

More heartfelt discussions on race needed, less reliance on policing

Tough laws have maintained racial harmony. But these days, Singaporeans also want open, if difficult, conversations on race and its frictions.

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For *The Straits Times*

In Singapore, discussions on and management of societal fault lines are underpinned by the pursuit of harmony and cohesion.

To effect this, the state has adopted a multi-pronged strategy, spanning wide-ranging community institutions, wielding firm leadership in scoping sensitive conversations, and acting as a final arbiter of contentious issues.

Most Singaporeans take pains to tolerate customs and practices that they may not feel comfortable with, appreciative of the diverse mix of racial, religious and cultural practices here.

In Singapore, a mix of strong laws and tough policies helps maintain a harmonious social fabric.

Policies such as the Ethnic Integration Policy and ensuring minority candidatures in group representation constituencies serve to promote racial integration and prevent the marginalisation of minorities – a situation prevalent in other polities.

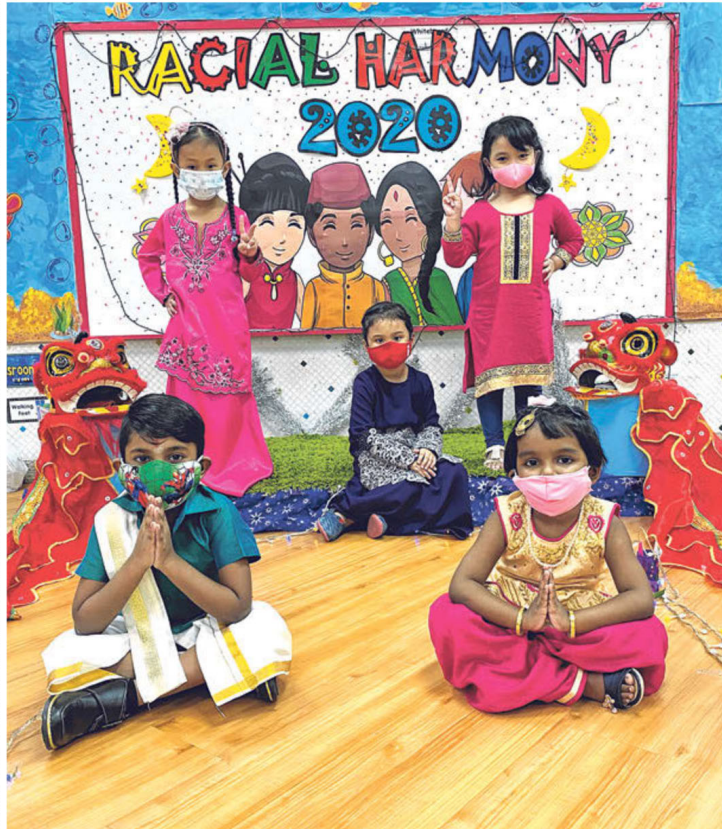
Hard legislation, such as the Sedition Act and Section 298A (which makes it an offence to promote enmity among different groups on grounds of religion or race), coupled with active enforcement, is seen as essential to preserving the peace. It compels offending individuals to cease and desist when it comes to socially divisive actions.

This status quo has served Singapore well over the past few decades.

Of late, however, some segments of Singapore's population have shown their dissatisfaction with a top-down approach to policymaking on race and religion. They want to meaningfully engage in open conversations on fault lines, partly fuelled by what they see occurring in other countries.

The rise of social media, independent blogs and viral content facilitates such citizen-led social advocacy and protest.

These Singaporeans are calling for the removal of hard legislation in the management of communal relations. They prefer a more liberal approach observed in many developed societies, where public discussion on race and religion is not curbed and policing is limited to



A celebration of racial harmony at PCF Sparkletots @ Sembawang Block 789. Choosing to identify and behave as Singaporean first, rather than as ethnic selves, can strengthen Singapore society and leave a more positive impact on future generations, say the writers. PHOTO: PCF SPARKLETOTS @ SEMBANGWANG BLOCK 789

only the worst forms of hate speech.

