9-2017

# Quality immigration will remain Singapore's lifeblood

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BY

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**September 29, 2017**

Seemingly innocuous individual decisions and life events, such as marriage, starting a family and migrating, have significant public-policy implications. This is reflected in the changing demographics of a country, which can affect the agility with which the country responds to the constantly evolving external environment.

Singapore's population growth over the past year was its slowest in more than a decade.

As of June this year, Singapore's total population stood at 5.61 million, up just 0.1 per cent from last year.

The annual population brief released by the National Population and Talent Division on Wednesday also highlighted two consistent themes: Fewer citizen births, and an ageing citizen population.

There were 33,167 citizen births last year, a dip from 33,725 in 2015, although this remained marginally above the past decade's annual average of about 32,200 citizen births.

With increasing life expectancy and low fertility rates, the citizens' median age also increased to 41.3 years, from 41 years in 2016. The proportion of citizens aged 65 and above rose to 14.4 per cent, up from 13.7 per cent last year.

In the years ahead, the proportion of citizen population aged 65 years and above will rise at a faster pace compared with the past decade as more post-war "baby boomers" enter the post-65 age range.

In the past year, 22,102 individuals — the highest number in the past 10 years — were granted citizenship. Most new citizens were from Southeast Asia, followed by other parts of Asia, and then from outside Asia. Another 31,050 people were given permanent residency. Overall, the number of permanent residents remained stable at 527,000.

The demographic challenges will become more significant in the years ahead.

However, after the uproar and unhappiness over the 6.9 million population in 2030 planning parameter in the 2013 Population White Paper, a very cautious approach to immigration has been adopted, despite the need to boost our population level.

A salient point from the latest set of population statistics is that immigration will continue to play an important role in population augmentation — not just in terms of numbers, but also in terms of quality.

Immigration in Singapore reflects two competing, perhaps even conflicting, anxieties. One is the state's anxiety that if the population is not topped up adequately, quantitatively and qualitatively, then Singapore is down the path of economic malaise, social vulnerability and geopolitical irrelevance.

The other is the average Singaporean's angst and anxiety that there are already too many immigrants in Singapore and that it is taking in too many more immigrants.

With the domestic workforce expected to decline from 2020, the policy imperative to keep the immigration doors open will remain abidingly strong.

As former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew put it in 2012: "Our choice must be … taking in immigrants. I know Singaporeans do not feel very comfortable seeing so many strange new faces, but the alternative is economic stagnation and worse, nobody to look after our old people later on."

In the contentious Population White Paper debate, the previous immigration policy was perceived as generating more competition in schools, for housing and jobs, a cause of runaway property prices, overcrowdedness in public spaces, the cheapening of the value of Singapore citizenship, the dilution of the Singaporean identity, and more.

These sentiments are no different from that of other countries with immigrant inflows.

The reality is that immigration will continue to be a prominent feature in Singapore's political, economic and socio-cultural landscape.

Despite the slew of marriage and parenthood incentives, Singapore is unlikely to raise its total fertility rate (TFR) to near replacement level. Last year's resident TFR dipped to 1.20 from 1.24.

However, the apparent tension over the immigration policy negatively affects the state's efforts to recruit new immigrants. From time to time, xenophobic sentiments are expressed on social media platforms. This was particularly acute following a large influx of people between 2005 and 2009. As the 2010 advanced census data revealed, the number of non-residents (foreigners working, living or studying in Singapore without permanent residence status) almost doubled from 754,500 in 2000 to 1.31 million in 2010.

The number of permanent residents almost doubled from 287,500 to 541,000 in the same period.

In contrast, the number of citizens grew more modestly, from 2,985,900 in 2000, to 3,230,700 in June 2010. The next census in 2020 will have less-dramatic figures where immigration is concerned, as the days of runaway growth are probably over.

Nonetheless, as many countries' experiences show, the challenge in getting citizens to embrace a national policy like immigration is that not every citizen gains from it — at least at the personal level. It is not unusual for foreign workers and new immigrants to be blamed for local jobs lost, stagnant wages, high property prices and public infrastructure unable to keep up with the influx.

The global economic realities in which Singapore's immigration regime operates mean that immigrant-seeking countries such as Singapore and Australia compete with one another for the same talent pool.

At the same time, a country's immigration regime has to appeal to the prospective immigrant and be acceptable to the domestic audience. At times, the interests and needs of the foreign and domestic audiences not only compete but may also conflict.

All things being equal, prospective immigrants are more likely to migrate to a country where there is less opposition to immigration. Politically, immigration can be a vote-loser for governments if it is not managed properly and the local population resists the policy and new entrants.

This was vividly demonstrated in United Kingdom Brexit polls, the United States presidential election and the recent German election.

The race for talent will get only more intense.

Singapore's global pursuit of human capital is also made more compelling given that developed countries such as Australia, the UK, the US and many European

Union countries are competing to make themselves attractive immigration destinations.

Like Singapore, these countries seek to appeal and attract the well-educated and talented segment of the potential migrant pool to augment their human resource capability.

Increasingly, the usual immigrant sources for Singapore — China, India and South-east Asia — are also experiencing demographic slowdowns. They are also experiencing healthy economic growth in which the push factors for emigration are weakened.

Hence, immigration policy is less likely to be about quantity but more about quality — numbers are not as pivotal as attracting the right type of immigrant.

The qualitative aspect must become a crucial differentiator in deciding who acquires citizenship. This includes whether a prospective citizen shares our values and ethos.

Regardless of the pace of immigration, more openness over the direction of the immigration regime can help secure buy-in.

The Government and Singaporeans should not shy away from a frank discussion over the pluses and minuses of immigration.

Gaining the support of Singaporeans requires attending to the concerns at both cognitive and affective levels. The bottom line is that the immigration regime has to significantly contribute to society's overall welfare, and ensure that Singaporeans' collective interests are adequately looked after and their identities secure and protected.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

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CORRECTION: In an earlier version of this commentary, we said that according to the 2010 advanced census data, the number of non-residents (foreigners working, living or studying in Singapore without permanent residence status) almost doubled from 754,500 in 2000 to 1.35 million in 2010. The actual increase was to 1.31 million in 2010. We are sorry for the error.