NUS National University of Singapore

Source: *The Straits Times*, pA4
Date: 24 November 2021

Gender, political ideology driving identity politics globally: Minister

Goh Yan Han

Gender and political ideology are among the identity markers, apart from race and religion, that are driving identity politics in societies around the world today, said Finance Minister Lawrence Wong yesterday.

The age-old conflict between national and tribal identities remains one of the most potent driving forces of violence within and between nations, he added.

He said some think that ethnically homogeneous countries are less susceptible to tribal conflicts, but "tribe" is not just a matter of ethnicity.

"I have noticed that other aspects of identity have surfaced in our conversations – around gender, sex or various causes that people feel strongly about," he said.

The minister was speaking at a round-table session on new tribalism and identity politics, and noted that he and Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong had earlier this year spoken at length on the topic of racial harmony in Singapore.

The conference was organised by the Institute of Policy Studies and S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, with Mr Wong as the keynote speaker.

In his speech, he noted that tribalism runs deep in all human societies, and has become more prominent today with a focus on the individual.

Mr Wong acknowledged that there has been a greater emphasis on the culture of self over the last few decades, which has brought about progress in many areas.

This evolution differs from the past, when societies everywhere were generally more cohesive and people were more connected and active in their respective communities.

"In Singapore, we call this the 'kampung spirit'," said Mr Wong.

However, when the sense of self is inflated at the expense of community, the connections between people are weakened, he said.

"This leads to loneliness and isolation. And when people feel lonely and alienated, they fall back on defences that are perhaps primeval in our species – they revert to tribes."

The Internet has also made it easier for new tribes to form and organise themselves, but the echo chamber of social media often means that the tribes end up self-selecting information to support and reinforce their own views, he added.

Said Mr Wong: "Tribalism may feel like community. But the two are not the same. Community is about inclusive connections, and it's based on mutual affection. Tribalism is inherently exclusionary, and it's based on mutual hate: 'us' versus 'them', 'friend' versus 'foe'."

Mr Wong listed several examples of recent conflicts around the world that have arisen from identity politics.

These include the culture wars in the West that cut across issues, from abortion rights and voting rights to woke culture and vaccination or mask-wearing.

Mono-ethnic societies have also seen conflicts related to identity politics. Poland, which is ethnically homogeneous, with Poles comprising more than 95 per cent of the population, has seen an intensifying stand-off in recent years between supporters of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) rights and conservatives who oppose them. Some parts of the country have declared themselves "LGBT-free zones" amid strong resistance from liberals.

The United States, despite its long-cherished melting-pot ethos, is seeing greater political polarisation based on ideology and identity.

For example, a growing proportion of Republicans and Democrats view the opposite party in starkly negative terms. Even life-saving public health measures such as mask-wearing and vaccination have become markers of political identity, noted Mr Wong.

He noted that when such tribal identity takes root, it is difficult to achieve any compromise without it seeming like dishonour.

He said: "Every grievance threatens one's self-worth, and every setback a challenge to one's sense of self. So we get a downward spiral: Individualism and self-interest cause tribes to form, each tribe closes ranks upon itself, and politics becomes defined as all-out war among tribes."

gyanhan@sph.com.sg

The harmonious state of affairs in Singapore will always be on a knife-edge, said Finance Minister Lawrence Wong yesterday, noting that the culture wars that began in the West have already created new forms of identity politics here beyond the familiar divides of race and religion. ST PHOTO: KUA CHEE SIONG

New forms of tribalism can take root, define politics: Wong

Challenge is to address concerns but not let politics be based just on identities, allegiances

Tham Yuen-C
Senior Political Correspondent

Many Singaporeans, when asked about the worst ethnic disturbance in Singapore's history, may cite the race riots of 1964 that involved clashes between Malays and Chinese and resulted in 36 deaths and 560 injured.

But a far more violent conflict took place between Hokkiens and Teochews in 1854.

It lasted for over 10 days, left 400 dead and a great many wounded, and saw about 300 houses burned down, sparked by the Hokkiens' refusal "to join in a subscription to assist the rebels who had been driven from Amoy by the Imperial China troops".

