

S'pore society needs to step up to preserve racial, religious harmony

Government policies can only lay the groundwork – true cohesion requires active participation from citizens.

Melvin Tay

In a world increasingly grappling with racial and religious tensions, Singapore's continued stability is a rare and commendable achievement.

The latest findings from a 2024 study shed a positive light on the situation.

According to the study by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) and racial harmony advocacy group OnePeople.sg (OPSG), published on Feb 3, public perceptions of racial and religious harmony have improved since 2018, trust levels among different communities are rising, and most Singaporeans recognise the importance of diversity in their social fabric.

This exemplifies why Singapore has long been held up as an example of a diverse, multicultural society that has managed to avoid the racial and religious conflicts that have plagued many other nations.

However, this narrative overlooks key historical moments – such as the 1964 racial riots – that have demonstrated how fragile racial and religious harmony can be.

As history has shown, complacency is the enemy of progress.

In the UK, race-related riots in 2024 exposed deep divisions exacerbated by disinformation and populist rhetoric. France has seen repeated cycles of civil unrest due to unresolved tensions around identity, migration and integration policies. The US, with its long-standing democratic institutions, continues to grapple with racial flashpoints that periodically spill into violent clashes.

These cautionary tales abroad illustrate that the social peace, once taken for granted, can quickly erode when underlying tensions are left unaddressed.

In this regard, the continued evolution of Singapore society – shaped by demographic shifts, immigration flows, global influences and the rapid spread of information through digital platforms – requires constant vigilance in strengthening the foundations of its racial and religious harmony.

A SOCIETY ON THE RIGHT TRACK

The data from the IPS-OPSG Indicators study – for which I was a co-author – is encouraging. In



As societal dynamics shift, so too must Singapore's approaches to ensuring that race and religion remain sources of strength, not division. Government intervention plays a crucial role in managing faultlines, but true progress lies in empowering individuals and communities to actively engage with one another. ST PHOTO: GIN TAY

2024, 65.4 per cent of respondents rated Singapore's racial and religious harmony as high or very high; up from 57.1 per cent in 2018.

Inter-group trust levels have also improved significantly, with fewer people expressing distrust towards other races or religions.

These trends, among others, indicate that Singapore's long-standing policies – such as the Ethnic Integration Policy, the Chinese-Malay-Indian-Others framework and the promotion of multiracialism in national education – continue to be effective in fostering social cohesion. Singaporeans also broadly agree on the Government's role in managing racial and religious issues.

Another IPS study on Faultlines in Singapore released last week found that around two-thirds of respondents felt the Government's current level of involvement in these issues is appropriate; and more than nine in ten acknowledged the state's contributions to improving harmony.

The recent tabling of the Maintenance of Racial Harmony Bill further strengthens Singapore's legal framework in addressing racial and religious tensions. The new law consolidates existing laws and provides new measures to mediate disputes and encourage reconciliation, reinforcing our collective commitment to a harmonious society.

RISKS OF OVER-RELIANCE ON THE STATE

Despite these positive indicators, we must recognise that an over-reliance on government intervention can have unintended consequences.

While state-led efforts provide a strong framework for harmony, true racial and religious cohesion cannot be sustained through policies alone.

When social harmony is perceived as something to be maintained solely through laws and regulations, it can stifle organic community engagement and discourage individuals from taking personal responsibility to foster mutual understanding.

The IPS Faultlines report highlights this challenge, with Singaporeans generally supporting government intervention: nearly two-thirds view current levels of government involvement in race and religion as sufficient, and about three in 10, in fact, desire more government involvement. The data also shows that people are often hesitant to intervene in situations involving racial offence, or engage in discussions on race and religion, particularly in public spaces and online platforms.

In response to a hypothetical social media post about an incident regarding a taxi driver who made racist comments to a passenger, seven in 10 respondents found it acceptable

to varying extents to do nothing or not get involved.

