CHANDLER
INSTITUTE OF GOVERNANCE

SINGAPORE:
OVERCOMING RACIAL VIOLENCE BY GIVING EVERYONE A PLACE TO CALL HOME

Singapore: A Brief History

Singapore's multiracial history was born out of its strategic location as a major entrepot in the Straits of Malacca. The island was controlled by Malay chieftains during the 14th century and various Malay sultans through the 16th and 18th centuries, and had a history of settlement of traders from Southeast Asia, India and China. In the 19th century, it was chosen by the British as a trading settlement, due to its natural deepwater harbour, ready timber supply for ship repair, and freshwater supplies. When the British


19th Century Singapore
(Source: National Archives of Singapore)

arrived, there were an estimated 1,000 people living on the island – mostly Malays and some Chinese. With its establishment as an outpost of the British Empire, migrants began arriving from the rest of Empire, as well as Chinese, Indians and Malays from other islands. From the very first months of Singapore's establishment as a British settlement in 1819, large numbers of Chinese in particular settled on the island, and by the start of the 20th century, the Chinese had formed the largest ethnic group and have remained so ever since. During colonial rule, the British segregated the different ethnic groups in separate enclaves across the island, which further impeded interaction between people of different races.
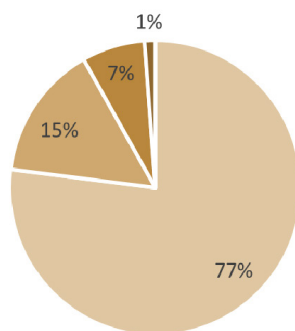
Singapore Population (1970)
*(Source: Department of Statistics, Singapore)*

As anti-colonial struggles ramped up after WWII, Singapore and Malaysia began discussions about merging into a united Federation as both nations sought independence from the British. In 1963, the Federation of Malaya was formed. However, a few years later in 1965, Singapore broke from the Federation. There were many reasons for the break: apart from widely different political approaches and economic conditions between Singapore and Malaysia, race was also a central problem during the union. Singapore was a majority Chinese island, while in Malaysia, Malays were the majority. Political leaders capitalised on these communal differences and race became a fractious issue. The two main

"Eventually, what happens in the long run depends upon how we solve our problems here. And the best way to ensure our survival and to ensure an enduring future is through a multi-racial society. By that I mean a society which is tolerant to all groups, which gives a chance to everybody."

