

RACIAL INTEGRATION AND NATION-BUILDING IN SINGAPORE

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As a young, multi-racial nation, Singapore is faced by the most formidable task of balancing the relationship between its Chinese majority and its minorities, within a predominantly Malay regional environment. Following the maxim of unity in diversity to effect a politically united but culturally pluralist society, its leadership seeks to inculcate in its population a sense of commitment to the state, and an acceptance of the linguistic, cultural, and religious differences of the country's four component races. How these avowed objectives are translated into concrete steps is analyzed by the author. Another issue examined by the author is the wide gap between the English-educated and Chinese-educated segments of the population. This difference in academic training provokes an entirely new type of problem, which could be more serious than the racial question.

Singapore is unique in Southeast Asia in that it has a population which is composed of a majority of ethnic Chinese, a minority of ethnic Malays, and a small proportion of Indians, Pakistanis, Eurasians, and others. According to the 1970 census, of a population of 2.1 million, slightly less than 76 percent were ethnic Chinese, 15 percent were ethnic Malays, 7 percent ethnic Indians and Pakistanis, and less than 3 percent Eurasians and others. It is perhaps also unique in its approach to the problems of racial integration and nation building. In most racially heterogeneous countries, the dominant racial group assimilates the minority groups and the way of life of the majority prevails. In a few countries, even minority communities try to dominate politically and otherwise the racial majorities, as in South Africa and Rhodesia. Singapore follows the maxim of unity in diversity, seeking to achieve political unity but allowing a fair degree of cultural pluralism.

There are, of course, important reasons why Singapore is adopting a policy of accommodation rather than forced assimilation. It would have been justifiable for the government to follow the usual path of allowing the majority to set the norm and expect the racial minorities to conform. But such a policy is fraught with

danger both internally and externally. Domestically, it could generate racial discord leading to national insecurity. Externally, since the ethnic Chinese elsewhere in Southeast Asia, with the probable exception of Thailand, have posed problems of assimilation in their respective countries, Singapore cannot afford to project the image of a "little China" in the region.¹ Besides, and this is perhaps not always understood by its neighbours, Singapore wishes to be Singapore, an independent nation on its own right, and not a little something else. Singapore is a part of Southeast Asia and wants to live on the best of terms with her neighbours. Once this is understood, the political, economic, and social policies that Singapore tries to carry out will show themselves to be logical and reasonable.

Singapore, a Multi-Racial Nation

Not only is Singapore's population multi-racial; it is also multilingual and multi-cultural. The four principal races in Singapore have their own distinct languages, religious and cultural heritage, as well as ethnic characteristics. How to unite such diverse peoples and build a homogeneous nation is one of the most challenging problems faced by a small and young nation born hardly nine years ago.

Roughly half of the ethnic Chinese are Chinese-speaking or Chinese-educated while the other half are English-speaking or English-educated. Perhaps about 10 percent of them are literate in both languages. The predominant religious influence is Buddhist-Taoist. Christians (both Catholic and Protestant) total less than 10 percent. There are also cultural distinctions between the two groups: the one, bearers of Chinese values and norms, the other, followers of Western-European customs and practices. The Malays are generally homogeneous, although the English-speaking among them tend to be more modernized and progressive. The latter are also economically better off, being mainly salaried people in the public service. The Indians and Pakistanis, like the Singapore Chinese, may also be divided into the English-speaking and non-English speaking groups, except that there are less cultural differences between them. The Pakistanis are mainly Muslims, whereas the Indians and Sri Langkans are Hindus, Buddhists, or Christians. The Eurasians (mainly Anglo-Indians) are all Westernized, speak English, and are predominantly Catholics. They are a small but homogeneous group. These four or five racial components are ruled by an elected government which comprises members from all the ethnic communities. The President of the Republic is a Eurasian (the first President was a Malay), while Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew is of Chinese descent. The Foreign Minister, Mr. S. Rajaratnam, is of Sri Lanka descent. It may be seen from the above account that Singapore is without doubt a multi-racial nation-state.

A relevant question to ask is how can such diverse racial groups live harmoniously together in one political entity? But then, one might retort "since they could do so for more than a century under the British colonial administrators, why can't they now?" Except that there is one significant difference between colonial Singapore and independent Singapore, that is whereas under the British the different communities had to exist peacefully together in order that they might be allowed to continue making a living in the colony, now as owners of

their own country, they have to cooperate positively to bring about a united nation. Power has to be shared among them and differences have to be settled by themselves. The people are now masters of their own fate, and upon how they treat one another will depend the peace and prosperity of their homeland. The answer lies in the creation first of a united political entity, and from there to convince them that in order for this entity to grow and prosper they must have a common identity and common interests. This calls for the adoption of a policy of gradual integration of the heterogeneous people and not a policy of forced assimilation of minorities. To inculcate a sense of commitment to the state and maintain racial harmony, multi-racialism and multilingualism are emphasized as fundamental beliefs of the nation. This implies, first, loyalty to the state, and second, tolerance and acceptance of the linguistic, cultural, and religious differences of the four component races, according all Singaporeans equality before the law and equal opportunity for advancement.

