



SOCIAL FAULT LINES AND SINGAPORE

Event Report
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Centre of Excellence
for National Security

Event Report

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Centre of Excellence for National Security (CENS)
S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS)
Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

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The workshop adheres to a variation of the Chatham House Rule. Accordingly, beyond the speakers and presenters cited, no other attributions have been included in this report.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Welcome Remarks

Shashi Jayakumar, Head, Centre of Excellence for National Security (CENS), RSIS, NTU

In his welcome remarks, **Shashi Jayakumar** emphasised the timely nature of CENS' Workshop on Social Fault Lines and Singapore. He highlighted the topics covered in the workshop as pertinent issues which tie into the core potential fault lines in Singapore today. These topics included religion, the cosmopolitan and heartland dichotomy and its accompanying opportunities and challenges, and gender and sexuality. Jayakumar recognised some of these topics as longstanding issues within society while others have been more recently included in discussions. He also highlighted CENS' role as a think tank with an applied focus, in building both intellectual capital and a higher level critical thinking on Singapore's future. He stressed how the workshop presented an opportunity to share research findings, network, and have frank discussion. Jayakumar thanked the speakers and participants for participating, and encouraged discussion to continue beyond the workshop.

Panel 1: Religion

Panel 1 discussed current interreligious concerns in the Singaporean context. More specifically, the three panellists explored strategies for dealing with religious differences and demands. They emphasised the need for deeper and more constructive engagement between the various religious and secular groups, to encourage greater understanding within society. In this panel, **Paul Tobin** from the Humanist Society talked about the nature of humanism, issues which non-believers face in largely religious environments, and the issue of offending and being offended. **Mathew Mathews** of the Institute of Policy Studies examined the role of religion within the Singapore context of policy-making and the negotiations which should take place between and within religious and non-religious groups. **Nazirudin Mohd Nasir** from the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS) focused on rethinking what is considered "religious" in interreligious Singapore. He

encouraged more inclusion in interfaith engagements, where religious and non-religious groups can discuss issues based on morality and anthropocentric issues such as human suffering and the environment.

Panel 2: Revisiting the Cosmopolitan and Heartland Dichotomy: Opportunities and Challenges

Panel 2 discussed the complexities of dealing with diversity through the lens of the cosmopolitan/heartlander dichotomy. **Leong Chan Hoong** from the Institute of Policy Studies explored the cosmopolitan and heartlander dichotomy by examining the thoughts of young Singaporeans on working and living abroad. Leong defined cosmopolitans as globally connected and outward looking individuals who are comfortable with working and living in different cultures and interacting with people from diverse backgrounds. On the other hand, he characterised heartlanders as down to earth, more at ease with familiar faces, and strongly attached to the immediate neighbourhood. His presentation covered the issues of social class divide between cosmopolitans and heartlanders, impact of overseas work experience on vocational training, importance of and barriers to overseas work experience, and the future of the cosmopolitans and heartlanders. **Lee Tzu Yang**, Chairman of the Esplanade Company Ltd, explained that due to the natural drive for earning a living and providing for one's family, Singapore continues to be open for business not only with people from Singapore but also with external parties from other countries. Therefore, it is important for Singapore individuals and organisations to have developed experience, knowledge, and confidence in dealing with diversity. Lee noted Singaporeans are not only exposed to ethnic and cultural diversity through labour but also via popular culture, entertainment, and lifestyle. He argued the term "heartland" came into use as a contrast to "cosmopolitan". However, he stressed there are many aspects to explore around the label "heartland" such as attachment to the locality, beliefs and values, and economic standing. He added that whether one is a cosmopolitan or heartlander, he should improve the ability to engage with diversity.

