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Citation

EUGENE, Tan K. B.. CMIO holds value for minority communities. (2021). *Straits Times*. A18-A18.

Available at: https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/sol_research/3719

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CMIO holds value for minority communities

Critics lament its race-based structure but in a significantly Chinese-majority Singapore, the CMIO scheme provides the assurance of official recognition for minority communities. Let's nurture Singapore's civic identity while fully recognising its multiple roots.



Eugene K B Tan

For The Straits Times

With school-going Singaporeans having just commemorated Racial Harmony Day this week, it is timely to consider our next steps as a society managing the challenge of evolving race relations.

It matters immensely. As circumstances change, we have to ensure we do not sleepwalk or maladapt our way to a more divided society.

Oflate, debates over race and religion seem to have become more contentious. Have we flatlined on how we engage each other in navigating difficult issues?

Incidents such as the polytechnic lecturer haranguing non-Chinese over dating Chinese, the People's Association's seeming lack of cultural awareness, and a woman mocking her Hindu neighbour conducting a prayer ritual have raised legitimate concerns on the state of race relations here.

They vividly demonstrate that race matters, and whether race unites or divides ultimately depends on Singaporeans deepening our understanding and respect of other races.

How well we navigate these tides and eddies presented by a multiracial society will in part depend on the maps and charts that have guided us in the past. Do they still serve us well?

One such "map" that has come under the spotlight is the Chinese-Malay-Indian-Others (CMIO) system of classifying Singaporeans, at birth, into four broad categories.

While acknowledging its bureaucratic usefulness, there are regular calls for such a race-based system in this day and age to be relooked or even set aside altogether.

Proponents for abolishing the CMIO classification – with "Others" for Eurasians and other communities – argue that doing so will help remove the race-based lenses through which we view



fellow citizens.

Notwithstanding the well-intentioned criticisms, we must be careful not to overlook the intrinsic and symbolic value the CMIO classification holds.

In a significantly Chinese-majority Singapore, the CMIO scheme matters to all communities, but more so for the minorities. In essence, it provides the assurance of official recognition for each community and affirms multiracialism as the foundation of our Singaporean identity.

Furthermore, doing away with the CMIO scheme raises questions about the "special position" of the Malays as the indigenous people of Singapore, enshrined in Article 152 of the Singapore Constitution.

This provision mandates that it is the Government's responsibility "constantly to care for the interests of the racial and religious minorities in Singapore", and specifically "to protect, safeguard, support, foster and promote their political, educational, religious, economic, social and cultural interests and the Malay language".

Getting rid of the scheme will raise disquiet among minority communities over the potential erasure of their distinct and distinctive identities, the end point of which is assimilation into the majority community.

As we seek to strengthen race relations, it is crucial to remember that a people's grasp of their own community's history and roots is the basis of their sense of identity and security. As a nation of immigrants, the constructed civic identity will take many more generations to be internalised.

Put simply, the multiple identities of Singaporeans must be

sustained. While being Singaporean must be our primary identity, especially in the common spaces, secondary identities along racial, religious, cultural and linguistic lines have always been openly accommodated. This is how we have and will thrive as a plural society.

MANAGING RACE RELATIONS

Part of the angst and anxiety of a young nation-state is that our overarching identity as Singaporeans seems inadequate in making our sub-national identities less prominent.

And it is certainly worrying that racism and discrimination persist and may even have increased. Multiracial harmony is not preordained. Ethnic markers, rather than being crosscutting, often reinforce differences. While they continue to define us, we can and should make them less salient and depoliticised. Throw class into the mix and societal cleavages can deepen further.

However, we must not overlay the social distance between communities and the apparent apathy on the part of the majority community. Transplanting concepts from abroad such as critical race theory and majority-race privilege without due consideration of our context is also unhelpful.

An appreciation of the nuances of ground realities can provide the basis for meaningful dialogue and a pathway to understanding. Without it, there is the real danger of talking past each other as individuals and groups become defensive and trade competing and conflicting grievances.

Painting an entire community negatively in broad-brush strokes perpetuates stereotypes that have a corrosive effect on race relations.

SHIFTS ACROSS GENERATIONS

Another challenge is negotiating and redrawing the boundaries on discussions on race, language and religion as society evolves.

Younger Singaporeans aspire to discuss the issues of race and religion more openly, while older Singaporeans are concerned about the sensitivity of such discussions.

As President Halimah Yacob observed at the opening of the 14th Parliament last August: "Younger Singaporeans prefer talking about these issues more candidly and openly, which is a positive development. But the conversation needs to be conducted with restraint and mutual respect, because race, language and religion will always be visceral subjects. If each group pushes its own agenda to the extreme, we risk eroding the common space, and fracturing our social cohesion."

The relative success of national integration has naturally led to growing expectations and even over-exuberance of Singapore being post-racial, a state of affairs where race is no longer relevant.

As we make sense of how race matters in our society, it is vital to recognise that characterising complex issues in the form of simplistic binaries, such as "Singapore is racist/not racist" or retaining/doing away with the CMIO scheme, may result in unintended consequences.

Often, the way forward is path dependent on policies and

institutions that are already in place for an extended period.

Thus, the endeavour must focus on making them work better for us.

For instance, instead of having to choose one race, mixed-marriage couples can since 2011 opt for their children to have dual racial affiliations.

The Ministry of Education has done away with the public release of annual data and 10-year trends on how students from the different races fared in the national examinations. To improve every community's educational performance, such data are probably still collected and carefully analysed. But how they are presented and used can either assist the communities or reinforce racial stereotypes, especially of minority groups.

Having made good progress after almost 56 years of nationhood, Singapore can embark with guarded optimism on more robust discussion and debate on race issues.

What can result from this continual dialogue and meaningful engagement?

A stronger sense of who we are, a nuanced understanding of our differences, and a better appreciation of what needs to be done to strengthen the Singaporean identity and ethos, one that incorporates our multiple identities.

As Singapore seeks to strengthen race relations, it is crucial to remember that a people's grasp of their own community's history and roots is the basis of their sense of identity and security, says the writer, adding that the multiple identities of Singaporeans must be sustained.

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