To create a Singapore identity and to forge a nation out of diverse racial and cultural groups necessitates the nurture and development of national values and beliefs as opposed to sectional and group interests. At times national interests must override sectarian interests and national values supersede sectarian values. But this is only tolerable if it is not viewed as a deliberate attack on, or denial of, minority rights. It is hoped that ultimately a new Singaporean identity and culture will evolve out of the melting pot of diverse social and cultural elements.² In the meantime what will help the ethnic minorities to integrate with the majority is a policy of accommodation of minority interests, economic assistance and social upliftment, and tolerance of their languages and religions.

There are four official languages in Singapore, all of which can be used in Parliament, though in practice English and Chinese (Mandarin) are the principal working languages. Singapore has television and radio programmes in all four languages and several Chinese dialects.

When Singapore was preparing to merge with Malaysia in 1959, Malay, the language of the minority race, was adopted as the national language of the country — a unique feature among nation states. And the national anthem of Singapore is sung only in the Malay language. Such government policies can hardly be said to be popular with the ethnic Chinese majority, but they have acquiesced in these for the sake of national interest and survival. For geopolitical and pragmatic reasons, Singapore is following a new approach in racial integration and nation building.

The Malay Problem

Of the racial minorities, the Singapore government pays most attention to the Malays, the dominant race in West Malaysia. The Malays are generally regarded as the indigenous people of the Malay archipelago, and in colonial times they were favoured by the British. Economically the Malays in Singapore are behind the other ethnic communities, and the government is cognizant of the need to assist them to improve themselves. Practically all Malays who could gain admission into the universities and colleges are given free tuition, a privilege not available to non-Malay students. Primary and secondary education are, of course, free for them. Malay parents have been advised to send their children to receive a technical and vocational education rather than a traditional Malay education in order that they might obtain better occupations when they finish schooling. At the same time education in the mother tongue continues to be encouraged, with emphasis on English as an important language for commerce and technological advancement.

The government has granted special concessions in the enactment of laws affecting the religious sensitivities of the Malay Muslims. All Singaporeans, excepting the Muslims, are subject to the Women's Charter which makes marriage other than monogamous ones a punishable crime. Non-Muslims must register their marriages at the civil registry, but Muslim marriages are regulated by a specially created

Muslim Religious Council.³ This is another example of special concessions to accommodate the Malays in Singapore. It is also proof that the Singapore government is committed to the preservation of the cultural heritage of all communities. The national policy is that of integration of all facets of life of the various communities, and not to subordinate or assimilate the value systems and religious beliefs of minorities, except where these violently conflict with the development of national ideologies and values.

In keeping with the policy of equality for all, the government frowns upon the idea of any minority group expecting special privileges and treatment, and will not allow them to play up communal grievances. Certain special privileges are voluntarily given, but only insofar as they do not appear to the majority as over-pandering to the wishes of any racial group. This is the most the government could permit, because it has put strong constraints on the Chinese majority in respect to their demand for the preservation of their language and culture, and to allow the minorities to get everything they asked for might be potentially dangerous, as this could cause resentment on the part of the tolerant, dominant race; in other words, rouse the sleeping giant.

But whatever may be done to accommodate minority interests, there are bound to be some areas of dissatisfaction. Some Singapore Malays think that the concessions granted to them are not substantial enough, especially in relation to what their brethren in Malaysia are enjoying.⁴ But they fail to realize that in Malaysia the Malays constitute the majority, whereas in Singapore, the Malays comprise only a 15 per cent minority. At any rate, when the former Malaysian Prime Minister Tunjku Abdul Rahman offered to resettle them in Johore (the southern-most state of West Malaysia) at the time of Singapore's separation, hardly any took up his offer. This indicates that the Malays did not think that they were very badly treated in Singapore. If the Malays reflect carefully, they would come to the conclusion that in few countries in the world would a racial minority

be so fairly treated, because there is not only no discrimination against them politically, socially, and economically, but they are being deliberately favoured in several areas of national policy. The government could hardly be expected to do more than this without being visibly unfair to the other sections of society.

It is true that the Malays are economically in a weaker position than the other communities, but their economic elevation can only come about over a period of time. They cannot expect to move from the positions of chauffeurs and policemen to directors and corporation managers in a matter of a few months or years. But with better education for their children, and cultivation of a more modern outlook and work ethic, the next generation of Malays in Singapore should be in a better position to compete successfully with the rest for the economic fruits of the country. In the meantime, they will be accorded such assistance in improving their standard of living as is not overly dissonant with the general principle of justice and equality for all citizens.