Lee Kuan Yew (1966) articulating the importance of building a multi-racial society, following much suffering in the early days of Singapore over the issue of race.[1]
Former Prime Minister of Singapore,
Mr Lee Kuan Yew, on May 22, 2009.
(Source: Getty Images)
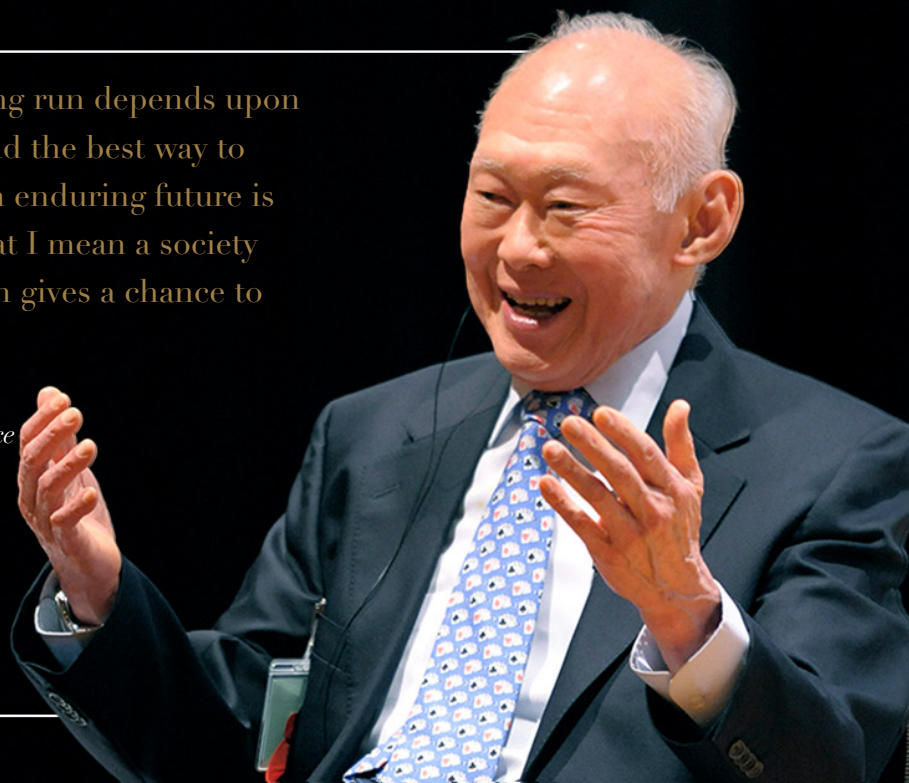
political parties at the time – the People's Action Party (PAP), which was a multi-racial party but whose members were majority Chinese, and the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) – accused each other of spreading communalism and this eventually erupted into race riots. In 1964, some Malays (who are predominantly Muslim) had gathered in a central square in Singapore to celebrate the Prophet Mohammad's birthday, when an unidentified person threw a bottle into the procession. The Malay procession and the Chinese bystanders started attacking each other and word soon spread throughout the respective communities that their ethnic group was being attacked. Violence spread swiftly throughout the island. It took 17 days before the violence was quelled, and there was relative calm, until the mysterious killing of a Malay trishaw rider a month later – race riots erupted yet again with Malays and Chinese attacking each other. Racial tensions continued to simmer in the years that followed, with race riots breaking out yet again in 1969 – this time as a result of election-related ethnic violence between Malays and Chinese in Malaysia that spilled over into newly independent Singapore.

Scenes from racial riots in Singapore, 1964 and 1969
(Source: National Archives of Singapore)

Creating Stakeholdership: Building a Foundation for Commitment to the Common Weal

Shaken by these riots, the Singapore government promoted commitment to the common enterprise of nation-building, while creating a social environment that embraced diversity and championed the heritage of each cultural, ethnic and religious group. One of the first steps Singapore took to translate this to reality was to ensure that all members of society felt that they had a stake in the nation, regardless of their race or religion. Singapore's first Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew, had envisioned that all citizens should enjoy home ownership, employment opportunities, access to education, and a sense of security through law and order. With these basic needs met, he believed that all citizens regardless of race, language or religion, could then commit to contributing to the nation and envisioning it as their home for generations.

Unlike most post-colonial states at the time, Singapore did not have any natural resources. At the time of independence, half the population was illiterate, unemployment was over 14%, and over 70% lived in overcrowded slum-like conditions. The government worked quickly to establish industry to make the country financially viable as it transitioned its economy from being heavily reliant on trade, importing, processing and exporting, to export-led industrialisation that attracted global multi-national corporations for industrial growth. To support economic development, the government also invested heavily in transforming the education system to focus on skills and knowledge needed for this modern transition. On top of these necessary first steps as a newly independent nation, Singapore adopted another important policy approach that laid strong foundations for multicultural harmony – the establishment of modern public housing

> *"This was the plan we had from the very beginning, to give everybody a home at cost, or below cost and, as development takes place, everybody gets a lift. All boats rise as the tide rises."*
>
> *- Lee Kuan Yew (1966) articulating the importance of home ownership in building a multi-racial society, following much suffering in the early days of Singapore over the issue of race.* [2]

In the 1960s, Singapore faced a severe housing crisis with a large portion of the population residing in unsanitary slums and crowded squatter settlements. Government flats were available to only 9% of Singaporeans, leaving many without a proper place to live. To address this urgent issue, the Housing & Development Board (HDB) was established with the primary objective of resolving the housing crisis. With remarkable swiftness, the HDB took immediate action, and constructed 54,000 flats in five years. Over the next decade, the HDB successfully built a substantial number of flats, and had effectively resettled most of the population from slums and villages into HDB flats that were basic but comfortable and modern.