Recounting this episode to illustrate that even seemingly stable identities are not set in stone, Finance Minister Lawrence Wong said yesterday: "We cannot assume that the harmony we now enjoy is solid, let alone permanent.

"Barely 150 years ago, tribal or, more accurately, 'dialect' identities among Chinese here in Singapore, as well as in China too, trumped their racial, cultural or national identity as Chinese."

He was speaking at a conference organised by the Institute of Policy Studies and S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies on identity, which discussed the rise of tribalism and identity politics and how these will affect Singapore.

Mr Wong noted that the culture wars that began in the West have already created new forms of identity politics here, beyond the familiar divides of race and religion.

"If we are not careful, the new tribalism can easily take root here, and our politics can become defined by new identity issues too," he said, referring to the struggle between different social groups over cultural issues such as gender identity and race, and the political agenda that emerges as a result.

"The challenge is to acknowledge and do our best to address the legitimate concerns of every 'tribe', without allowing our politics to be based exclusively on identities or tribal allegiances."

In his speech, the minister noted that Singapore has always been a mix of tribal identities.

Singapore's nationalism had its inspiration from the separate tribal nationalisms of its component races, he said, citing the Chinese revolutions, Indian national movement and Indonesian Revolution, without which people here would not have conceived a Singaporean nationalism.

"Can we then really be sure, with the rise of China, India and Southeast Asia, that Singaporean nationalism will not deconstruct again into Chinese, Indian and Malay nationalisms?" he asked.

That different races and religious groups live in harmony did not happen by chance, said Mr Wong.

Having experienced the racial and religious riots in the 1950s and 1960s and having witnessed how differences were politicised when Singapore was part of Malaysia, Singapore's founding fathers had gone to great lengths to safeguard racial and religious harmony.

They took "tough but necessary action" such as invoking the Internal Security Act against chauvinists of all ilk, making English the main medium of instruction in schools, and later putting in place the Ethnic Integration Policy for public housing to create more common spaces, he said.

"All of these moves were only possible because generations of Singaporeans believed that what Singapore stood for as a nation exceeded the pull of their own tribal instincts and feelings," he added.

"This was not an instinctive choice to make, or the natural thing to do in many other societies."

But the harmonious state of affairs will always be on a knife-edge, he stressed, noting that the culture wars that began in the West have already created new forms of identity politics here beyond the familiar divides of race and religion.

Mr Wong warned that this could result in a new tribalism taking root, and politics becoming defined by new identity issues.

But he acknowledged that the pull of identity politics arises from real differences in the lived realities of different tribes and groups, and said these differences cannot be dismissed or ignored.

Women continue to bear a disproportionate share of housework and receive less recognition at work, people with disabilities are not able to participate as fully in society, and LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer) people feel society does not accept them or even recognise them as different, he noted.

"These are important concerns. One cannot say to any of these groups that their concerns are illegitimate or exaggerated," he said.

"If we are to live up to the founding ethos of Singapore, every Singaporean deserves a place in our society, regardless of his or her background, status or racial or cultural identity.

"That is what a fair and just society must mean.

"And we cannot – in the name of avoiding the dangers of identity politics – deny the rights of a variety of groups to organise themselves, so as to gain recognition for their concerns, or seek to improve their conditions."

yuenc@sph.com.sg

SEE THE BIG STORY • A6, OPINION • A18

'DIALECT' IDENTITIES

We cannot assume that the harmony we now enjoy is solid, let alone permanent. Barely 150 years ago, tribal or, more accurately, 'dialect' identities among Chinese here in Singapore, as well as in China too, trumped their racial, cultural or national identity as Chinese.

FINANCE MINISTER LAWRENCE WONG, recounting a violent conflict between Hokkiens and Teochews in Singapore in 1854 that left 400 dead to illustrate that even seemingly stable identities are not set in stone.

5 strategies to avert identity politics

Linette Lai
Political Correspondent

As Singapore turns the tide in its fight against Covid-19, it must not allow the differences that have emerged during the pandemic to become permanent divides that affect its politics, said Finance Minister Lawrence Wong yesterday.