While it is possible that fear of reprisals contributed to preferences for inaction, it is also likely that many lack confidence in navigating these issues without state mediation, or expect the Government to step in.

At the same time, the data also warns of the real dangers of mismanaging racial and religious tensions.

Approximately half of respondents believe that failure to manage these issues properly could lead to societal anger against specific communities.

One-third foresee the risk of violence if race or religion were to be mismanaged – a significantly higher proportion compared with under two in 10 respondents indicating likewise for other faultlines including socio-economic or class differences, immigration, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) issues.

If we are to truly deepen racial and religious understanding and mitigate the risks of solely relying on policy and policing, we must empower Singaporeans – especially the younger generation – to take the lead in these conversations.

The youth play an outsized role in shaping social norms, given their exposure to diverse perspectives online and their ability to challenge outdated mindsets.

In fact, the same IPS survey

found that younger Singaporeans are more likely to recognise discriminatory behaviours and support efforts to address racial biases.

In this regard, their engagement will be crucial in moving beyond passive tolerance to active inclusion.

BUILDING A SOCIETY OF ACTIVE STAKEHOLDERS

Creating a more engaged society begins with fostering open conversations on race and religion in safe and conducive spaces. Constructive discussions should be encouraged through community dialogues, workplace inclusion initiatives and school-based programmes.

Providing Singaporeans with the right platforms and language to engage in such discussions will help reduce fears of social backlash and promote mutual understanding.

The IPS Race, Religion and Intergroup Cohesion programme is one such initiative that contributes to this effort. Through cultural competency outreach and public engagement efforts grounded in empirical research, it seeks to shift mindsets and cultivate skills to effectively navigate race and religion-based issues.

Beyond conversations, it is crucial to strengthen civic participation. Singaporeans should have more opportunities to shape policies

and initiatives related to social cohesion. Making public consultations more accessible and supporting community-led initiatives through funding and institutional backing will allow for more grassroots involvement in these issues.

At the same time, digital literacy must be prioritised. Social media plays a significant role in shaping perceptions of race and religion, both positively and negatively; online platforms can facilitate constructive engagement but also serve as spaces for racial tensions to fester.

Schools and organisations need to equip young Singaporeans with the skills to critically assess content and engage responsibly in online discussions.

Lastly, social integration must extend beyond housing. While policies like the Ethnic Integration Policy have ensured a racial mix in housing estates, true integration should also happen in workplaces, schools and public spaces.

The Workplace Diversity Programme launched by OnePeople.sg in partnership with IPS is one example of how programming for organisations can create environments where employees of all backgrounds can feel valued, interact and cohere.

Through specially curated sessions, participants can leverage opportunities to experience immersive gaming tools, engage in dialogue with religious practitioners and be involved in open conversations to tackle racial discrimination in the workplace.

Encouraging such cross-cultural interactions through interfaith initiatives, collaboration within and with the public service, and diverse representation in media can help reinforce Singapore's multicultural identity.

THE WORK IS NEVER DONE

Singapore has made great strides in managing racial and religious harmony, but the work is never done. The latest data reaffirms that we are on the right trajectory, but it also reminds us that harmony is a continuous process, not a guaranteed outcome.

As societal dynamics shift, so too must Singapore's approaches to ensuring that race and religion remain sources of strength, not division.

Government intervention will always play a crucial role in managing societal faultlines, but true progress lies in empowering individuals and communities to actively engage with one another.

The Maintenance of Racial Harmony Bill is timely, but it must be complemented by efforts to build a society where citizens feel confident and responsible for fostering cohesion.

Racial and religious harmony is not just a product of policy – it is a shared effort, a living practice and a collective responsibility that includes the state and all of us.

• Melvin Tay is research associate at the Institute of Policy Studies Social Lab, National University of Singapore. He is a co-author of the recent IPS-OPSG Indicators of Racial and Religious Harmony 2024 report, and the Faultlines in Singapore report.