Squatter Housing, 1960s
(Source: National Archives of Singapore)

"Underneath the staircase was a single plank. A man was lying on the plank. He had rented it. That was his home!" - *Mr Lim Kim San, 1st HDB Chairman, 1960-1963*
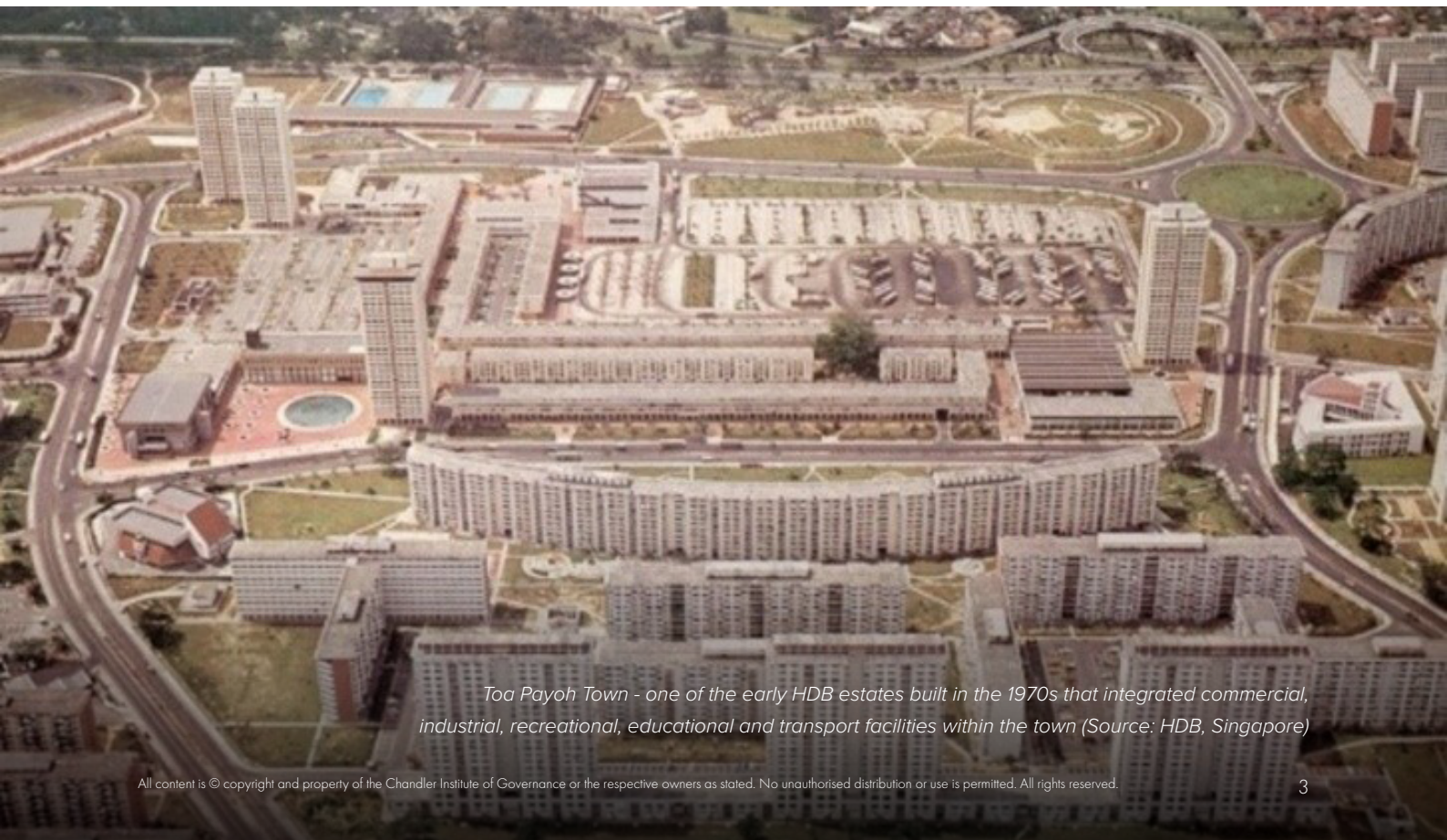
Toa Payoh Town - one of the early HDB estates built in the 1970s that integrated commercial, industrial, recreational, educational and transport facilities within the town (Source: HDB, Singapore)