How can it balance the competing demands of diverse identity groups while maintaining a cohesive and harmonious society?

The minister outlined five possible approaches.

1 STRENGTHEN RELATIONSHIPS AMONG PEOPLE

The first way is to strengthen human relationships through day-to-day interactions, he suggested. People build up the trust they have in one another, which helps keep societies together.

This is not something the Government can compel people to do. But it can work to strengthen the norms – such as being caring, kind and gracious – that bring people closer together.

In the pandemic, these norms have been personified in frontline workers – role models for society who have gone above and beyond the call of duty, working to keep society going.

Said Mr Wong: "These examples represent the best of us, and we should recognise the values they embody. We should take pride in our fellow Singaporeans who are prepared to set the interest of others ahead of their own, and serve the greater good."

2 AVOID STEREOTYPING GROUPS

The minister warned against stereotyping groups of people, or believing that communities are homogeneous. This is the case for the concept of Chinese privilege, as a poor Chinese woman would have a "vastly different lived experience" from a wealthy Chinese man.

The same logic applies to other concepts about which people may hold preconceived notions, such as on gender, religion or political allegiance.

Minority groups are especially subject to such prejudices, he said, adding that all Singaporeans must be more conscious of the stereotypes they might harbour.

"We must avoid reducing our understanding of each other to a single dimension," Mr Wong said. "This hardens our views of those who are different from us, and over time, we see all issues through that particular lens. It will become increasingly difficult to find common ground, or solutions that benefit all groups."

Singaporeans must also avoid breaking society into "ever smaller boxes".

People must fight the instinct to set themselves apart and pigeonhole others, and instead, be willing to build understanding and commonality across identity lines, he said.

The reality is that all people have multiple identities, he added. But they are first and foremost Singaporeans, no matter their race, religion, gender or sexual orientation.

"If we uphold this idea – that being Singaporean is a matter of conviction and choice, and that it takes priority over our other identities and affiliations – that would give all of us one important commonality around which to build understanding and trust, negotiate our differences and find common ground on difficult issues, and then we can continually look for ways to move forward together."

3 DRAW ON 'THE BETTER ANGELS OF OUR NATURE'

The minister drew on Singapore's history as a trading hub for an analogy on how the country can move forward. Trade is grounded on norms of reciprocity, trust and mutual benefit, with the foundation of all trades lying in the willingness to exchange and cooperate, Mr Wong noted. To trade effectively, one must build long-term win-win relationships – an instinct that is crucial for setting the tone in Singapore society.

"We should draw on the better angels of our nature," he said. "From the beginning, our forefathers knew the importance of compromises and striking a fair deal for all. They knew cooperation, rather than competition and conflict, was the best way forward. This became not just the basis for our economy, but the outlook for our entire society," he said, observing that this is perhaps why tripartism has worked here.

"We must continue in this vein – continue to engage with one another, cooperate and work towards mutual benefit. We must do so not only with those outside Singapore, but also between different segments of Singaporeans as well."

4 GIVE HOPE TO ALL

Singapore must continue to give all its citizens a reason to hope and a fair chance at a good life, Mr Wong said. This means promoting inclusive growth and working to ensure all Singaporeans can succeed in their pursuits.

He noted how the problems of many advanced economies are related to economic woes, with typical households stagnating and children doing worse than their parents.

"We must never allow this to happen in Singapore," Mr Wong said, adding that by pursuing inclusive growth, Singapore can break out of a zero-sum mindset where certain groups feel others' success is at their expense.

"When it comes to social programmes, we will do our best to avoid such invidious comparisons by balancing targeted support with universal coverage for essential items," he said.

5 GOVERNMENT MUST REMAIN A FAIR, HONEST BROKER

The Government must – and will always be – a fair and honest broker between different groups.

Mr Wong acknowledged that Singapore's leaders may not always succeed in establishing a consensus on controversial issues, despite their best attempts.

"In such cases, the Government will do our utmost to recognise the challenges and needs of different groups, decide on the appropriate policy and convince the rest of society that this is a fair way to move forward," he said.

