

Discrimination Pervasive in Singapore Rental Market

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Propertyguru.com.sg (screenshot)

A rental advertisement for a condominium in Singapore specifies that no Indians, Malays or citizens from the People's Republic of China be allowed to rent the property.

SINGAPORE – A three-bedroom condominium for rent in Singapore's cosmopolitan Claymore Hill area in the central part of the island boasts a pool, a gymnasium, and proximity to the Orchard Road shopping district. It would be a great catch for any high income family – unless you happen to be Indian.

The listing, which appeared November 3 on the Property Guru classified listings website, beckons prospective tenants to “search no more” but adds the following caveat: “Accept all race, except indian sorry no offence (sic).”

While multiracial Singapore has established an enviable reputation worldwide for its social harmony in recent decades—especially compared with its more conflict-prone regional neighbors – racial discrimination remains an unabashed fact of life in the city-state's residential rental market.

A significant number of property advertisements on rental websites such as Singapore-based Property Guru or Craigslist specify that no Indians, ‘PRCs’ (from the People's Republic of China) or Malays be allowed to rent various properties. Some ads also specify that Japanese, Caucasian or Chinese tenants are preferred.

Although the number of listings with such requests varies over time, a recent search for rental ads on one property site that stated preferences against tenants from mainland China alone yielded an estimated 200 such listings from over the past month.

Such specifications are not illegal under Singaporean law, though they are officially discouraged for rental properties and are, at times, questioned by residents.

“Certainly, the ads' specification against people of certain races or nationalities is discriminatory. It flows from certain stereotypes of specific categories of people,” said

Eugene Tan, a professor of law at the Singapore Management University. But “it is not illegal in the Singapore context as landlords are free to specify their requirements.”

Singapore’s Council of Estate Agents, a statutory board under the purview of the government’s Ministry of National Development, says it doesn’t condone racial discrimination. It also said in a response to queries from The Wall Street Journal that it has advertising guidelines in place to prevent discrimination, but “some landlords have explained that they face practical considerations renting out their properties, leading to certain requirements in rental transactions.” It did not specify what those considerations were.

The statement went on to say that the government plans to continue educational efforts stressing the importance of mutual respect to preserve ethnic harmony.

The prevalence of race-specific property listings in Singapore comes at a time when Singaporeans have grown increasingly conscious of – and dissatisfied with – the large number of immigrants working and living in their midst, particularly from mainland China and India.

An estimated 1.9 million foreign nationals now live in Singapore, which has a total population of about 5.2 million. Residents often complain that those immigrants add to traffic, take local jobs and help push property prices out of reach for some younger families, among other problems. The government has responded with a number steps in recent years to limit the number of foreign workers coming in, such as an increase in levies employers pay to bring in foreign workers.

The government has also long used strict rules governing who can buy properties – though not over who can rent them – to help ensure social order and encourage racial and cultural integration.

Most of the city-state’s residences – about 80% — are government Housing Development Board (HDB) flats, which are Singapore’s version of public housing. Such flats can only be sold to Singaporeans or permanent residents, and are regulated by an Ethnic Integration Policy, which sets limits on the number of Chinese, Malays and Indians – Singapore’s three main ethnic groups – in each public housing block and neighborhood so as to maintain a roughly even ethnic distribution across the island.

In 2010, HDB added newer rules that limit the number of units in a building that can be sold to some permanent residents, which includes foreigners who have met many, but not all, of the requirements to become full citizens.

While discriminatory in practice, the government’s policies on ethnic integration in the public housing market have generally been accepted both locally and internationally as their broader aims are seen as working toward a greater degree of social harmony and cultural acceptance.

However, these quotas and limits do not apply to either the public or private rental markets, nor for purchases of private residential units outside the HDB scheme.

The local Council of Estate Agents' guidelines include admonitions against marketing tactics that "indicate preference for any race or religion in all advertisements, unless it is to comply with the Ethnic Integration Policy which aims to achieve a balanced ethnic mix among the various ethnic communities living in public housing estates." However, there are no hard laws on the matter and no punishments.

Despite those guidelines, advertising considered discriminatory by some residents in both the public and private rental markets is still very visible on many property-listings websites.

Property Guru says it employs a team to moderate the more than 100,000 listings on its site to check against "racist or anti-social content" that contravenes Singapore's anti-sectarian and racial harmony laws. But it still makes allowances for clients to request their preferences even when it comes to race and ethnicity.

"We understand that agents have to take care of their clients' preferences," said a spokesperson from Property Guru, adding that if any listing is found to be racist or anti-social, agents are contacted and told to amend the information.

Craigslist did not respond to a request for comment.

In some cases, the discrimination revolves around worries about residents' cooking styles, which sometimes rely heavily on odor-intensive oils and spices. In those instances, Property Guru suggests agents and landlords use less-divisive language to address such concerns but its policies stop short of prohibiting such ads outright.

Instead of saying 'No Indian or No Malay Allowed,' (the ad) can be put as 'light cooking allowed' or 'owner prefers (tenants) who do not do Asian cooking,' the spokesperson explained.

Even if those changes are made, though, discrimination can still occur in other ways. For example, a Canadian professional of Indian origin who works in Singapore said even landlords and agents that don't explicitly discriminate in advertisements still do so later on in the application process.

"It's understandable if they have an issue with Indians who cook, for example, but to generalize based on just your ethnicity is unfair," the Canadian, who chose to remain anonymous, said. The man recalled one incident in which an agent said, "but you look Indian, let me check with the landlord if Indian is okay."

Agents will also often ask prospective tenants to provide details of their race in their rental applications.

"Many times they are still willing to meet if you respond 'Indian' but sometimes they say 'profile not suitable'," he continued.

Experts say that while the "market decides" on rental properties in Singapore, the government can exert moral suasion on landlords not to discriminate, though it is hard to legislate in such an area.



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“The issue is more an ethical one than a legal one,” said SMU’s Mr. Tan. “To be sure, such ads do work against existing efforts at racial and religious integration here in Singapore (and) also work against Singapore’s efforts to attract immigrants to live and work here.”