

Identity politics will damage society in the long run: Chee Hong Tat

Impact bigger on the minorities, who may face more restrictions, discrimination, disadvantages

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The Republic must guard against the rise of identity politics and prevent the mixing of race or religion with politics in order to uphold racial and religious harmony.

Minister for National Development Chee Hong Tat said this at a dialogue at the OnePeople.sg (OPSG)- Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) Community Leaders' Conference 2025 on Oct 25, at the NUS Shaw Foundation Alumni House.

He warned that identity politics might seem effective in the short term but damages the entire society in the long run, especially the minority communities. "If you have a political environment that encourages people to play identity politics, it will not stop with just one group appealing to one community."

He added that others will follow by stirring different communities, leading to escalating divisions across society. "And soon you will have a society whereby, instead of this common space and a common

identity that we want to work towards, and we want to enhance and deepen, you will end up with people just emphasising their differences."

The event was attended by about 200 community and religious leaders, including OPSG members, self-help groups, Inter-Religious Organisation (IRO) and grassroots leaders, youth, public servants, academics and educators.

Racial and religious issues were among topics discussed at the event, themed Social Cohesion – The Next Lap. The session was also attended by OPSG chairman, Dr Janil Puthucheary.

Mr Chee said identity politics was very powerful because it appeals to certain tribal instincts. But he cautioned about the risk of such politics, saying it would have a bigger impact on minority groups.

While some political parties might begin by appealing to minorities, he noted that they could shift to mobilising majority groups for greater political gain.

He said: "The danger of doing that is minority groups may face



National Development Minister Chee Hong Tat said identity politics is very powerful because it appeals to certain tribal instincts. Beside him is moderator Shane Pereira, a research associate with IPS. ST PHOTO: NG SOR LUAN

even greater restrictions and discrimination and disadvantages than what they would otherwise face in a society that promotes equality."

He noted that when people feel the current situation is not desirable and want change, they might be tempted by politicians who promise them change along ethnic or religious lines.

But politicians should not succumb to this temptation of identity

politics, he said. Especially when external actors interfere with Singapore's domestic politics, he noted.

During the dialogue, Mr Chee added that guard rails such as the Ethnic Integration Policy (EIP) were put in place to help safeguard social cohesion. The EIP prevents ethnic enclaves from forming in HDB estates by setting a limit on the number of households of each race within each neighbourhood

and block.

HARPING ON DIFFERENCES

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**NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT MINISTER
CHEE HONG TAT**

teacher Noor Deros and politicians from Malaysia's Islamist party, Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS).

Mr Noor and PAS politicians called on voters to support the WP's Mr Faisal Manap, who led a five-member team contesting Tampines GRC against a PAP team led by then Minister-in-charge of Muslim Affairs Masagos Zulkifli.

Mr Shanmugam had said the WP could have acted more quickly and been less ambiguous about its stance.

During the event, study findings presented include younger respondents being more open to and curious about diversity, as well as younger Singapore residents being in general more aware of racial and religious challenges and having more appetite to engage on race, religion and other fault lines.

In a separate panel discussion, Mr Shukul Raaj Kumar, the IRO Youth Wing's chief coordinator, agreed that young people are more willing to confront uncomfortable issues and seek honest discussions rather than surface-level engagement.

He said: "That is the kind of approach that we need to increasingly bring into our community engagements. Our own works, our own communities and groups, because that is the crucial need of the hour if we are speaking about deepening social cohesion and going beyond just amplifying exposure."

Ms Tanmayee Kulkarni, 20, an NTU economics undergraduate, who attended the event, noted that more young people are aware of racial and religious issues but added that some older people are also proactive in understanding their role in maintaining harmony.

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