Examples include the Housing Board's Ethnic Integration Policy, as well as the existence of Special Assistance Plan schools for Chinese-speaking students.

While the Government may not always arrive at a perfect solution, Mr Wong pledged that it will never let any group feel unheard, ignored or excluded.

"We will never let any group feel boxed in or ostracised. All must feel that they are part of the Singapore conversation, all must feel they are part of the Singapore family, all must feel there is hope for the future."

linettel@sph.com.sg

Source: The Straits Times © Singapore Press Holdings Ltd. Permission required for reproduction.

NUS National University of Singapore

Source: *The Straits Times*, pA6
Date: 24 November 2021

Need for groups to listen, compromise as they engage with one another

Taking an aggressive or confrontational approach will erode trust, says minister

Tham Yuen-C
Senior Political Correspondent

It is entirely legitimate that different groups with different lived realities will organise themselves to promote their own interests, as that is part of how society becomes more open and diverse, said Minister for Finance Lawrence Wong.

But he cautioned against taking a confrontational or aggressive approach that seeks maximum entitlements and rights vis-a-vis other groups, or tribes, saying that such an attitude will lead to political tribalism, in which groups close ranks and become insular.

This has happened around the world and will quickly erode trust among people.

Instead, it needs to be a two-way process with both sides subscribing to norms of reciprocity and mutual benefit, he said.

"If you're all talking, pushing, no one is listening. I think we are not having a proper conversation," Mr Wong said during a dialogue at the Institute of Policy Studies and S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies' Conference on Identity.

"So the calls for engagement, I think, can work if we are committed, not just to a process of advocacy, but also a process of engagement, listening, compromise, negotiation and constantly expanding our common space."

Finance Minister Lawrence Wong at a dialogue session moderated by veteran diplomat Ong Keng Yong at the Institute of Policy Studies and S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies' Conference on Identity yesterday. PHOTO: INSTITUTE OF POLICY STUDIES

In the session moderated by veteran diplomat Ong Keng Yong, Mr Wong also spoke about the Government's approach to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) issues.

Some members of the audience pointed out that some tribes, such as LGBTQ Singaporeans, had no leverage and could not engage on an equal footing with others.

Acknowledging these sentiments, Mr Wong said people have very strong views on sexual orientation and gender identity, and this is the case all over the world.

"But I would say to LGBTQ groups that the attitudes are not static, they are shifting," he added, noting that the Government frequently engages people, including those from LGBTQ and religious groups, about the issue.

"It's very clear (that) sentiment and attitudes are shifting especially among young people, but also shifting for the whole of society."

This shows that conversations are not futile, he said, adding: "It's not as though things will be static forever.

"As these attitudes and sentiments shift, society will have to think about where the balance might be. And the Government, too, will have to consider what balance would be appropriate for society and what policies we might have to adjust."

During the session, Mr Wong had cited the change in rules to allow singles to buy Housing Board flats as an example of how policies had evolved to reflect the stronger desire for fairness as society matures.

He said that while policies will be adjusted, it would not be possible to accommodate all the requests from different groups, and stressed that trade-offs would have to be made.

He noted that in the United States, culture wars between different groups have eroded the trust between people.

Urging Singaporeans to keep faith with one another, he said: "When people lose faith with each other, it is very hard to hold a country together.

"And so what we must ensure is that even with these multiple identities that may take root in Singapore, we should never demonise one another."

On its part, the Government will strive to be a fair and honest broker in conversations between the different tribes, and will listen to all sides of the debate, he pledged.

He said: "We will attempt to understand how attitudes and mindsets are shifting because they will shift over time. It's not a static position.

"And as we do that, where there are policy decisions to be made, we will strive to find the appropriate policy setting. In some instances, we may decide after lengthy deliberation and discussion to make adjustments to our policies."

yuenc@sph.com.sg

PROCESS OF ENGAGEMENT

The calls for engagement, I think, can work if we are committed, not just to a process of advocacy, but also a process of engagement, listening, compromise, negotiation, and constantly expanding our common space.