Panel 3: Gender and Sexuality

Panel 3 examined the themes of Gender and Sexuality with three speakers analysing various challenges faced in the promotion and advancement of gender equality in Singapore. The first speaker, **Jolene Tan** from the Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE), provided a broad overview of the state of gender equality in Singapore, using the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) as a point of contrast between state commitment and national interests in advancing the position of women as equal

members of the society. **Vanessa Ho** from Project X gave an in-depth presentation of the sex industry in Singapore, delineating the major laws governing this industry as well as providing a cross-section of societal views and reactions towards sex workers. Through the lens of critical race theory, **Sangeetha Thanapal**, an independent researcher, examined the various “intersectionalities” underpinning the discrimination of certain groups. She highlighted in particular, situations of multiple marginalisations faced by individuals when gender intersects with other social constructs such as race, in affecting the access of these groups to social justice.

WELCOME REMARKS

Welcome Remarks

Shashi Jayakumar, Head, Centre of Excellence for National Security (CENS), RSIS, NTU



Shashi Jayakumar

Shashi Jayakumar welcomed the speakers and participants of the Workshop by first introducing the Centre of Excellence for National Security (CENS). CENS is one of five centres within the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), an autonomous school established in 2007 within the Nanyang Technological University. CENS' key research programmes – namely radicalisation, social resilience, homeland defence and cyber security – organise workshops annually. Jayakumar explained that experts from each field present their views and findings at these workshops to an audience consisting of academics, representatives from think tanks, government agencies and the private sector.

Jayakumar emphasised the timely nature of CENS' workshop on social fault lines and Singapore, under the Social Resilience Programme (SRP). He then introduced the topics covered in the workshop as pertinent issues for Singapore today. These topics included religion, the cosmopolitan and heartland dichotomy, and gender and sexuality.

Jayakumar recognised some of these topics as being longstanding issues within Singaporean society, while others have recently entered public discussions. For example, he alluded to religious fault lines as being historical to the Singapore context. This acknowledges religion as being a well-established and heavily researched aspect of society since Singapore's independence. Other topics, namely the cosmopolitan and heartland dichotomy, as well as issues of gender and sexuality, are more recent. Jayakumar supported the openness shown in discussing these topics especially when academics and researchers share their findings to further develop the discourse.

Jayakumar then highlighted CENS' role as a think tank with an applied focus in building intellectual capital and encouraging critical thinking on Singapore's future. He stressed the benefits participants would gain from the discussions each panel offered, as panellists would present diverse views from academic, practical and policy perspectives. He encouraged participants to maximise the opportunities the workshop provided to network, exchange views and have frank discussions.

In closing, Jayakumar welcomed the speakers' and participants' expertise, and encouraged discussions to continue beyond the workshop.

PANEL 1: Religion

Offence, Blasphemy and Humanism in Singapore

Paul Tobin, President, Humanist Society



Paul Tobin

Paul Tobin from the Humanist Society of Singapore contributed to the panel on Religion from a non-religious organisation's perspective, in his presentation on "Offence, Blasphemy and Humanism in Singapore". He defined humanists as individuals who take a "life stance" based on morality, human welfare and human flourishing that does not appeal to what he referred to as "supernatural science". The Humanist Society believes human beings can lead moral and fulfilling lives by emphasising reason and compassion. Tobin focused on three main points in his presentation: (1) the role non-religious individuals can play in multi-religious Singapore; (2) the difficulties humanists face in largely religious environments; and (3) the issue of offending and being offended.

First, Tobin emphasised the important role humanists or non-religious individuals can play within a multi-religious society like Singapore. He stressed the need for humanists to participate in interfaith events to build "bridges of tolerance". Referring to the workshop's theme and using geological fault lines as an analogy, he explained how engineers design and build structures strong enough to withstand potential earthquakes. Similarly, he alluded to the need to build societal attitudes resilient enough to overcome the tensions

produced by religious fault lines in Singapore, instead of ignoring their existence.

