

Singapore riot ignites burning class issues

Experts say problems around foreign labour need to be addressed after Sunday's riot by Indian and Bangladeshi workers.

Tom Benner Last updated: 10 Dec 2013



Singapore is one of the world's richest cities [GALLO/GETTY]

Singapore - Every Sunday as evening falls, tens of thousands of foreign-born transient workers from southern India and Bangladesh gather on the sidewalks and open fields of this city's ethnic Indian neighborhood. For most, it is their one day off from the construction site or other job location, their one night out to eat, drink, and socialise with friends.

Low-paid migrant workers toil amid the seemingly incompatible demands of class-conscious Singaporeans, who don't want to perform the dirty and sometimes dangerous manual labor involved in building the physical infrastructure underlying the island-nation's economic miracle, but who simultaneously worry about the presence of too many guest workers living in their midst and clogging up sidewalks, trains and buses.

On Sunday night, after a 33-year-old Indian national in Little India was struck by a private-hire bus and killed, emotions and resentments exploded into what would become the first major riot in Singapore for more than 40 years. Some 400 people joined the spontaneous revolt, and when it was over, the angry mob had overturned police cars and other vehicles that burst into flames, smashed the windshield of the bus involved in the accident, and violently charged police and rescuers.

Singapore Police Force Commissioner Ng Joo Hee said: "As far as we know now, there was no Singaporean involved in the riot... The unwanted violence, rioting, destruction of property, fighting the police, is not the Singapore way."

Some sense a long-simmering and growing frustration among low-paid, low-status workers.

Last year saw Singapore's biggest outbreak of unrest among imported labor in recent memory, when some 170 bus drivers from mainland China went on strike illegally – in part to protest getting lower pay than their Singaporean and Malaysian peers.

"The issue of foreign manpower needs close attention and urgent action to prevent erosion of business confidence and our need for immigration, short- and long-term," said Professor Eugene Tan, an assistant law professor of Singapore Management University. "There is lots of angst, anger and anxiety among all stakeholders over foreign manpower issue. Lawlessness and violence and lack of buy-in are deep sources of concern."

'Underlying tension'

National University of Singapore sociologist Tan Ern Ser said that while the riot cannot be condoned, "My take is that we should first hear what the foreign workers have to say in regard to whether their conduct was merely an angry response to the death of a fellow countryman, or there had been some underlying tension which has its source elsewhere."

Cherian George, a professor and social critic at Nanyang Technological University, wrote that foreign workers often are mistreated by employers and lack access to basic services, cautioning against "the comforting illusion that there is only one 'Singapore' with one set of norms - the ones we are familiar with."

"There's an undercurrent of grievances stemming from an experience of exploitative behaviour by high-handed bosses"

Alex Au, Singaporean blogger

George wrote, "One of the documented dysfunctions of these other Singapores is the existence of rogue employers who do not treat injured workers in a particularly humane way. Might this warp the judgment of workers who see a comrade fatally injured?"

Foreign workers can view authority as oppressive, a feeling that may have erupted when they witnessed a fellow countryman run down by a bus, wrote Singaporean blogger Alex Au: "There's an undercurrent of grievances stemming from an experience of exploitative behaviour by high-handed bosses and supervisors. Many have reason to feel that they have been chronically cheated of part of their wages."

There are nearly one million low-wage migrant workers in Singapore, making up some 20 percent of the country's population, according to the non-profit group Transient Workers Count Too. They contend with long working days or no days off, live in dormitories or

substandard housing, can be cheated on pay, and suffer from social discrimination.

The scale of the riot - perhaps no greater than the typical game-day antics of drunken football hooligans in other countries - was an unaccustomed outburst of incivility that took law-abiding Singapore by surprise. But the presence of foreign workers has been a growing concern since last year's government projection that Singapore's population will likely grown from 5.3 million to 6.9 million by 2030.

In addition, a recent study points to growing income inequality in the wealthy Asian city-state.

'Avoid racial comments'

Immediately following the riot, Singaporeans took to social media to reinforce the country's emphasis on racial and ethnic harmony.

Tan Chuan-Jin, who heads the Ministry of Manpower, the ministry that oversees migrant workers in Singapore, posted on his Facebook page: "Stay calm. Avoid racial comments. Why? Emotions are raw and can stir unintended knock-on effects."

Race and religion are generally not topics for discussion in open company: Singapore's penal code criminalizes public criticism of race or religion. Right now, 2 million of the 5 million living here are foreign-born; the ethnic makeup of the resident population is 75 percent Chinese and 13 percent Malay Muslim, followed by ethnic Indians, Eurasians and other racial groups.

To some, the matter was strictly one of law and order.

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, in a Facebook post, called the riot a "very grave incident ... Whatever events may have sparked the rioting, there is no excuse for such violent, destructive, and criminal behaviour. We will spare no effort to identify the culprits and deal with them with the full force of the law".

Following the fatal accident, Singapore police have said the victim, identified as construction worker Sakthivel Kumaravelu., was drunk and creating a nuisance when he attempted to board the bus that eventually ran him down.

'Compromises for the future'

This coming Sunday there will be a complete ban on the sale and consumption of alcohol in

the Race Course Road area, the focal point for Sunday afternoon gatherings of manual laborers.

The last riots to take place in Singapore were race related in 1969.

As Sunday's fatal accident culminated in the Little India riot, Singapore's ruling People's Action Party (PAP) had just wrapped up its weekend congress during which party members underscored the city state as a place where people from diverse racial and religious backgrounds can "live harmoniously together, embrace one another as fellow citizens and work together for a better Singapore".

Wrote one commentator on Reach, a government website that hosts public comment, about Sunday's riot: "Quite shocking. It must also be really embarrassing for the PAP to have it happen at the very same time as the PAP convention last night. Can the PAP now still say that Singapore will be a place of harmony and security even as foreign workers are being let into Singapore by the thousands?"

But most observers say imported labor is essential for Singapore to continue to build and expand, and that co-existence is the only path for economically and ethnically diverse Singapore.

"It will be tough for the (government) to fulfill its promises on infrastructure development without foreign manpower," observed Singaporean blogger Bertha Henson. "And it would not make sense for citizens to advocate such a tightening of the tap that it compromises our own future."

Source: Al Jazeera