Diversity and Nation-Building in Singapore

April 2017

Singapore's current commitment to multiculturalism is in many ways quite impressive. In many countries, official commitments to recognize or accommodate diversity are seen as symbolic or ritualistic, and as camouflaging the reality of majoritarian rule. In Singapore, the commitment to multiculturalism is deep and wide. Although the ethnic Chinese population forms 75% of the population, a commitment to multiculturalism is a central part of a broader political project to define Singapore as a multi-ethnic society, rather than a Chinese-majority state. This decision is also reflected, for example, in the decision to privilege English over Chinese as the main official language of education and government administration. These policies can be seen as an impressive and largely successful attempt to block the kind of majoritarian nationalism that has threatened pluralism in so many other post-colonial societies.

The Singapore case raises several interesting questions. One is how the Chinese majority has been persuaded to restrain majoritarian tendencies.

But a more significant question concerns the way ethnic relations are monitored and regulated in order to preserve this ethnic mosaic. Singapore's conception of multiculturalism is often described as distinctly "communitarian" and "paternalistic". Singaporean multiculturalism is sometimes said to prioritize the preservation of harmony amongst groups over the freedom to individuals within the city-state's historic communities to choose their allegiances and ties— for example, in the laws regarding co-ethnic residential concentration. Of course, this is a familiar criticism of many forms of multiculturalism, but Singapore may represent one of the cases where this criticism is most appropriate.

A related question concerns the capacity of the Singapore model to adapt to changing migration patterns, such as the large and long-term migrant worker population, whose members do not fit easily into the long- standing ethnic categorization of Chinese-Malay-Indian-Other (CMIO) used since colonial times. Would the relative success of Singapore's multicultural model be compromised

if it adopted a more liberal and flexible conception of multiculturalism in order to encompass new migrant groups, as some of its critics have recommended, or to allow for greater individual freedom?

In commissioning the Singapore case, the Global Centre for Pluralism has sought to understand what features distinguish "communitarian" approaches to multiculturalism, and how these approaches differ from liberal or republican models of governing diversity, as well as other post-colonial approaches. How important a role has paternalistic social engineering played in Singapore's multiculturalism story?

CASE NARRATIVE

Formerly the primary city of British Malaya, Singapore became an independent state in 1965 when it left postcolonial Malaysia in response to affirmative action policies that favoured the "special position" of indigenous Malays. In contrast, Singapore's early leaders adopted a policy of multiracialism using the colonial state's "racial grid" of four communities—Chinese, Malay, Indian and Other (CMIO). In practice, this colonial grid papered over the more complex realities associated with different waves of migration. Rather than a single large community, for example, the Chinese comprised communal groups divided along linguistic, regional, ancestral, religious and class lines with numerous associations and affiliations. As colonial authorities did before it, Singapore's early leaders used the racial grid to structure and

consolidate a highly diverse population shaped by waves of migration. They also used it to build a nation.

Grouped together in the CMIO racial grid, the Chinese were by far the largest of the four groups. At independence, communal groups lived in close proximity and interacted economically but separated from each other politically and culturally. As such, communal diversity was both a challenge and an opportunity for nation building. In the 1960s, the People's Action Party (PAP) government sought to institutionalize multiracialism by mobilizing existing community organizations and energies. In the 1970s and 1980s, extensive state takeovers and social engineering followed in four institutional spheres: grassroots organizations, parades and processions, schools and language policy, and welfare and charity groups.

Through its social engineering practices, the governing People's Action Party sought to establish itself as a multiracial movement that could rise above communal interests, both to manage the ever-present threat of racial conflict and to

articulate the general interests of an emergent nation. The government used various mechanisms to reshape the society using CMIO categories. Urban redevelopment preserved communities while also cultivating inter-ethnic common spaces. New residents' organizations as well as longstanding communal and religious institutions were co-opted by the state. English became the medium of instruction; civic education and inter-cultural celebrations in schools promoted multiracialism.

Singapore's postcolonial approach to multiracialism had both negative and positive effects. On the negative side, distrust of the "other" was endemic. A strong belief persisted that deep-rooted community ties and sentiments could quickly become a source of conflict and that matters of cultural and communal diversity therefore required strong governmental management and social discipline. On the positive side, postcolonial multiracialism sought to develop, through appropriate institutions and practices, the moral sensibilities needed to value other cultural traditions, so as to produce a forward-looking people and a united nation. In relation to both the negative and positive effects, the individual and the discourse on rights were conspicuously absent. In their place, the community was advanced as the natural means of social inclusion and as an end in itself. Individuals' responsibility was to uphold the social bonds and moral values deemed necessary for the collective good; in turn, their rights would be secured by the community that protected and nurtured them. Cascading layers of communal belonging and responsibility distinguished the society, with the nuclear family as the basic block, building upwards through interlocking neighbourhoods and ethno-religious

communities, and then to "racial" communities. The nation—a community realized by the party-state—sat at the top. In the 1990s, the state codified this vision as "communitarianism".

