Multiculturalism in Singapore

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ABSTRACT

The author gives a brief history of Singapore as a multiracial nation. Despite being very rigorous in its implementation of multicultural policy, certain uneven outcomes result. The following topics are addressed: language and education, public housing, political representation, and religion (Islam).

A little known fact within the growing academic and policy discussion on multiculturalism is that Singapore was the first nation in the world to constitute itself as a multiracial society in the nation's Constitution, at the point of its political independence as a city-state in 1965. This constitutional multiracialism was a consequence of its historical, demographic and geopolitical location at the time of independence. Shortly after the establishment of a trading post and free port by the Anglo East India Company in 1819, waves of immigrants from impoverished southern China began to arrive. Within a short decade, Chinese immigrants already constituted the demographic majority of the population. Although immigrant waves declined after the Second World War the Chinese majority grew, augmented by local born. At the time of independence, ethnic Chinese constituted an overwhelming 75% of the population, with approximately 15% Malays and 7% South Asians, who are generically classified as 'Indians', and a small percentage of non Asians. These three visible ethnic groups are locally known both officially and informally as three races; race instead of ethnicity will therefore be adopted in this essay.

Geographically, Singapore is a small island which is contiguous to the Malaya peninsula, separated by a narrow straight of less than one mile wide. Both are, in turn, part of the Southeast Asian archipelago, which is divided into Indonesia, Malaysia and southern Philippines, where Islam and the Malay language are the identity markers of the people. Being an island nation with a majority migrant stock, ethnic Chinese population within this region of Muslim and Malay language majority, to remain silent on the nation's 'ethnic' character would, undoubtedly, caused it to be read as a 'Chinese' nation. This would not have been received with equanimity by the neighbours. Furthermore, the time was during the Cold War, with the People's Republic of China actively promoting communist ideology regionally; a de facto ethnic Chinese nation, no matter how small, would therefore likely be received as a potential bridgehead for the spread of communism. Consequently, the founding political leadership could be said to have made a virtue out of necessity and declared Singapore a constitutional multiracial nation.

Language and Education

From the beginning, four official languages were adopted: English, Mandarin, Malay and Tamil, the language of the majority of the South Indian citizens. English, the colonial language, was retained as the language of commerce, public administration and the primary medium of instruction of state-run schools on account that it was the world language of enterprise, science and technology. However, every student was, and continues to be, compelled to take one's 'mother tongue', namely the father's ethnic or 'racial' language, as a second language throughout primary and secondary education. Obviously, the 'race' of an individual is assigned by patrilineal descent, regardless of the mother's ethnicity; offspring of inter-ethnic marriages are assigned the father's ethnicity. Through such a mechanical assignment, everyone in Singapore is racialized by the state.

Due to colonial neglect, local ethnic communities had developed vernacular schools to cater to their own community needs during the colonial days. As the financial advantages of the English language became increasingly apparent after independence and as the state rapidly expanded the opportunities for English language-based education, more and more parents began to enrol their children in state schools. Ethnic language schools atrophied from the early 1960s onwards. By 1974, all schools were state-funded or state-subsidized and English was made the primary language of instruction for all education levels.

Adoption of English as the language of government and economy has an additional ideological advantage for the state. English can be rendered as the 'ethnically neutral' language with reference to the local Asian populations, providing no advantages to Chinese, Malay and Indian in its acquisition. To the extent that economic competition is highly dependent on facility with the English language, English became by default the 'guarantee' of meritocracy in both the education institutions and the marketplace. Indeed, the economic dominance of English has become a point of irony, if not contention, and is often parodied in local entertainment, in which a non English-speaking Singaporean would lose out, such as in

employment, to an English-speaking one. However, with ample opportunity to learn English in public schools, the issue of economic advantages has become, over time, less about race and increasingly a question of social class. Children of middle class professional households, with English as the domestic language, would have a head-start, and thus cultural advantages over those from working class families who continue to use their respective racial languages.

By now, English has effectively become the 'public' language of Singaporeans. The government and some in the population are left in belated lamentation about the demise of the 'mother tongues' within a population who used to be polyglots in Asian languages, including several Chinese languages. In vain attempts to recover some of the linguistic competences, one month every year is designated as a language month for the three official Asian languages with dubious results. Furthermore, the emphasis on 'mother tongue' acquisition in primary and secondary education has been sharply reduced. Until early 2000, a minimum grade for the mother tongue was necessary for admission to the local universities, but this qualification has been removed and competency of the language no longer matters in gaining entrance.

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Public Housing and Racial Redistribution

One of the most impressive achievements of the long ruling government in Singapore – the People's Action Party (PAP) has formed the government, through periodic general elections, since 1959 without any interruption – is the national public housing program. The less than desirable housing conditions of the colonial days have been completely erased. Except for the highest 10% income households who live in private housing, the rest has been resettled into state-subsidized, high-rise apartments in comprehensively planned housing estates. This national rehousing program provided the government with an opportunity to break up racial enclaves of the colonial era and redistribute their residents into the new housing estates.

Public housing is allocated on a first-come-first-serve basis. This would already have an effect in diluting possible concentration of the demographic minority groups, the Malays and Indians, in a particular housing estate. However, fearing that these groups may re-concentrate themselves through purchasing flats in particular housing estates, a quota system was imposed in the early 1980s; the presence of each racial group in a housing estate is maintained relative to their proportion in the total population. This control is possible because each property transaction has to be processed and approved by the public housing authority, the Housing and Development Board.