Political Unity and Cultural Pluralism

Sociocultural accommodation or even assimilation is the ultimate goal of heterogeneous nation-states, but before reaching that stage there has to be a transition period during which cultural pluralism is viewed as not incompatible with political unity. To force the pace of social and cultural assimilation is to create problems for the country. Cultural pluralism in a subdued form need not be harmful to national development, but could be a source of enrichment to the cultural life of a nation.

In Singapore there are a number of national policies which directly or indirectly contribute to the goal of "unity in diversity," namely education, national service, and the encouragement of multi-cultural corporate activities.

The education system in Singapore is geared towards producing bi-lingual pupils, that is, English plus the mother tongue (Chinese, Malay, or Tamil) depending on the wishes of

the parents. But it is increasingly evident that more and more parents are opting for their children an education with English as the first medium and the native language as the second medium.⁵ This is done for pragmatic reasons as an English education is seen as more advantageous for the pursuit of a career in Singapore. Nevertheless, the learning of the mother tongue, which in effect is Chinese, Malay, or Tamil, is encouraged partly as a means of preserving the positive aspects of the traditional cultures of the people, so that the new Singaporeans will not become totally Westernized.

Parents have two choices. Those of Chinese descent can send their children to English-speaking schools where Chinese is taught as a second language or vice versa. Malays could send their children to Malay-English or English-Malay speaking schools, while Indians or Pakistanis can go to Tamil-English or English-Tamil schools. The aim of the education policy is to equip high school graduates with a proficiency in English and at least one of the Asian languages. For non-Malays, a knowledge of Malay as the third language is also desired. All this emphasis on bilingualism or trilingualism is one way to bring about mutual understanding among the various communities and to minimize social barriers caused by language differences. Ability to communicate is an important step towards harmonious relations and the building of a united nation of diverse racial origins. The Singaporeans of the future should also be in a position to communicate with peoples of the neighbouring countries, such as Malaysia and Indonesia. With the peoples of other Southeast Asian countries, we shall have to depend on English as a medium of communication.

An indirect means for the development of national identity is the national service instituted since Singapore's independence in August 1965. Feeling an urgent need to build up a military force for self-defense, the government introduced compulsory three-years military service for men between the ages of 18 and 40. In some cases part-time service of 12 years could be substituted. In the course of training

national servicemen the government found that it is a useful means of breaking down language, racial, and class barriers, since young men training and living together in the military camps develop common ideas and beliefs, as well as a common identity and loyalty to the nation. Future male Singaporeans will have a common military experience of at least three years. Through this period of serving in the military force they will have developed a sense of national belonging, whereas in the past the people of Singapore had sectarian loyalties based on race, language, or religion. National service also helps the youth to become more effectively bilingual. Thus, it is both an insurance for national security as well as an instrument of national and ideological unity.

National service helps to break down class barriers. Boys from rich and poor families alike have to work, train, and live together, eating the same food and receiving the same treatment in the camps. Promotion is by ability and merit. For the first time, too, the government has developed a respect for the military as a necessary part of society, whereas previously only those who could not find better occupations would take up a military career. Whether this in itself is a good thing or not, is of no concern to us here. But, as a member of the ASEAN, Singapore believes that by being able to look after its own defense requirements it can contribute to the collective security of the region, and thus there will be less need to have a foreign military presence in Southeast Asia.

In an attempt to foster the growth of a Singaporean culture, the government starts from the basis of the encouragement of multi-cultural activities. In community centres where many of the corporate activities take place, multi-cultural programmes are constantly staged, such programmes consisting of Malay, Chinese, Indian, and Western songs and dances. This is aimed at cultivating an appreciation of the cultures of races other than one's own. It is hoped that over a period of time the intermingling of the different cultures could bring forth some amalgamation and ultimately the

evolution of a new culture that draws from the four main cultural streams. How successful this will be only time can tell, but it is aimed in that direction.

Tolerance of cultural pluralism is demonstrated in the list of annual public holidays. New Year's Day (1 January) is a universal holiday based on the Western calendar which is in keeping with Singapore's commitment to modernity and the world outlook. Hari Raya Haji in December and early January (2 days) is a Muslim festival; so is Hari Raya Puas in October. Chinese New Year occurring in February or March is allotted two public holidays, while the Christians have Good Friday and Christmas Day. The Buddhists have Vesak Day, whereas the Hindus have Deepavali as public holiday. The other two public holidays are National Day and Labour Day. From this list it may be seen that Muslims are given three public holidays a year, the Chinese, many of whom are Buddhist-Taoists, a total of three days, the Indians who are mainly Hindus and Buddhists two days, and the Christians two days. Thus, the ethnic Chinese who comprise 76 percent of the population have no advantage over the Muslim Malays who constitute 15 percent of the population. Fairness to minority races is scrupulously maintained; sometimes the government even bends over backwards to show that this is done, by giving the minorities more than their population percentage entitles them to. This is to disprove any charges that government policies are unfair to minorities.

