

Race, rights and respect: Reflections on the route to harmony

Beyond symbolism, Racial Harmony Day sets the stage for more poignant deliberations on the way forward

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For The Straits Times

Singapore's annual Racial Harmony Day was celebrated last week, but there is much more to it beyond the sights, sounds and smells of such multiracial festivities. It sustains and reinforces Singapore's commitment to harmonious coexistence, despite differences.

Indeed, the Racial Harmony Day celebrations are well received by most. The recent 2021 CNA-IPS Survey on Race Relations involving about 2,000 Singapore residents found that four in five respondents felt the event helps preserve racial harmony.

However, the reality is that Singapore's quest to be a nation regardless of race, language and religion is a work in progress. This is because cultural needs

continually evolve, shaped by both local and international realities.

As such, contestations and resolutions about cultural rights are expected.

How Singapore handles these issues is crucial to building national identity and ultimately securing the country's future.

THE STORY SO FAR

Singapore has done well in navigating contentious cultural issues. The state has tried to accommodate contemporary needs, in tandem with giving due consideration to preserving our prevailing harmonious coexistence.

One example is the tudung issue. Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong announced in his National Day Rally speech last year that the former restrictions on tudung for Muslim staff in healthcare settings would be lifted.

This was met with much applause from the Muslim community.

While the call to accommodate

the dress needs of Muslim nurses was first brought up in a public forum and widely publicised in the media nearly a decade ago, the glacial speed of change does not imply a majority Chinese society dragging its feet to accord provisions and rights to minorities.

A plethora of policies, from the recognition of festivals, languages and practices, to ensuring communal and political representation, to accommodating needs such as dietary requirements, bears testament to the country's commitment to include all.

This stems from Singapore's model of multiracialism on which Independence was based.

Most independent states have veered towards the securing of rights and preferential treatment for the majority in society.

In contrast, Singapore's "regardless of race" and "equality" ideals respect the rights of all individuals and communities to maintain their cultural identities, amid a cohesive Singapore identity.

ISSUES THAT CAN ARISE

There are periodic calls for the Government to designate various religious and racial celebrations as public holidays, over and above the current 11 days already catering to most of the population.

If an approach is taken that simply caters to all groups, this can easily result in a deluge of demands, given the diversity and vibrancy of our racial and religious space. This also has implications beyond the sociocultural, such as the impact on the economy.

A loose attitude towards rights provision can also result in the importance or triviality of issues relating to each community being harder to discern.

This, in turn, results in those outside the communities becoming desensitised to the issues.

Instances in other countries hold useful lessons. In Canada, the duty to accommodate the widest possible range of rights forms part of its national narrative.

A dedicated independent watchdog, the Canadian Human Rights Commission, holds the government to account.

In 2018, 25,000 individuals contacted the commission to find out if they could file a complaint on the grounds of their rights being compromised.

This number ballooned to 36,000 in 2019, 49,000 in 2020 and 60,000 last year.

Yet the number of complaints found to be valid or pertinent and accepted by the commission for further investigation fell from 1,129 in 2018 to 849 last year.

HARMONY TAKES TIME

This is not to argue against conferring rights to communities beyond the status quo but is a reminder that any policy decision must account for the potential of those rights to impose on others, and also of competing considerations beyond the sociocultural.

It highlights that, whenever changes to sociocultural policies are being considered, due process in the light of multiculturalism involves engaging all groups in close conversation to identify and understand their concerns.

This is vital to demonstrate the mutual respect and understanding extended to all, even in the face of differing stances.

The engagement process is often over an extended period – especially when groups hold deeply ingrained values and are hesitant to articulate their true feelings if these go against the thinking of others.

After all, in the spirit of harmony, it may seem disruptive to say that something exulted by one group may cause grief, seem

inappropriate or be inconsequential to another.

Such feelings may often be harboured and discussed within a group privately, accompanied with varying levels of resentment about accommodating others.

In addition, this process often does not progress in a linear fashion. The dynamic nature of society and daily life all but guarantees that the perspectives and stances will change.

These changes can result from ad hoc occurrences or events, dialogue within and between groups, the role of leaders and opinion influencers, and even the very act of the group being consulted.

KEEPING THE PEACE

Singapore's approach to sustaining peaceful coexistence between racial and religious groups has been based on its harmony-centred model.

Singaporeans will, to a great extent, compromise for harmonious coexistence. They prefer to keep the peace and pursue issues with tactful and measured dialogue over more antagonistic approaches such as sit-ins, protests and revolt.

This enables communities to uphold practices and perspectives they fundamentally value.

Local Christian clergy interviewed in a study led by the first author of this commentary acknowledged that their broader goal of being Christian witnesses was best fulfilled in a peaceful sociocultural climate – even as they were compelled to make considerable adjustments to limit their evangelism approaches in line with the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act.

In the same vein, recent regulations and limits on large LED wreaths often seen at Chinese wakes amid the backdrop of apprehension, including the

discomfort of minorities alongside other safety issues, also reflect this conciliatory approach.

Such compromise gives space for everyone to take ownership in sustaining the stability Singapore society is renowned for.

It is fortuitous this stance continues to prevail, as most Singaporeans do not perceive majority or minority groups to be overbearing in their push or advocacy for their cultural rights.

This is illustrated by the responses of over three-quarters of respondents in the 2021 CNA-IPS Survey.

The Government's current focus on the potential for more robust legislation on employment discrimination following the resolution of tudung donning in the healthcare sector also reflects the evolution of both the Government and society in the quest for a harmonious ideal.

While the process of deliberating the relevant policies can be protracted, ungainly and exasperating at times, it can lead to additional insights that can help resolve other related concerns.

Ultimately, Singapore has pursued a path that seeks to ensure every segment of society continues to feel valued.

This is integral to remaining socially cohesive, while continuing to reap the benefits of a diverse population.

In this season replete with Racial Harmony Day festivities, may we avoid actions which may undermine the peace and engender polarisation, even as we forge ahead in tackling more poignant issues of significance.

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