

## 1. TRIBALISM AND IDENTITY POLITICS IN SINGAPORE

“We cannot assume that the harmony we now enjoy is solid, let alone permanent... This harmonious state of affairs will always be on a knife-edge; so it needs constant attention and careful management.”

This was what Minister for Finance Lawrence Wong said on 23 Nov, at a roundtable organised by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) and S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), which discussed the rise of tribalism and identity politics, and how it would affect Singapore.

He also made these points:



### Tribalism Runs Deep in All Societies

- The age-old conflict between national and tribal identities remains **one of the most potent driving forces of violence within and between nations**.
- Singapore has always been a mix of tribal identities, from three major “Asian civilisational complexes – China, India, and Southeast Asia”.
- **Seemingly stable identities we take for granted** today were not always stable.
  - The worst ethnic disturbance in Singapore’s history was the conflict between Hokkiens and Teochews in 1854, where tribal identities among the Chinese here trumped their common identity as Chinese. The riots lasted for more than 10 days, and resulted in more than 400 people killed and about 300 houses burned.
  - The racial and religious riots in the 1950s and 1960s also underlined the potential for “sectarian” clashes of differences.
- After Independence, Singapore took tough but necessary actions to **safeguard racial and religious harmony** in our young nation. These were possible only because generations of Singaporeans believed that what Singapore stood for as a nation exceeded the pull of their own tribal instincts and feelings.

### Identity Politics More Prominent Today

- Culture wars that began in the West have created new forms of identity politics here.
- The **pull of identity politics arises from real differences in the lived realities** of different tribes and groups, who have their own real and valid concerns and anxieties.
- Three examples of such groups are: (1) women; (2) people with disabilities; and (3) the LGBTQ community.
- The challenge is to acknowledge and address these concerns without allowing politics to be based exclusively on identities or tribal allegiances.

**“These are important concerns. One cannot say to any of these groups that their concerns are illegitimate or exaggerated. 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.”**

– Minister for Finance Lawrence Wong at IPS-RSIS Conference on New Tribalism and Identity Politics on 23 Nov

### Five Approaches to Tackle Identity Politics

1. **Strengthen relationships among people** through day-to-day interactions, and build up trust in one another.
2. **Avoid stereotyping groups**, or believing that communities are homogeneous.
3. **Draw on “the better angels of our nature”**. Humans are traders by nature, and trade is grounded on norms of reciprocity, trust, and mutual benefit. We should continue to engage, cooperate and work with one another.
4. **Give hope, chance at a good life to all** by promoting inclusive growth and working to ensure that all Singaporeans can succeed in their pursuits.
5. **The Government must remain a fair, honest broker between different groups.**

## 2. NAVIGATING BIG-POWER RIVALRY: SINGAPORE'S TAKE

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Long and Minister for Defence Dr Ng Eng Hen shared their perspectives on China and the US at the Bloomberg New Economy Forum Gala Dinner on 17 Nov and the 12<sup>th</sup> Aspen Security Forum on 4 Nov respectively.



In Minister Ng's opening remarks at the **12<sup>th</sup> Aspen Security Forum**, he shared two key takeaways:

1. **US leadership provided the stability from which Asia prospered.**
  - o In the 1960s and 1970s, Southeast Asian countries were newly independent and needed a climate of confidence and continuing security which America could provide.
  - o Singapore's founding cabinet held a long view that the US presence was vital for Asia-Pacific's stability and progress. A Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) was signed in 1990 with the American Government, allowing a continued US military presence. That MOU was renewed in 2019.
2. **China's central focus in the post-Mao era has been driven by its desire to raise its standards of living, and more recently, to take its rightful place on the global stage.**



In a moderated dialogue at the **Bloomberg New Economy Forum Gala Dinner**, PM Lee made these points:

1. The US and China see the world, and each other, in very different ways:
  - o The broad view in **American society** was that China was not just a **potential threat, but a challenger and a serious problem** – even if this view may not be held by the current Administration.
  - o In **China**, some view the strategic rivalry with the US as **an attempt by Washington to slow them down and stop their emergence**, even as China takes its rightful place in the world.
2. **Differences** between the US and China are **many and deep**, going beyond individual issues to basic mindsets, and cannot be resolved over one meeting or deal.
3. The world should be concerned about the delicate situation in Taiwan. While the right things were said, there were moves, such as the increase in military and diplomatic engagements with Taiwan, and China's testing of Taiwan's defences by flying into its air defence identification zone (ADIZ) almost daily. These raise suspicion, tension and anxieties, making it more likely that a mishap or miscalculation can happen.