Such calls, however, are being met with discomfort by other Singaporeans. This is not surprising, as surveys show that Singaporeans expect any misstep in public discussions on race and religion to have a negative impact.

An Institute of Policy Studies paper last year on societal fault lines in Singapore found that nearly half of the 4,000 Singaporean residents surveyed believed that there would be suspicion and anger against communities if relations were not managed well, although two-thirds did not think that violence could be one of these consequences.

With the majority of respondents in the survey indicating levels of our racial and religious harmony as "high" or "very high", it might be unthinkable to them that any group in Singapore would respond to a racially or religiously charged comment with violent action. These attitudes might continue

to prevail with an increasingly educated and globally connected populace.

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While hard legislation discourages individuals from committing acts that threaten harmony, this approach has its downsides.

The broad scope of such legislation, as well as perceived or actual OB (out-of-bounds) markers, and strict policing of discussions on race and religion, can result in an unintended but significant chilling effect on public engagement and conversations. Statements or acts made with good intentions to raise awareness or promote social justice may fall into the ambit of what is punishable. Individuals with thin skins may feel insulted, perceive their feelings to be wounded, and dial 999 to assuage their emotions. While it is good that public trust in the police force to enforce laws

fairly is high, there should not be such a strong reliance on security agencies to play the role of community mediator.

Too much reliance on policing and enforcement can shift attention away from what truly matters – assessing whether statements illustrating injustices are true, and if so, how one should clarify or resolve these issues.

We should strive for a better approach in managing race discussions. For one thing, there should be guidelines on the use – and misuse – of police reporting, even as we promote respectful civic engagement.

Many Singaporeans understand that substantive conversations on race can be uncomfortable – especially if they confront the privileges of majority groups and delve into the unfair treatment experienced by various ethnic or religious groups. In order to allow for more public

airing of race- and religion-based issues even if they cause discomfort, the state will need to introduce more nuance to existing legislation to prevent honest discussion from inadvertently crossing the line to cause offence and be deemed to promote enmity between groups.

All this, while ensuring that distress caused by insidious actors is curbed.

One guideline might be to be strict about anonymous allegations but more permissive of individuals who publicly identify themselves when they speak up with anecdotes or experiences of discrimination. After all, the lived experiences of each individual are often different.

The track records of the individuals expressing their opinions and views on fault lines matter too. If they have been involved in related activism to advance causes for the social good, their perspectives should be deliberated upon and addressed.

People should, however, still act responsibly and not add fuel to fire.

Providing clearer frameworks on public discussions of race and religion can help steer such exchanges to promote understanding.

A refusal to publicly acknowledge difficult issues of discrimination and privilege around race can cause issues to simmer, and erupt with more force when they are brought into the open. More importantly, refusal to acknowledge real issues perpetuates inequality or injustice done to minority communities.

While Singapore's law-based approach to racial harmony has kept the lid on tensions for decades, there is scope to examine if this harmony has come at a price: that of downplaying frictions in our interracial relations, and turning a blind eye to the fabric of implicit bias that is felt daily by minorities but invisible to the majority.

When discussing racial harmony, Singaporeans should embark on a mindset shift.

In the past, the fear of disturbing racial harmony stopped many discussions. But fear of punishment, while effective, should not be the main reason why Singaporeans choose to tolerate people of other races and religions.

Instead, such discussions should be based on mutual respect and understanding, so that each community is sensitive to and aware of what it feels like to be the "other", so that we can be more "woke", or awake and aware of difficulties felt by marginalised communities.

But even as we discuss race-based issues, we should make sure such discussions are directed towards strengthening the Singaporean identity rather than focusing on one's race or culture.

Choosing to identify and behave as Singaporean first, rather than merely as ethnic selves, can help us strengthen Singapore society as a whole, and leave a more positive impact on future generations and how they perceive issues of race.

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