In the appointment of cabinet ministers a similar fair distribution is practised. Of the ten full ministers, seven are ethnic Chinese, one is Malay, one Ceylonese (Sri Lankan), and one Eurasian. There are eight Malay Members of Parliament out of sixty-five, and there are two Malay Ministers of State, and two Parliamentary Secretaries. Senior civil servants, too, have a fair representation of the various races, though in this case the meritocratic system tends to work against the Malays to some extent, as percentage-wise there is a smaller number of highly trained and qualified Malay personnel.

Religious freedom is accepted and there is tolerance of various religious practices so long as they do not interfere with the life and property of others. The different communities are allowed freedom of religious beliefs, but where their religious practices are detrimental to others the government will introduce restrictions. For example, the Chinese used to let off crackers during festivals, and on many occasions this caused the outbreak of fires leading to burnt-down houses and loss of lives and limbs. The government, therefore, banned the firing of crackers. Such a prohibition inhibits the freedom of religious practice by the Chinese, but the rationale here is that human lives are more important than the needs of ghosts and demons. Similarly, the government is said to be not too happy about Muslim mosques using loudspeakers early in the morning to broadcast their prayer sessions as this constitutes a form of noise pollution and interferes with the sleep of non-Muslims, but so far no action has been taken to stop this practice.⁶

There were also other controversial measures taken in the interest of the nation as a whole but which did not please some religious groups. One such measure was the legalization of abortion which was opposed by the Catholics. The government overruled the objection of the Catholics because it is intent on reducing the birth rate in Singapore so as to raise the economic standards of the people. Catholics can, of course, practise their own methods of family planning, but non-Catholics who do not have the same conviction about abortion can resort to it as a means of preventing unwanted births. The current ideal is a family of two children, one boy and one girl. Perhaps an indirect result of this policy may be in the increase of the percentage of Catholics in Singapore in the decades ahead, since Catholic families can continue to produce large families of five or six, and assuming that non-Catholics will veer towards the national norm of two in a family. But I suspect that Muslims are also continuing to have bigger families. So the group that is likely to decrease demographically is the non-Catholic Chinese.

Bridging the Gap Between the Chinese and English-educated

A non-racial but important question that has occupied the attention of the Singapore government is the social and cultural integration of the Chinese-speaking and English-speaking segments of the population. In the past, a chasm existed between the two groups in political orientation, cultural inspiration, and value system. The English-educated tended to be Western-oriented and imbibers of Western culture, while the Chinese-educated tended to be Chinese-oriented and less Western in outlook.⁷ The former are more individualistic and liberal, whereas the latter are more group-conscious, disciplined, and indoctrinated. The Western-oriented have more exposure to democratic values and practices as well as American movies and pop-culture, whereas the Chinese-oriented are more amenable to authoritarian leadership and exposed to Chinese sword-fighting pictures. Previously, the language barrier served to bring about a dichotomy of interests leading to mutual distrust and lack of cooperation. Such a dichotomy would clearly be detrimental to the growth of a national unity among Singaporeans.

The government has wisely adopted social and political measures resulting in narrowing the gap between the two. Among these measures are the bilingual education policy, equal employment opportunities, recognition and improvement of the Nanyang University (a university founded by Chinese community leaders using Chinese as a principal medium of instruction), a more flexible policy of university and college entrance qualifications, and absorption of more Chinese graduates into the public sector. All this has brought about greater contentment among the Chinese-educated who now feel they have a stake in the country.

While this aspect of national integration does not come under racial assimilation, it is nevertheless an important facet of the process of social engineering that has been going on for the last fifteen years. If mismanaged or left unattended, it could have been potentially as disruptive of peace and unity in Singapore as

the Chinese-Malay problem. Tackling the Chinese-English-educated problem successfully is a significant step towards homogeneity among the 76 percent of ethnic Chinese population upon whose votes the People's Action Party depends for its mandate to be the government of Singapore. In terms of domestic politics, keeping the confidence of both groups of the Chinese electorate is more relevant to the PAP's continued monopoly of power than the externally more sensitive Malay "problem."

Notes

1. For a recent discussion of Chinese assimilation in the region see Wang Gungwu (1974).
2. For discussion see Heng-Chee and Evers (1972).
3. For a discussion see Kassim (1972).
4. For a discussion see Kassim (1972).
5. The integrative role of education in Singapore is also discussed in Lau Teik Soon (1974).
6. See Berita Harian (June 7, 1974).
7. The characteristics of the diverse Chinese people in Singapore are described in Wang Gungwu (1970).

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