CREATING STAKEHOLDERSHIP: BUILDING SHARED ASPIRATIONS AND TRUST OVER TIME

It is important for nations to build both tangible as well as intangible stakes through shared aspirations. In 1991, the government initially took a rather top-down approach to crafting a set of national values that would be common to all communities. They identified and propagated the following key principles:

1. Nation before community and society above self;
2. Family as the basic unit of society;
3. Community support and respect for the individual;
4. Consensus not conflict;
5. Racial and religious harmony.

A couple of decades later, amidst shifting global norms, there was growing recognition of the value of seeking out and incorporating citizen perspectives and interests into the policy-making process. In Singapore, these led to an initiative in 2012, known as "Our Singapore Conversation" (OSC) – a national-scale public engagement exercise that aimed to engage Singaporeans on their desired future for thenation and to establish a broad consensus on the key issues that should be addressed.

*A student sharing his hopes for Singapore
(Source: Our SG Conversation/Facebook Page)*

The OSC made use of a mixture of platforms to draw together a range of perspectives and voices on three questions: What matters to us? What are the values we hold? How can we work together to meet the challenges of the future? Over one year, 47,000 Singaporeans participated in more than 660 dialogue sessions, online and in person or through surveys. The outcome were these five core aspirations: opportunities; purpose; assurance, spirit and trust – which then informed policy-making across areas such as housing, healthcare and job security.

At the PA OSC dialogue held at Sembawang GRC, participants, including Senior Parliamentary Secretary (Education) Hawazi Daipi, discuss what kind of home, society and people they would like to be in 2030. (Source: People's Association, Singapore)

Then Education Minister Heng Swee Keat at the closing of the OSC exercise, assuring citizens that their concerns would inform upcoming policy reviews (Source: The Straits Times)

Promoting Integration – Engineering Awareness and Appreciation for Different Cultures

By the 1980s, various neighbourhoods across Singapore were becoming ethnic enclaves, with the Indians gathering predominantly in the central areas, the Chinese in a number of neighbourhoods across the island, and the Malays primarily in the East. The government did not want a repeat of the race riots of the 1960 and foresaw that ethnic enclaves would lead to different ethnic groups becoming increasingly insular.
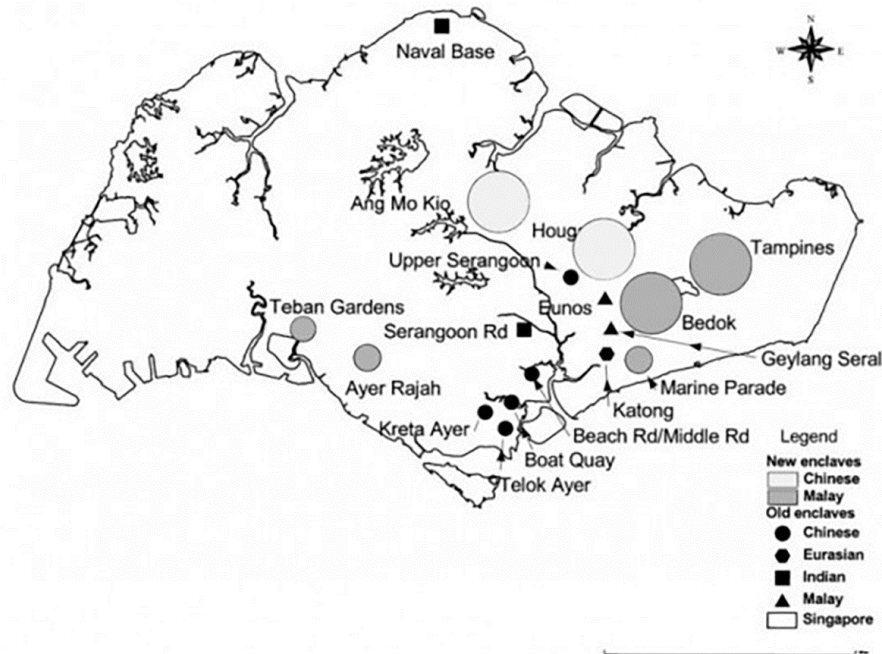
By 1989, new ethnic enclaves were formed by people purchasing flats near others of their own race, despite the fact that the government had rehoused most of the population in HDB flats in different neighbourhoods from the old ethnic enclaves. (Source: National Archives of Singapore)