Quota has apparently been fairly applied to all three races. However, as in all race-based policies in Singapore, the effects are unavoidably unevenly distributed through the racial groups. For example, even with the quota, with an overwhelming 75% majority population every Chinese household is likely to find Chinese either as immediate neighbours or on the same corridor of the housing block. The same is not true for the Malays, and even less like for Indians. It could be surmised that there are, therefore, greater demands on the latter two groups in terms of tolerance and integration than for the Chinese in any housing block and estate.

Political Representation

With the radical disruption of racial enclaves and the overwhelming majority of Chinese, it is entirely conceivable that Malay and Indian candidates would not be elected in a parliamentary election, if the electorate were to vote along racial lines. In an attempt to avoid the complete shutting-out of Malay and Indians in parliament, the electoral process has been modified to guarantee 'minority' representation.

As a post-British colony, Singapore had a parliamentary system of single constituencies, in which the candidate who garnered the most votes got to represent the constituency. In the early 1990s, a new form of constituency was established by the PAP government. Some constituencies were regrouped to form a 'group constituency', called the Greater Representative Constituency (GRC). In a general election, each of the contesting political parties has to put forth a slate of candidates equal to the number of constituencies in the particular GRC, of which one of the candidates must be non Chinese. The slate that garners the most number of aggregated votes wins all the seats of the GRC. With such machinations, a 25% presence of non Chinese, being their proportion in the total population, in each elected parliament is guaranteed. This has effectively ensured the presence of Malays and Indian members in parliament (MPs); however, it has also simultaneously guaranteed a 75% permanent majority of Chinese members. If MPs were to vote along racial lines on issues, it would become obvious, very quickly, that the Malay and Indian representatives could be reduced to mere token presence. The cost of guaranteed representation along racial lines appears to exceed its convenient attainment, if Singaporeans were to behave politically, exclusively along racial lines.

The Particularity of Islam

As mentioned above, the Malays in Singapore is part of the largest regional Islamic community of the world constituted by Indonesia, Malaysia and the southern Philippines. This has resulted in the Singapore Constitution recognizing

Malays as the indigenous people of the nation and accorded certain special privileges. Additionally, as a legacy of its two-year (1963-65) membership in Malaysia, where all Malays are constitutionally Muslims, Malay ethnicity is similarly conflated with Islam in Singapore. As a consequence, perceptions and management of Malays issues are closely tied to issues with Islamic religion. This has several significant consequences.

First, the Muslim community is governed by a separate legislation, in addition to the civic laws of the land. The British colonial administration gave in to pressures from the Muslim community and enacted the Muslim Ordinance in 1957 which provided for, among other institutions, the setting up of an Islamic court, the Shariah Court, and a separate Registry of Muslim Marriages. The Ordinance was replaced by the Administration of Muslim Law Act (AMLA) in 1965, by the independent government. The most important cases dealt with by the Shariah Court concern divorce and its attendant settlements. There have been complaints from Malay-Muslim women that judges of the Court are too conservative in preserving male privileges. More often than not, they have refused to use both more liberal interpretations of the Islamic legal provisions derived from elsewhere in the Islamic world and the wider berth provided by the AMLA itself, in their judgements.

AMLA also instituted an Islamic Religious Council and an office of the Mufti. The Council has become the central religious administrative agency which oversees the *zakat fitrah* (annual obligatory tax), administration of *wakaf* (donated) land, the centralization of the Haj pilgrimages and the management of all mosques. The Mufti presides over the Fatwa Committee, and is responsible for religious rulings pertaining to Islamic law. The centralizing tendencies of these institutions have generated contestations between themselves and those who have different interpretations of the religion. Individual preachers would often add their commentaries on the edicts provided by either the Council or the Mufti, demonstrating their religious independence. The centralization tendency is therefore not without its critiques.

Second, the Malay-Muslim community has direct representation and access to the highest level of government institutions in the office of the Minister for Malay-Muslim Affairs. Along with the other Malay-Muslim MPs, they constitute together the political leadership of the community. However, as members of the ruling government, they cannot represent Malay-Muslim interests exclusively but rather have to dilute these interests relative to the nation's interests as a whole. This has resulted in complaints that see the Malay-Muslim PAP members as obstacles to the full articulation of the community's interests. The Association of Muslim Professionals had proposed an alternative community leadership formation process which was rejected by the ruling party as potentially racially divisive.

One area in which the community's interest and the government's interest are at odds is that of the use of headdress for female Malay students in schools. All Singapore schools require students to wear a uniform. The community would like the schools to allow female Muslim students to wear headdresses. This has the support of the Malay-Muslim MPs. However, the request has been denied by the Ministry of Education, again, on the ground that such sartorial practices will lead to exclusion and divisiveness among students. When the uniform rule was challenged by some parents on the first school day of 2002, the students were promptly denied entry to the schools and suspended until they relented to abide by the school uniform. The issue has subsided but not disappeared.

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Conclusion

Among the nations which espouse multiculturalism as a national policy, such as Canada and Australia, the Singapore government is possibly the most rigorous in carrying out the logic of state multiculturalism. It officially racializes every citizen, broaching no hybrids. It imposes similar language requirements on all students in primary and secondary education. It imposes quotas on every racial group in housing allocation. It provides an equal number of public holidays to each racial or religious group, which is often co-extensive. It rigidly maintains 'meritocracy' in the economic sphere, refusing any form of affirmative action on the basis of race or religion. Yet, as I have shown above, in many of the areas of social life, such apparently 'fair' policies for all frequently produce uneven effects and thus uneven disadvantages. Furthermore, the Singapore state is compelled by history and geopolitics to pay particular attention to the Malay-Muslim community, which constitutes less than 20% of the population. These additional attentions have not always been read as privileges, and thus welcomed, by the recipients. Nevertheless, political argument for maintaining racial harmony seems to hold sway; this is hugely significant in accounting for the economic success of the past forty years of Singapore's nationhood.