FINANCE MINISTER LAWRENCE WONG

Panellists speak on bias, privilege, differences and lived experiences

Linette Lai and Goh Yan Han

A panel of six speakers discussed identity at an IPS-RSIS conference on the topic, moderated by the Institute of Policy Studies' principal research fellow and head of its social lab Mathew Mathews.

Here are some issues raised.

ACKNOWLEDGE CONCERNS OVER DISCRIMINATION

Professor Joseph Liow
Tan Kah Kee Chair in Comparative and International Politics and dean of Nanyang Technological University's College of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences

As Singapore works towards establishing a collective identity, it must evolve a framework to ensure no one is marginalised, Prof Liow said. It must also ensure that no one seeks to undermine the system by appealing to other identity markers, such as race and religion.

He noted that modern Singapore's identity has been shaped by its historical and geographical context, and cannot be divorced from that reality. While it is legitimate for people to express unhappiness with certain issues, it is important to stop such situations from "cascading downhill", he added.

Countries must have platforms to discuss differences and foster engagement between groups, he said. "A lot of times, difference arises from the fact that there's either disinterest or just... very deep aversion towards another party, without actually knowing what the other party represents."

This means acknowledging, rather than downplaying, differences, and tackling legitimate expressions of concern about discrimination. "If it's about 'we' and 'our' – the collective – there needs to be an effort and an opportunity for every element in that collective to be able to express their fears... about not being part of that collective."

DIFFERENCES NORMAL, NATURAL

Professor Vineeta Sinha
Sociologist at the National University of Singapore's Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences

It is important to consider concepts such as gender, political orientation and class interests when discussing issues of diversity in Singapore, Prof Vineeta said.

(From left) Moderator Mathew Mathews with Professor Joseph Liow, Professor Vineeta Sinha and Professor David Chan at yesterday's conference. The three other speakers present (on screen) were Mr Ng Yi-Sheng (partially hidden), Ms Corinna Lim and Mr Sharvesh Leatchmanan. PHOTO: INSTITUTE OF POLICY STUDIES

And it is useful to frame differences in positive terms, rather than focusing on the potential tensions that can arise, she added.

"If we accept differences as normal and natural in all their genuine expressions, then it becomes part and parcel of the fabric of everyday life," she said.

She also spoke about the importance of building a society in which people are committed to letting others from different communities express themselves, which helps avoid identity politics.

"The minute you begin to think that only women should be concerned about women's issues, or only ethnic minorities should be concerned about issues affecting ethnic minorities, is where you'll begin to see the cleavages."

TALK OF MULTIPLE IDENTITIES

Professor David Chan
A psychologist and director of the Singapore Management University's Behavioural Sciences Initiative

It is difficult to tell people that they should be "Singaporean first and foremost", and that their other identities must always come second, Prof Chan said.

Instead, figure out how people can be fully committed to the country while remaining true to the aspects of identity they feel most strongly about, he suggested.

He pointed out that frictions often arise when identity differences stem from different values – that is, what people fundamentally believe to be right and wrong.

One way to mitigate this is to remind people that they are more than just one particular identity, and that relationships can be built despite the existence of areas of difference, Prof Chan said.

Those who hold dominant, mainstream values should be sensitive to what others in the minority are going through, he added.

DON'T SHY AWAY FROM PRIVILEGE

Ms Corinna Lim
Executive director of the Association of Women for Action and Research

Ms Lim said terms such as privilege should not be something to shy away from, especially when linked to something sensitive, such as race. Instead, people should talk about them respectfully and with an understanding of what it means when the word "privilege" is used.

Ms Lim noted that social media has allowed for different types of identities to surface, and allows for engagement on topics where doors used to be closed.

She also cautioned that focusing on the Singaporean identity could create a division between Singaporeans and non-Singaporeans, given that 40 per cent of the population are not citizens.

"Using that as the means to try to bring people together – to me it has some downsides – and you'll have people falling through the cracks, like the migrant spouses who have Singaporean children. Where do they lie?" she said.

