

Ideas Offered for Better Integration

Summary

In discussions on integration in Singapore, participants said that while Singapore made a creditable effort at welcoming foreigners, harmonious relations should not be taken for granted. To foster effective integration, greater attention should be given to what local-born Singaporeans considered a common culture foreigners should respect, what can and should be expected of foreigners in terms of their loyalty to Singapore, and Singaporeans' own sense of security.

IPS Closed-Door Discussions on Integration in Singapore

In August and September, three closed-door discussions were conducted among local-born Singaporeans and foreigners based in the country to hear their views on the relationship between the locals and foreigners, what model of integration would best suit Singapore's unique conditions, and how best to research these questions. The participants were from academia, expatriate clubs, welfare agencies, and also included community leaders, civil servants, and journalists. In the summary that follows, the shorthand term, *native* refers to local-born Singaporeans, and when not further specified, *foreigner* refers to people born outside Singapore including naturalised citizens.

Economic Security

2. On the current state of relations between natives and foreigners, amidst the constant discourse of the need for foreigners here, there was an impression of competition for jobs and education opportunities exacerbated by the current recession. The crux of the discussion was the scale at which foreigners were being admitted and if this were to continue, it would be prudent not to take the current level of harmonious relations for granted.

3. Foreigners among our participants were appreciative of the proactive national effort in addressing issues of integration. Their view was that it was relatively easy fitting into Singapore currently. They suggested it would be important for the government to pay greater attention to locals most affected by the influx of immigrants. If these Singaporeans felt somewhat secure in terms of jobs and welfare, hostility towards foreigners would be reduced, acceptance would increase.

Culture

4. Participants noted that local-born Singaporeans were upset about having to change their way of life, their use of language and settled social norms to accommodate the

presence of foreigners. The behaviour and attitudes of the latter often contradicted some of these settled norms. Varying standards in work ethic and norms posed a barrier to smooth relations especially at the workplace.

5. On that score, participants felt it was critical that foreigners achieve a minimum standard of proficiency in English, (just as much as this was an expectation applied to natives,) to engage the workplace and broader community effectively. In addition, it would be good if there were ways to help the foreigners increase their appreciation and adoption of Singapore's model of multiracialism.

6. From the discussions, it was clear that Singaporeans had misconceptions of foreign transient workers and would be distressed if dormitories were located in their neighbourhood, although those living in the public housing estates were less likely to voice their discontent. This could partly be the result of the transactional bias in our relationship with them, and representatives of welfare agencies stressed that it would be beneficial if more effort were made to engage this group socially.

Loyalty

7. Participants agreed that integration was a two-way street and appreciated the need for mutual respect and tolerance between locals and foreigners. There were different expectations of how loyal foreign residents, whether permanent residents (PRs) or expatriates, ought to be. One sticking point was a perceived reluctance among foreign residents to allow male children to take stay on in Singapore and take-up PR status because of the national service liability. On the side of the foreigners, one reason for that could be the high cost of living in Singapore made them ambivalent about sinking roots here.

8. Participants were divided in their views on a segmented approach to engaging different categories of foreigners . integration for expatriates, PRs and new immigrants and segregation for unskilled foreign workers. The differential treatment to the latter may trigger unhappiness among expatriates and PRs if they thought that their compatriots were being treated unfairly.

9. One view on this issue was that it could be helpful if policymakers were more transparent in declaring the eligibility criteria for permanent residency and citizenship applications. Native Singaporeans could then be further assured of the full value and interests of the country in admitting certain people as immigrants. The question of migrant spouses could also benefit from some attention especially if the current trend of marriages with foreigners continued to rise.

10. Participants were divided in their reactions to the policy of sharpening the distinction between PRs and citizens. On one hand, it would encourage the PRs to take up Singapore citizenship if it promised greater privileges but on the other hand, it could accentuate the rift between two groups. Furthermore, the motivation for citizenship application could then be more acutely dictated by economic and financial

considerations as opposed to one based on affective ties, identification with the way of life and socio-cultural values in Singapore.

The Future

11. Going forward, most participants felt that multiracialism as practised in Singapore could still be the model of integration but it had to be a balanced and measured process focused on widening the common public space. The notion of loyalty and integration had to be nurtured on the premise of affective ties to one's community and nation as opposed to the transactional focus of one's contribution to the economy.

12. One participant felt that the public perhaps demanded too much and too quickly for a declaration of loyalty from the new arrivals. Though it was a different context, our forefathers were not subjected to undue pressure. Another noted that the really existing culture among Singaporeans, epitomised by Singlish, was in fact one that accommodated diversity and hybridisation. It was unfortunate that official government policy frowned on such hybridisation that could act as social glue between natives and foreigners.

13. Participants proposed a variety of strategies and methods to define and evaluate the state of integration that the IPS research team could consider in a multi-disciplinary study of the issue.

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This project is a collaboration between the Demography and Family cluster and Politics and Governance cluster at IPS.