Second, Tobin elucidated some difficulties humanists face in largely religious environments – environments where the non-believing aspect of humanism is the most pertinent point of contention. For example, the negative public perception of the non-religious in Greece, Brazil and the United States may impede non-believers in being elected as leaders. There also exist blasphemy laws against non-belief. Legislatively, anti-terrorism laws in Saudi Arabia brand anyone supporting atheist thought in any form as a terrorist, while Malaysia has also condemned humanism and secularism as deviant and a threat to Islam and the state. Egypt has launched a national campaign to fight the supposed spread of atheism amongst the youth. Mob violence may also target unbelievers, such as the murders of secular bloggers in Bangladesh.

Third, the speaker addressed the issue of offending and being offended. He defined offence as the wounding of feelings caused by annoyance or resentment. He then posed three questions to be considered when assessing offence. First, can one avoid giving offence? Second, should one avoid giving offence? Third, can one be free from being offended? Tobin suggested deliberate offence-taking might be used strategically as a tool to halt discussion or criticism, as the offended have the upper hand in acquiring sympathy and even fear from outsiders. It can also be used as a method of imposing one's views or religious practices on others.

Tobin then presented several suggestions to handle offence. He advised individuals to develop thicker skins as offence cannot be avoided, and not to tolerate advocates of retaliation. He also emphasised the need to rethink what is understood by "respect[ing] each other's beliefs". Instead, he advocated for respecting "each other's right to their own beliefs or non-beliefs". Tobin's conception of respecting each other's beliefs accepts the need to develop tolerance for beliefs which may be perceived as opposed to one's own, especially in

religiously diverse societies. Therefore, Tobin believes the toleration of religious differences is the most important and effective approach to promoting harmony among different sections of society.

Negotiating Religious Demands in Singapore

Mathew Mathews, Senior Research Fellow, Institute of Policy Studies



Mathew Mathews

In his presentation on “Negotiating Religious Demands in Singapore”, **Mathew Mathews** examined the role of religion within the Singapore context of policy-making and the negotiations which should take place between and within religious and non-religious groups. Mathews structured his presentation according to three points: (1) religion in Singapore society; (2) historical and contemporary tensions between religion and society in Singapore; and (3) strategies for the state to manage differences within a multi-religious setting.

First, he introduced religion as it is understood in Singapore. Religious harmony thus far has been upheld and there has been minimal tension based on religion. A secular Singapore state has been instrumental in maintaining religious peace. According to Mathews, religion is an important component of the social fabric, and there is general trust across the different faith groups. Moreover, the government is also expected to take an active approach towards managing or addressing religious issues in Singapore, should they arise.

Second, Mathews elucidated on the historical and contemporary tensions between religion and society in Singapore. During Singapore’s early years, its state

development model necessitated all communities to accept several restrictions to achieve social stability and economic progress. Therefore, there were restrictions on religious practice and observances such as religious processions. Notable early tension between the state and religious organisations include the redevelopment of land used by religious groups, abortion, and the banning of religious groups such as Jehovah’s Witness and Hare Krishna. These groups had observed practices which went against what the state considered acceptable. There were also several significant early tensions between religions. These included Muslim leaders’ concerns about Christian proselytization in the 1960s, concerns about the insensitivity portrayed by Christian evangelists in the 1990s, and Hindu-Sikh tensions in Singapore after the Hindu-Sikh riots in India.

Recent tensions between religion and society included the wearing of the tudung in several occupational capacities, the instrument ban during Thaipusam celebrations, and Pastor Rony Tan and his statements on Buddhism. Others include the Health Promotion Board’s FAQs which appeared to support homosexuality, the Pink Dot movement’s support for the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender, and the subsequent “Wear White” backlash opposing Pink Dot’s objectives. Further, several moral and social concerns have also remained stark – especially amongst Muslims and Christians – such as pre-marital sexual relations and cohabitation.

Third, Mathews presented several strategies for the state to manage differences within a multi-religious setting such as in Singapore. One strategy is to mute the differences between groups. This is easily achievable if the state firmly controls flows of information. However, the suppression of rights might only bring about dissatisfaction. Another strategy is reconciliation, where the state brings different groups to negotiate with each other. Forced compromises might be necessary, should the groups be unwilling to accommodate to each other. The state can also consider allowing differences to flourish. Here, respect for fellow citizens is crucial, as there is no need for uniformity of beliefs or practices within the state.