[Sources: MINDEF & ST, 4 Nov; Bloomberg & PMO, 17 Nov; ST, 18 Nov]

“*On the US, Mr Lee [Kuan Yew] had this to say, ‘The US is the most benign of all the great powers. Certainly less heavy-handed than any emerging great power.’ On China, he asked the question, ‘Will an industrialised and strong China be as benign to Southeast Asia as the US has been since 1945?’*”

— Minister for Defence Dr Ng Eng Hen at the 12th Aspen Security Forum on 4 Nov

### 3. STRENGTHENING REGIONAL COOPERATION IN ASIA PACIFIC

Between Oct and Nov, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong led the Singapore delegation at several summits that discussed regional cooperation initiatives aimed at improving cooperation in the Asia Pacific region.

#### 38<sup>th</sup> and 39<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Summit and related summits from 26 to 28 Oct

- During the summits, ASEAN leaders exchanged views on **regional and international developments**, as well as efforts to strengthen regional resilience and cooperation. The summits discussed the **ASEAN Comprehensive Recovery Framework** and its implementation plan, which serves as the region's **consolidated exit strategy from the COVID-19 pandemic**.
- Other meetings involving partner countries such as the US, Japan, China, and India included: (1) the 16<sup>th</sup> East Asia Summit; and (2) the 24<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Plus Three Summit. These meetings discussed how **ASEAN**, together with its external partners and the international community, can continue **working to build more resilient public health systems, supply chains, and economies that can emerge stronger from the pandemic**.
- During all the sessions, PM Lee conveyed **Singapore's unwavering support of ASEAN** and how **Singapore can support our neighbours** in overcoming the challenges brought about by COVID-19. He said Singapore can support India by being a vaccine transshipment point for Southeast Asia and beyond.



Image: Prime Minister's Office

#### APEC CEO Summit on 11 Nov

In his speech there, PM Lee made these points:

- A digitally inclusive community requires the joint efforts of governments and industry.
  - APEC can play a significant role in **deepening economic integration in the digital domain** to help businesses connect more easily and reach new markets.
  - For example, there is the Digital Economy Agreement between Singapore and Australia, and a Digital Economy Partnership Agreement (DEPA) among Chile, New Zealand, and Singapore.
- Domestically in Singapore, **SMEs and their workers should not be left behind**. While Singapore SMEs' digital transformation is still a work-in-progress, some progress has been made.



Image: Lee Hsien Loong / Facebook

#### APEC Economic Leaders' Meeting on 12 Nov

- There, 21 APEC member economies adopted a joint declaration to *"Join, Work, Grow Together"*.
- Minister for Trade and Industry Gan Kim Yong spoke of the importance of strengthening national and regional connectivity to facilitate access to essential goods and services, and highlighted the role that APEC has played in deepening regional economic integration.
- In PM Lee's speech, he:
  - Highlighted the importance of **progressively reopening the region's borders**, to allow each country in the region to **rebuild our economies and support businesses**.
  - Commended APEC economies for displaying solidarity and on the progress made on safeguarding the resilience and openness of supply chains **to achieve sustainable and inclusive growth**.



Image: Lee Hsien Loong / Facebook

[Sources: CNA, ST, 26 Oct; PMO, 26 Oct; PMO & ST, 10 Nov; PMO & ST, 11 Nov; Business Times, 12 Nov; CNA, 13 Nov]



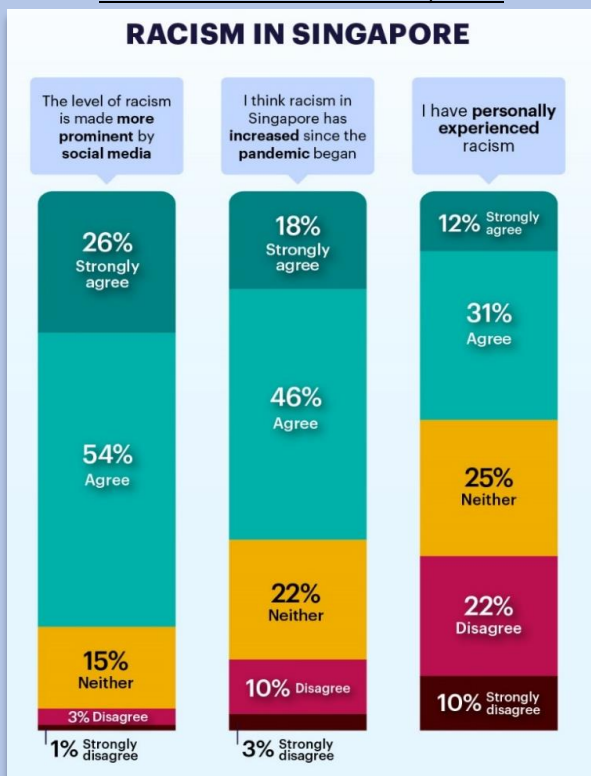
# 4. FINDINGS FROM THE TODAY YOUTH SURVEY 2021