> Although the CMIO racial grid remained in effect at the institutional-political level, its application at the grassroots level was softened and somewhat liberalized to allow for the expression of diverse and crosscutting identities within and between Singapore historic communal groups.

The shift from multiracialism to communitarianism was part of a wider political program to control and domesticate the wave of democratization that swept through East Asia after the Cold War. In Singapore, the rising middle classes began to demand the liberalization of society to allow for greater diversity and choice in cultural identities and lifestyles, including the freedom to avoid communal and "racial" ascriptions. Communitarianism remade multiracialism in two ways. First, institutional foundations of communalism were deepened to emphasize the community over the individual and to entrench the political dominance of the ruling party, whose discourse of "Asian values" repositioned human rights as "Western" values. Second, postcolonial multiracialism was increasingly retooled as multiculturalism, with a more social view of diversity replacing innate assumptions about "racial sentiments". Although the CMIO racial grid remained in effect at the institutional-political level, its application at the grassroots level was softened

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Since 2000, a new wave of migration has created fresh challenges for communitarian multiculturalism. To promote Singapore as a "global city", the ruling party encouraged immigration from other Asian countries to meet labour force needs and to offset the demographic decline of Singapore's ageing society. The diverse cultural backgrounds of immigrants have made their subscription to Singapore's communitarian social organization less certain. Increasingly, tensions between Singaporeans and recent migrants have found expression as xenophobic diatribes and protests against immigration. Disgruntled citizens excluded from the globalizing economy seek a renewal of communitarian norms, while new migrants face exclusion from CMIO-defined communitarian institutions. Invented as a political response to the democratizing pressures in the 1980s and 1990s, it remains to be seen whether Singapore's communitarian multiculturalism can resolve these challenges or meet increased demands for individual rights and freedoms.

THROUGH A PLURALISM LENS

Sources of Inclusion and Exclusion

The Global Centre for Pluralism asked each author in the Change Case Series to reflect on the sources of inclusion and exclusion through a pluralism lens— that is, using the Centre's "drivers of pluralism"

framework. Some highlights from the Singapore case are included here.

Livelihoods and Wellbeing

•Equitable economic development between groups, via urban redevelopment and a merit-based school system, was a key driver of postcolonial multiracialism.

Law, Politics and Recognition

• Singapore's group-based conception of multiculturalism defines a pyramid of social relations based first on the family unit, then on ethno-religious identity and communal affiliation, and finally on the nation.
• To support this conception of citizenship, Singapore's communitarian multiculturalism emphasizes social harmony and civic discipline while limiting individual rights and freedoms, which defenders of the status quo characterize as "Western" values.
• While Singapore's communitarianism has maintained peaceful interethnic relations, paradoxically it reproduces a state-induced culture of fear—fear of the conflict that might erupt between groups without the state's management of communal relations and identities.

Citizens, Civil Society and Identity

• Few opportunities have existed to redefine the bases of civic inclusion or to express multiple identities. Multicultural communitarianism has loosened these strictures somewhat, but not completely.

CONCLUSION

Singapore's postcolonial multiracialism was underpinned by three key assumptions: first, the immutability of the CMIO racial categories; second, the need for tolerance between groups to achieve social harmony; and third, the necessity of state management of social relations to achieve this tolerance and build a nation. Citizen demands to liberalize this policy in the 1980s and 1990s were met by the ruling party with communitarianism, which sought both to confirm the communal nature of social identity while also offering space to recognize a wider range of identities. This tentative shift from tolerance to recognition is now being tested by immigration. Whether Singapore's "racial grid" for categorizing individuals and organizing social, economic and political life can—or should—withstand this challenge is an open question.

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The Global Centre for Pluralism is an applied knowledge organization that facilitates dialogue, analysis and exchange about the building blocks of inclusive societies in which human differences are respected. Based in Ottawa, the Centre is inspired by Canadian pluralism, which demonstrates what governments and citizens can achieve when human diversity is valued and recognized as a foundation for shared citizenship. Please visit us at **pluralism.ca**