The government responded with a policy known as the Ethnic Integration Policy (EIP), which was adopted in 1989 to break down this residential segregation. As 80% of the population lived in HDB flats, the government mandated that the ratios of ethnic groups living in public housing neighbourhoods align with ethnic distribution at the national level, to ensure a proportionate representation of each racial group within each neighbourhood. While the quotas have been adjusted slightly over the years, the general guiding principles remain firmly in place.

In practice, this means that people are only allowed to purchase flats in accordance with the allowance for their ethnic quota in any given block or neighbourhood. Once the quota for any particular ethnic group has been reached in a block or neighbourhood, no further sales may be made to buyers from that ethnic group. Flats on the resale market can only be bought and sold between people from the same ethnic group.

Children of different ethnicities interacting in an HDB estate playground. (Source: National Archives of Singapore)

While some may question the extent of government interventionism in constraining individual housing choices and forcing social mixing, the policy was successful in breaking up the emerging ethnic enclaves, and was not met with protests or widespread resistance. It demonstrated Singapore's commitment to increasing cross-cultural interactions and preventing its citizens from growing up in ethnic silos. Housing estates are also built with large, open and abundant public spaces to further facilitate interactions between people of different ethnicities.

Promoting Integration – Ensuring Commonness through Bilingual Education

At the time of Singapore's independence, children attended schools where lessons were taught entirely in their mother tongue, typically Tamil, Mandarin or Malay, further exacerbating ethnic segregation in society. Singapore had to deal with its fractious racial situation while also contending with a fragile multilingual society. Instead of forcing everyone to speak one language and reject his/her mother tongues, it chose instead to adopt a bilingual education policy.[4]

To promote better understanding between groups, English was adopted as the language of administration and instruction for all schools. This also helped with trade and diplomacy. At the same time, children had to learn their mother tongues from the start of formal education, helping them stay connected to their cultural heritage. It was also an important way for the government to ensure people did not feel that their heritage was being deemphasised with the proliferation of the English language. Allowing mother tongues to flourish was consistent with Singapore's policy emphasis that it was a multiracial, multilingual, and multicultural society. The bilingual education policy thus became an important tool for establishing Singapore's identity as a place where people were united and committed to the nation, but also one where different cultures could thrive.

> "The kids go to the same kindergarten, the kids go to the same primary school, because all over the world young kids go to school very near to where they live, and they grow up together."
>
> *- Former Senior Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam reflecting on the principles underlying the effectiveness of the EIP twenty years after its adoption.[3]*

> "To announce that all had to learn English when each race was intensely and passionately committed to its own mother tongue would have been disastrous… Not wanting to start a controversy over language, I introduced the teaching of three mother tongues, Mandarin, Malay, and Tamil, into English schools. This was well received by parents. To balance this, I introduced the teaching of English in Chinese, Malay, and Tamil schools. Malay and Indian parents welcomed this but increasing numbers preferred to send their children to English schools. A hard core of the Chinese-educated did not welcome what they saw as a move to make English the common working language, and they expressed their unhappiness in the Chinese newspapers."
>
> *- Lee Kuan Yew on the implementation of the Bilingual Education Policy [5]*

