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Immigration and Singaporean Identity: The Ethnicity Conundrum

By Nur Diyanah Anwar

Synopsis

The compartmentalisation of Singapore's multicultural citizens into the four main 'races' prevents the effective forging of a comprehensive Singapore identity which new and local-born citizens can relate to. A stronger Singaporean identity needs to be inculcated in all citizens, especially with the increasing diversity of new immigrants to its shores.

Commentary

RECENT CALLS by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong and his ministers for new citizens to play a part in assimilating into Singapore society are not new; neither are the oft-repeated suggestions for Singaporeans to strengthen their Singapore identity before their ethnicity. However the two calls are mutually contradictory as being Singaporean comes with a caveat – one must belong to a "race". Inevitably this has largely encouraged citizens to view themselves according to their ethnic identities first.

Expectations for new citizens to easily assimilate into the Singapore society are unrealistic if ethnic identity already commonly precedes a Singaporean one, and where stark differences between ethnic groups are maintained. Both government and society should move beyond identifying Singaporeans according to one's ethnic group first, if a more substantial Singaporean identity is to be forged. This now becomes increasingly pertinent considering the diversity of new citizens domiciled in Singapore, to foster nation-building and ultimately the resilience of the society in times of need.

Is assimilation of newcomers possible?

'Assimilation' requires new additions into a society to adopt and conform to a central common identity, into a homogenous society. This differs from 'integration' in which the boundaries between the various ethnic groups are preserved while trying to bring them together. Although 'assimilation' and 'integration' might be used interchangeably by the government, we should note the nuance in them.

Singapore's multicultural policies primarily encourage the integration of the 'races', but it nonetheless recognises the need for new citizens to assimilate into a common Singaporean identity to foster nationalism.

In this regard, there lies an impediment in assimilating the new citizens into Singapore society if being Singaporean necessitates the categorisation into a racial category in the first place. Singapore is not homogenous; multiculturalism organises the citizenry along the CMIO (Chinese-Malay-Indian-Others) model which maintains the differences and boundaries between ethnic groups.

Naturally this indemnifies the ethnic identity first before the Singaporean one through lived experiences with the state's conception of multiculturalism. This is the first major issue in assimilation – there is a lack of a suitable setting that cultures the Singaporean identity before the ethnic one.

The problem here too lies in the government's continued conception that ethnicity is immutable and must be separate to ensure managed stability through policies. New citizens would also be categorised into one of the four broad ethnic categories. This is imposed on them; they too must belong to a structurally-defined 'race' to be entitled to the benefits Singaporeans have. Such rigidity provide them with a compartmentalised view of Singapore society from the onset, and do not encourage a comprehensive Singapore identity overall.

This is especially significant to new citizens who do not belong to the Chinese, Malay or Indian groups (note that even within these categories, the diversity in dialects – and now between local residents and foreign-born - is supposedly abridged). The 'Others' category is expanding, but the term simplifies and flattens the diversity of these new citizens. This is perplexing; the category originally used to refer primarily to the Eurasians, now conveniently includes new citizens who may not even be culturally defined together.

Difficult for new citizens to easily assimilate

If the same logic of ethnic immutability can be applied, then Singapore cannot discount that they may maintain their own ethnic practices within the society. This might keep many smaller pockets of culturally similar groups, which would not be healthy in developing an overall Singapore identity, nation-building and societal resilience in the future.

Thereby, 'race' distorts any organic development to being and living Singaporean *despite* ethnic difference or diversity. Assimilation into a comprehensive Singapore identity may not be impossible, but it is difficult because of the priority placed on one's 'race' first.

Unless multiculturalism in Singapore expect new citizens to assimilate into the respective CMIO groups instead, it would be difficult for them to assimilate into the Singapore society with such exclusivity. What we have here are contradictory objectives being forwarded. Multiculturalism's maintenance of ethnic groups' boundaries hinders effective assimilation of new citizens into a Singapore identity and society.

The overlap of the four circles representing CMIO – an analogy by then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong in a 1999 speech in Parliament, to signify these groups' interaction to produce a common Singaporean identity, culture or opportunities in common spaces – is not potent enough compared to the affiliations each would have to their respective 'races'.

Most particularly, it is unreasonable to expect new citizens to easily assimilate when each ethnic group's atomistic perception of their place within society already create difficulty in integration. This can be observed in issues such as the wearing of the *tudung* (*headscarf*) in certain public service positions, practices held during seventh month festivals, or insensitive remarks against certain ethnic groups on social media.

Beyond mere respect and toleration

To integrate effectively suggests the acceptance of each ethnic group's culture and practices; how do we expect to achieve a comprehensive Singaporean identity – into which the new citizens should assimilate into - when it might still be difficult to accept each other's differences?

Local-born Singaporeans might feel wary of the inflow of new additions, who bring their own set of

cultural differences on top of competition for jobs. This might affect how they accept new citizens - or permanent residents and other immigrants for that matter.

In this regard, there is a fundamental and pertinent need to rigorously foster the Singapore identity amongst all Singaporeans especially with the growing diversity. This moves beyond just respecting and tolerating the differences of each ethnic group, but to respect each member as Singaporean. We cannot expect new citizens to lose their prior affiliations fully, but we should further encourage the Singapore identity to flower especially if they have chosen Singapore as their home.

However, the government's demands are too high if it is difficult to establish what the Singaporean identity is beyond our 'race'. It should not be left arbitrary; this would ultimately ensure that the whole society grows as a nation in the long term. For Singapore to effectually assimilate new citizens, the process has to start now - before the problems of assimilation and integration become entrenched.

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