Most importantly, Mathews suggested continued inter-religious dialogue to identify common grounds and encourage understanding. This is especially expedient following September 11 and the rise of religiously-

framed political violence. An example includes the Inter-Racial and Religious Confidence Circle (IRCC). This strategy is key to developing mutual understanding among diverse faiths, normalising pluralism, and nurturing relationships on the ground. However, inter-religious dialogues in Singapore today largely attract centrists and not those who hold polarising views

Mathews concluded by suggesting the need for these discussions on religious differences and demands to be further developed on national and grassroots platforms, and for proper codes of engagement to be drawn so that discussions are productive.

Rethinking “Religious” in Interreligious Engagement

Nazirudin bin Mohd Nasir, Deputy Director, Office of the Mufti, Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS)



Nazirudin Mohd Nasir focused on rethinking what can be considered religious in interreligious engagement in Singapore. He organised his presentation in three sections: (1) the progress of inter-religious engagements in Singapore; (2) how inter-religious engagements have evolved to be more inclusive; and (3) the need to rethink moral discourse to further encourage the inclusive approach in the public sphere. This suggests welcoming others from fundamentally different backgrounds (including those of non-theistic or scriptural worldviews) into one's own moral discourse. Nazirudin suggested thinking deeper into potential social fault lines which may result from different moral views, and how various groups interested in participating in the inter-religious scene in Singapore can encourage heightened trust leading to more inclusive conversations.

First, Nazirudin elucidated upon the progress of inter-religious engagements in Singapore. There have been state and faith-based efforts to establish inter-religious understanding and networking in Singapore. He cited initiatives such as the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act, Presidential Council for Religious Harmony and Community Engagement Programme by the state, as well as the establishment of the Harmony Centre by MUIS. The Harmony Centre's commitment to facilitating the shared objective of peaceful inter-religious relations can be observed in its Building Bridges Programme. The programme encourages religious leaders to discuss contemporary issues from different perspectives, which allows them to appreciate diverse interpretations of shared concerns.

Following this, Nazirudin explained how inter-religious engagements have evolved to become more inclusive in recent times. He suggested the need for the right attitude and mind-set when partaking in inter-religious engagement. There should be an understanding that individuals can be different yet remain focused on the common good and social harmony. A pertinent step towards inclusive engagement is facilitating discussions on anthropocentric themes and issues. This includes topics relating to the human condition, such as human suffering and the environment, instead of ontological discussions based on religious precepts. Such a transition offers more inclusion to people from faiths which are not theistic or scriptural in nature. It reduces the exclusive nature of membership into religious communities, and allows for deeper conversations between religious and non-religious groups.

Third, Nazirudin called for a rethinking of moral discourse to further encourage the inclusive approach toward the public sphere. He noted the need to reconsider assumptions of the terms religious - away from the contexts attached to particular pieties and organised religions - and “non-religious”. He questioned whether the terms religious and non-religious can be viewed dichotomously based on their association to religion, or an absence of it. Nazirudin opined on the unfair assumption that the presence of religion can differentiate the moral position of the religious from the non-religious. He suggested this impeded inclusion in inter-religious engagement, and explained that ethical teachings in religious traditions do not necessarily depart from a non-theistic moral and philosophical

understanding. Further, one's moral stance can be influenced by factors other than religion, such as politics or economics, which also influence one's attitudes and views. Therefore, convergences between "religious" and "non-religious" thought and moral reasoning show the potential for greater inter-religious interactions in multi-religious Singapore.

Nazirudin concluded his presentation by drawing a difference between encouraging inclusivist attitudes in Singapore, and consensus-building on moral issues. Inclusive engagement fundamentally thrives on the acknowledgement of difference between different faith groups. However, disagreement based on these differences goes beyond just a clash of "religious" and "non-religious" worldviews; anthropocentric and moral aspects of inter-religious discussions should also be addressed.