Safeguarding against Tensions – Platforms for Arbitration and Legislative Safeguards

Breaks in trust in society in the past have also prompted efforts to open up public spaces for dialogue around difficult and contentious issues. As a multicultural and multireligious urban society where people of different religions and cultures live in close proximity to each other, intolerance and misunderstanding has always had the potential to increase conflict. In 2001, 15 members of the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) – a Southeast Asian Islamist militant group – were arrested in Singapore for plotting terrorist attacks. Muslims grew concerned that they would be discriminated against, while non-Muslims became more suspicious of their Muslim neighbours. To prevent tensions from simmering to the surface, there were concerted efforts to open up community-level spaces for dialogue known as Inter-Racial and Religious Confidence Circles (IRCC). Besides promoting inter-faith interactions, the IRCC steps in to arbitrate over the use of public spaces outside places of worship.

At the legislative level, Singapore has also established safeguards against such tensions, in the form of the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act (enacted in 1990), and the Maintenance of Racial Harmony Act, which was more recently passed in 2021. Such legislation allows for action to be taken against people who pass racist remarks and/or insensitive comments about religion with the deliberate intent to wound another – an offence which is punishable with imprisonment of up to three years, a fine, or both.

> "[The Act] will collect together in one place all the Government's powers to deal with racial issues. It will also incorporate some softer, gentler touches. For example, the power to order someone who has caused offence to stop doing it, and to make amends by learning more about the other race and mending ties with them. This softer approach will heal hurt, instead of leaving resentment and if he complies and does it, that is good and we will move on. If he does not comply or continues to do wrong things, of course legal consequences follow."
>
> *- Lee Hsien Loong, Prime Minister of Singapore, on the introduction of the Maintenance of Racial Harmony Act in 2021[6]*

Singapore faces rising challenges with welcoming new immigrants, ensuring social mobility and maintaining social harmony in an era of disinformation and social media. As it contends with these changes, it continues to draw on its fundamental guiding principles of unity in diversity, while at the same time evolving and adapting

---

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What were some key policy approaches in Singapore towards building a harmonious society?
2. What are some lessons from the Singapore story that could be applied to your home?

---

[1] *Lee, Kuan Yew, 'Speech by the Prime Minister, Mr. Lee Kuan Yew, at Queenstown Community Centre on 10th August, 1966' [Transcript] (National Archives of Singapore)*

[2] *Ho, Peter, Liu, Thai Ker and Tan, Wee Kiat, A Chance of a Lifetime: Lee Kuan Yew and the Physical Transformation of Singapore (US: Editions Didier Millet, 2016)*

[3] *Gov.sg Portal, 'HDB's Ethnic Integration Policy: Why it Still Matters', (Singapore: Ministry of Communications and Information, 13 April 2020). [Accessed online: https://www.gov.sg/article/hdbs-ethnic-integration-policy-why-it-still-matters]*

[4] *Dixon, L. Q, 'Bilingual Education Policy in Singapore: An Analysis of its Sociohistorical Roots and Current Academic Outcomes', in International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism (2005), 8(1), 25-47.*

[5] *Lee, Kuan Yew, From Third World to First: The Singapore Story, (New York: Harper Collins, 2000)*

[6] *Lee, Hsien Loong, 'National Day Rally Speech on 29 August 2021' [Transcript] (Singapore: Prime Minister's Office, 2021) [Accessed online: https://www.pmo.gov.sg/Newsroom/National-Day-Rally-2021-English]*

CHANDLER
INSTITUTE OF GOVERNANCE

The Chandler Institute of Governance (CIG) is an international nonprofit organisation headquartered in Singapore. CIG supports governments in developing its leaders, strengthening its institutions, and building its public service capabilities. We do this through advisory partnerships, training programmes, a proprietary index that measures government performance, and knowledge products.

To learn more, please visit our website.

www.ChandlerInstitute.org

Follow us online for our latest news.

/ChandlerINST   @ChandlerINST   /ChandlerINST