

The evolution of Singapore citizenship



Given Singapore's diversity, a mobile population, and the constant replenishment of its citizen population through immigration, Singaporeans must continue to embrace citizenship as the overarching civic identity, says the author. TODAY file photo

The imperative to create a coherent national identity and sense of belonging and to secure the citizenry's loyalty to the nation remains acutely relevant today even as we mark the 60th anniversary of the "Singapore citizen".

This idea and ideal of Singapore citizenship, distinct from the sectarian and sub-national identities, remains abidingly vital in nation-building in a globalised and borderless world.

This legal status of Singapore citizen (within the Commonwealth) came into being with the enactment of the Singapore Citizenship Ordinance in October 1957.

The backdrop was the imminent conferral of self-government (in 1959) on Singapore by the United Kingdom.

Hitherto, the dominant identity was based on one's race, language, religion, and especially place of origin. Loyalty was often more aligned to the cultural motherlands of mainland China, the Indian sub-continent, and the Malay archipelago. For these sojourners, Singapore was but a place to make a living but not to sink one's roots.

Singapore citizenship was offered to those born in Singapore or the Federation of Malaya and to British citizens who had resided here for two years. Residents who had stayed in the colony for 10 years and were prepared to swear their loyalty to Singapore were offered naturalisation. Citizenship was the catalyst for the birth and formation of the Singaporean.

Citizenship status was important because rights and privileges were attached to being a citizen, including the right to vote.

In the lead-up to the passing of the law, political parties here jostled to ensure as many of their supporters would obtain citizenship so that they would be eligible to vote in the May 1959 legislative assembly elections to elect Singapore's first indigenous government.

Economically, self-government meant the need for Singapore to transform its economy from one designed to serve the imperial capital to one that catered to the needs and aspirations of citizens and be of to the regional and global economy.

Publication: Today Online

Date: 4 November 2017

Headline: The evolution of Singapore citizenship

This sense of putative nationhood, of being one people, of our being responsible for our own collective fate was a powerful one even when Singapore was part of the Federation of Malaysia between 1963 and 1965.

In the last 60 years, the substantive content of Singapore citizenship has evolved through the constitutional moments of self-government, merger with Malaysia, and independence. Today, Singapore's Constitution provides that a person may acquire Singapore citizenship through any one of four means: by birth; by descent; by registration or, before the commencement of the Constitution, by enrolment; or by naturalisation. In 2004, landmark changes were made to relax the restrictions on the grant of citizenship by descent and to increase the length of time a person may spend away from Singapore when determining the residence period for citizenship applications. Furthermore, grant of citizenship by descent was made gender neutral. The net effect was to cast the net wider and make citizenship more inclusive, especially for those with some ties or connection to Singapore.

Subsequently, the rapid influx of immigrants in the few years preceding 2010 gave rise to concern whether citizenship and permanent residence were becoming commoditised.

The number of permanent residents (PRs) almost doubled from 287,500 to 541,000 between 2000 and 2010. In contrast, the number of citizens grew modestly (8 per cent) from 2,985,900 to 3,230,700 in the same period.

With a declining birth rate and an ageing population, however, immigration remains important in the minting of new citizens to augment the population quantitatively and qualitatively.

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To preserve the privilege of citizenship and to encourage suitable persons to take up Singapore citizenship, the distinction between citizens, PRs, and non-citizens continues to be sharpened in areas such as education, healthcare, and housing.

Even then, the authorities have to watch not just the numbers carefully but ensure that established and new citizens are integrating well.

In today's increasingly borderless world, citizenship nevertheless continues to define who belongs and who does not to a nation-state, and impacts heavily on one's sense of belonging and identity.

With a more mobile citizenry, overseas citizens are increasingly factored into domestic policy-making and foreign policy.

Singapore Day celebrations in cities with sizeable Singaporean population and overseas voting are part of the overall effort attempt to engage some 214,700 Singaporean citizens abroad (or 6 per cent of the citizen population).

A perennial question is whether Singapore will allow dual citizenship.

Currently, individuals with dual citizenship must renounce their foreign citizenship within 12 months of reaching the age of 21 in order to retain their Singapore citizenship.

Some have argued that with more Singaporeans in international marriages, dual citizenship could help children from these unions to have a connection with Singapore.

But allowing dual citizenship should be a means of last resort.

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Even then, the legalisation of dual citizenship should only occur when Singapore is confident that dual citizenship will not have a detrimental impact in terms of the people's sense of belonging to the country.

The Singapore government's premise is that as a small and young nation, citizens need to have a long-term commitment to building a future together here.

Given our diversity, a mobile population, and the constant replenishment of our citizen population through immigration, Singaporeans must continue to embrace citizenship as the overarching civic identity that unites Singaporeans regardless of their backgrounds.

Hence, efforts must be made to ensure that Singapore citizenship is not just a bundle of rights and privileges, including the use of the "most powerful passport" in the world (in terms of visa-free travel). Commitment to shared values like multiracialism and national service must be shouldered with pride and conviction.

It is this sense of belonging and togetherness that will make citizenship more than a legal status but a powerful unifying force in a turbulent world, where identity politics is manifesting itself aggressively in many parts of the world, including Southeast Asia.

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