

Publication: TODAY Online

Date: 31 August 2021

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In a departure from previous National Day Rally speeches, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong in his 17th address to the nation on Sunday (Aug 29) dwelled on the fundamental tenets of Singapore.

In particular, social cohesion featured prominently across his three speeches in Malay, Mandarin and English, as he spoke about how to support low wage workers, address anxieties over foreign pass holders, and manage issues on race and religion.

This focus on the themes of egalitarianism, equality, and multiracialism is a timely shot in the arm of nation-building, as Singapore seeks to rebuild from the ravages of the pandemic.

It is also a response by PM Lee to the public mood and headline concerns of the day.

The pandemic formed the backdrop to his speech, a vivid reminder of how Covid-19's unpredictable arc has upended people's sense of wellbeing, security, and even identity over the course of the last 20 months.

Mr Lee spoke to the concerns of many Singaporeans as the pandemic evolves from a public health emergency to an economic and social wake-up call.

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MEANINGFUL JOBS AND LIVELIHOODS

Unsurprisingly, bread-and-butter concerns of Singaporean workers featured prominently: Whether it was about low-wage workers' precarity as the gig economy grows or of ensuring that there are adequate means of dealing with workplace discrimination.

In ringing the upcoming changes to Workfare and the Progressive Wage Model, the prime minister signalled a growing urgency to deal decisively with low wage workers so that they will have "more secure futures".

Singaporeans' hopes and aspirations of an egalitarian society requires us to look out for these workers and to ensure that they and their families are not left behind.

Respecting and recognising the dignity of work and a decent wage for workers, especially the "frontliners", is crucial for the wellbeing of society.

Mr Lee did not indicate that Singapore would follow legal developments in other jurisdictions to treat gig economy workers as employees rather than independent contractors.

Instead, the preference is clearly for a tripartite approach in which the Government, employers, and unions work collaboratively to provide long-term support for low wage workers.

Mr Lee also highlighted the need for consumers to shoulder part of the higher costs that would come with higher wages.

FIGHTING WORKPLACE DISCRIMINATION

To reiterate equality as a core national value, tackling workplace discrimination will be aided by proposed legislation based on existing guidelines on fair employment practices.

Even as Singapore needs to remain open to foreign manpower in order to sustain its business hub status, fair employment practices and mindsets are necessary to ensure that the rational arguments for a multinational workforce here do cohere with lived experiences of the typical Singaporean worker.

Specifically, that foreign manpower complements and advances, rather than replaces and undermines, the interests of the domestic workforce.

The Government has long acknowledged this problem of a local-foreign divide.

It remains to be seen if this latest attempt will assure Singaporeans that an open economy is not a discriminatory and unequal one.

Efforts at social integration will have to be boosted so that the norms and values of Singaporeans and work pass holders converge rather than diverge.

Legislation is not the silver bullet.

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Further, proving discrimination may be more onerous with an enforceable legal standard in place. Time is of the essence if the issue is not to fester further and undermine openness as a national ethos.

The challenge for the Government is to show that this latest slew of measures will indeed work well.

The proof of the efficacy of the measures and commitment lies in the outcomes. Will Singaporeans see less discrimination? Will errant employers be taken to task? Will Singapore be an oasis of openness — of people, trade and ideas?

If these measures are not effective and discrimination persists, then there will be a political backlash. The blowback for a society that has its roots in immigration and still in need of immigration will likely be too much to bear.

RACE AND RELIGION

Race and religion comprised the lion's share of Mr Lee's speeches.

In his most extensive remarks on the back of several high-profile incidents involving people of different races, Mr Lee cited and reminded Singaporeans of unreported, exemplary stories of everyday multiracialism.

In asserting multiracialism as a core credo of Singapore, Mr Lee also explained why there was no Chinese privilege in Singapore.

This statement not only provided recognition of the sacrifices of the Chinese community since independence but also assured the non-Chinese communities that the state would not confer advantage on one community at the expense of another.

Mr Lee also assured all communities of the promotion and protection of their identities, languages, cultures and values. This emphatic reiteration of multiracialism cannot be underestimated.

On the cards are the proposed legislation on the maintenance of racial harmony, along the lines of the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act.

Another significant announcement was that Muslim women nurses, if they so wish, can wear the tudung at public healthcare institutions from November 2021.

Mr Lee detailed how the "careful adjustment" to the nurses' uniform policy was made, underscoring that in a polyglot society the impact of any policy change on a societal level must be duly considered.

The resort to laws to deal with social attitudes on workplace discrimination and racial harmony should prompt us to consider the pros and cons of a legislative response.

Mr Lee is right that laws can have a powerful signalling effect, providing for deterrence and common rules of engagement and conduct.

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However, laws by themselves cannot root out workplace discrimination or foster racial harmony, understanding and engagement.

Instead, they may even provide a false sense of problem resolution and social stability.

The bigger challenge is whether the proposed laws can nudge individual and corporate behaviour towards desired outcomes and socialise people into upholding expected norms and values in order to buttress the shared commitment to racial harmony.

The pandemic has vividly exposed the gap between the values of the Singaporean creed — egalitarianism, equality and multiracialism — and the lived experience. This cognitive and affective dissonance was latent; it has become increasingly strident.

This has and will always be the central tension of Singapore. Thus, how we respond as a society to these exposed gaps and vulnerabilities is vital.

Singaporeans have to rally around the imperative of remaining steadfast to the values that define Singapore and strengthen social cohesion and national unity.

The immediate tasks that Mr Lee identified are improving the life chances of all Singaporeans, zero tolerance of all forms of discrimination, and ensuring that race and religion enrich rather than divide us.

The overarching question that Mr Lee was addressing in this year's National Day Rally was: "Who are we and what defines Singapore?"

This is very apt as Singapore navigates an uncertain post-pandemic future.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Eugene K B Tan is associate professor of law at the Singapore Management University and a former Nominated Member of Parliament