overcome is in building a collaborative, and not paternalistic, governance style, said Mr Ho.

"However, such a government culture of participatory democracy can work only if the institutions of civil society can be actively engaged in decision-making," he said, in calling for better access to information for civil society activists.

During the dialogue after his speech, questions on race and diversity dominated the proceedings. Members of the audience asked whether Singapore would go the way of New York City in becoming a cultural melting pot and whether the Republic was ready for a non-Chinese Prime Minister.

Mr Ho expressed confidence that a more cohesive diversity would solidify in the coming years.

Citing the United States as an example, he said questions had also been raised on whether the country was ready for a black president, yet Mr Barack Obama was elected in 2008.

Meanwhile, Mr Bilahari Kausikan, Ambassador-at Large in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, has been appointed as Mr Ho's successor as S R Nathan Fellow for the Study of Singapore.

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