Conducted in early-Oct, the inaugural TODAY Youth Survey 2021 polled 1,066 respondents aged between 18 and 35 on six topics: (1) racism; (2) religion; (3) LGBTQ attitudes; (4) gender dynamics; (5) the impact of COVID-19 on mental well-being and social ties; and (6) career and material success. The Youth Survey sought to give voice to millennials and Gen Zers on societal issues and everyday topics close to their hearts. Here are the key findings:

## Race-related: Majority believe racist episodes rising amid pandemic, further amplified on social media.

- Social media has changed the way people responded to racism. Earlier this year, there was an increase in incidents of racial discrimination in Singapore. Videos of these incidents were circulated online, leading to widespread outrage over racism.

Source: TODAY Youth Survey 2021



- Many agreed that people who are against racism ought to call out such behaviour to make perpetrators realise that their views are offensive and wrong.

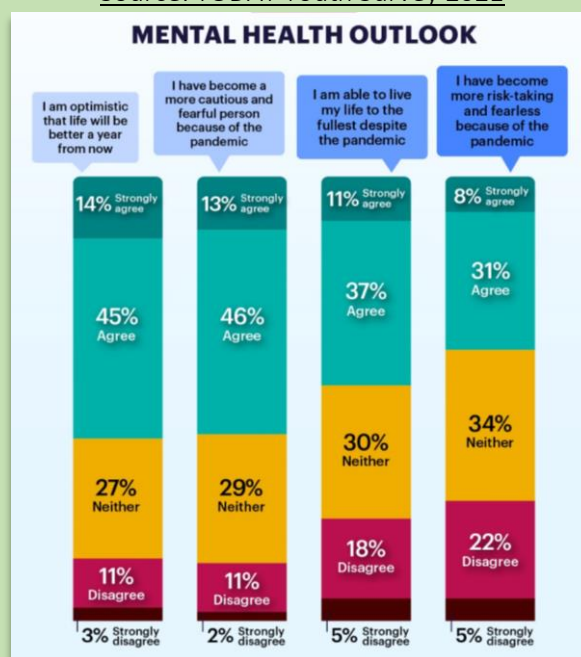
1. Online platform *Minority Voices* publishes stories of everyday racism faced by minority groups, and instances of more structural forms of prejudice.
2. The “Call It Out” movement (*#callitoutsg*) was started to encourage people to speak up and call out racism.

While this survey showed there are issues to be worked out when it comes to race and religion in Singapore, there is also evidence that youth can hold more open views compared to older generations. This provides some ground for optimism.

## COVID-related: Majority more fearful, less sociable due to COVID-19, but hopeful of “better” life a year from now.

- The survey reflected the conflicted feelings of Singapore’s youth as they navigated their way through pandemic life.
- A mix of optimism and anxiety:
  - The top two common mental states experienced by respondents in the past three months (Jul to Sep 2021) were: “stressed out” (41%) and “anxious” (37%).
  - Mr Praveen Nair, a counsellor at Raven Counselling and Consultancy, believes the main stressor is the frustration young people are feeling about the pandemic restrictions.
  - However, 59% were optimistic life would be better a year from now.

Source: TODAY Youth Survey 2021



## LGBTQ-related: There was high overall acceptance of LGBTQ people among youth.

- Individuals have varying degrees of acceptance towards the LGBTQ community, depending on how close the individual is to their personal lives.

While overall acceptance is high, people were less accepting of family members having same-sex relationships (58%) than they were of their friends (75%) and colleagues (80%) doing so.

[Sources: TODAY, 8 Nov, 9 Nov & 11 Nov]

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