"A better way is really to think about certain rules and values that we go by. What do we stand for? Inclusiveness, diversity – we make sure that whatever, whoever you are, whatever your social identity, (there will be) no violence against you, the state will protect you."

MINORITIES' LIVED EXPERIENCES

Mr Sharvesh Leatchmanan
Co-founder and editor of Minority Voices

Mr Sharvesh said it is difficult for him to understand the Singaporean identity because his lived experience tells him that he is not part of this identity. "Because when I and many people who look like me are questioned about our nationality and about our citizenship, very often that makes you feel like you are not part of the social fabric in Singapore," he said.

He also noted that some people from minorities have told him that they have gone through internalised racism and self-hatred of their own ethnicity or culture.

Having faced discrimination, they distance themselves from their culture and ethnicity, and later in life, it is difficult for them to eventually connect with their culture and their roots, he said.

He acknowledged that there are policies that include the different races, and efforts are made to include people from different groups. "But on the ground, (in) interpersonal relationships, and when you're experiencing racism on a day-to-day basis, it can really make you feel otherwise."

EXPRESSING ANGER IS IMPORTANT

Mr Ng Yi-Sheng
Writer

Mr Ng, a gay Singaporean writer, noted that Prof Chan, in discussing the malleability of identity, had suggested refraining from being angry when in disagreement with others.

Mr Ng said: "Rage is productive. Sorrow is productive... Most people cannot express themselves through formal independent arguments and going through academic conferences which may or may not influence policy. So going into social media and venting, having that anger, that's important."

He also said some groups have the right to be angry when there is injustice, and added: "You know, Singapore, we've got five shared values. We've got justice, equality, we've got democracy, we've got progress. But all that we seem to care about is peace."

linettel@sph.com.sg
gyanhan@sph.com.sg

Key to create safe spaces to discuss identity issues and their impact: Forum

To get people discussing difficult issues of identity and their impact on lives, it is important to create spaces where participants feel safe and are not pitted against one another.

Digital platforms can provide ready-made, organic opportunities for such discussions to occur, though thoughtful moderation is also needed if the aim is to advance understanding rather than heighten differences.

These were the key points made at a forum on identity and engagement, organised yesterday by the Institute of Policy Studies and S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies.

For one thing, people can start engaging on the complex topic of identity by recognising the "family resemblances" between one another, said Mr Aaron Maniam, deputy secretary for industry and information at the Ministry of Communications and Information.

An Indian Muslim and an Indian Hindu, for instance, have their ethnicity in common even though they differ on religion.

"The more we can recognise those family resemblances, the more we will be able to find points of commonality with others, but not expect ourselves to be identical to them," Mr Maniam said.

"I suspect that will be a good starting point for truly recognising the range of identities around."

Associate Professor Zhang Weiyu from the National University of Singapore's department of communications and new media spoke on how to structure discussions on identity, recounting how a Polish study got two groups with strongly opposing views to take part in a debate that ended with both sides even further apart than before.

Framing discussions around broader topics that impact all participants – rather than issues which only one side appears to benefit from – and sharing their lived experiences could be one way around this, she suggested.

"For instance... when we discuss policies regarding the pandemic, it will be very natural for the socio-economically disadvantaged to start talking about their experiences," she said.

"We can use these broader topics as opportunities to discuss consequential differences."

Mr Joel Lim, managing director of youth publication Zyrup Media, added that social media can act as a "funnel" of sorts, allowing opinion leaders to emerge and represent their communities in discussions with other groups.

"You have the masses, and you filter down their opinions to key opinion leaders," he said. "And those people are the ones you want to bring to the table, to discuss."

The digital space can increase citizen engagement because it allows people to interact in an asynchronous manner – hopping in and out of conversations when it is convenient for them, noted Ms Chan Chi Ling, chief operations officer at non-profit organisation Better.sg.

But this form of interaction often results in important context being lost, she observed, adding that a balance must be struck. "I think that's the challenge and sweet spot we want to work towards," she said.

Linette Lai

Source: The Straits Times © Singapore Press Holdings Ltd. Permission required for reproduction.