Discussion

A participant asked the extent to which inter-religious concerns between religious groups and the state can be attributed to religious requirements as well as globalisation and modernity. A speaker replied it is precisely because religion has had to deal with globalisation and modernity that religious groups feel a need to uphold the faith's precepts. Religion as an institution might have been seen by some as taking a backseat despite Singapore being a multi-religious society. Therefore, religious groups would want to protect the function of religion and prevent its erosion as the country develops further.

Another participant suggested that a tolerant society might crack eventually, despite inter-religious interaction. A speaker emphasised his earlier point on tolerance being more important than understanding in Singapore. He posited that having diametrically opposite opinions between various groups should be accepted as it acknowledges the diversity in the country. Understanding the explanations behind those opinions should be enough, and therefore tolerance would be more effective in managing differences. Another speaker emphasised other aspects of inter-religious discussions which these groups can agree upon, and that multi-religious and multi-ethnic societies were built on tolerance initially. He also added that the increased acknowledgment and discussion of differences in the public sphere signals a positive evolution toward adequately confronting the fault lines present in Singaporean society.

PANEL 2:

Revisiting the Cosmopolitan and Heartland Dichotomy: Opportunities and Challenges

Finding the “Cosmo” within the “Heart”

Leong Chan Hoong, Senior Research Fellow, Institute of Policy Studies



Leong Chan Hoong

Leong Chan Hoong scrutinised the “cosmopolitan” and “heartlander” dichotomy through the following puzzles: What do young Singaporeans think of working and living abroad? Is there a social class divide? Can overseas work experience enhance vocational training? Why is overseas work experience important? What are the barriers?

Leong began his talk by highlighting the steady upsurge in the number of overseas Singaporeans in the last decade. He also explained that the cosmopolitan-heartlander construct was introduced to national political discourse in 1999 by then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong. Cosmopolitans were illustrated by Leong as globally connected, outward looking, and comfortable working and living in different cultures and interacting with people from diverse backgrounds. In contrast, he described heartlanders as down-to-earth individuals who prefer the comfort of familiar faces and have a strong attachment to the immediate neighbourhood.

Discussing the views of young Singaporeans on working and living abroad and the question of social class divide, Leong expounded that based on the 2009 study on emigration attitudes of Singaporeans, there is a fair degree of interest when it comes to overseas education, temporary work, or permanent relocation. He

also identified a typology of young Singaporeans with regard to working and living overseas: (1) the heartland stayer (they prefer to improve their standard of living in Singapore rather than leaving); (2) the cosmopolitan stayer (they are not keen to relocate but remain open to non-permanent migration); (3) the disengaged (they do not have strong opinions and are rather disconnected from their families and country); and (4) the explorer (they have a strong desire to live and work abroad and have solid family ties but do not feel connected to their country). Leong then highlighted the concept of class and what it means to young Singaporeans. He elaborated that one-third of the sample agreed with the perception that those who have successfully emigrated overseas enjoy a higher social status in Singapore and the ability to migrate is an indication of success and competence.

As for the impact of overseas work experience on vocational training, respondents for the 2014 Applied Study in Polytechnics and ITE Review (ASPIRE) believe overseas attachments or exposure can enhance education and prepare them for a job after graduation. Leong stressed that the respondents, regardless of their family background or socioeconomic status, see overseas experience as an advantage in today's competitive labour market.

Leong then discussed the main reasons why overseas work experience is important according to the Strategic Issues Group Survey (2012) which took a representative sample of polytechnic and university graduates aged 25-29 and 35-45 years old. Both age groups acknowledged that overseas work experience was important for career development, knowing the world beyond Singapore, financial reward, acquiring skills and knowledge, as well as other factors such as networking and meeting their employers' expectations. When it came to barriers to working abroad, the 25-29 age group identified “finding the right opportunity” as the main barrier, while the 35-45 age group recognised family objections and commitment.

For Leong, the future of the cosmopolitans will not be

restricted to degree holders. Leong argued that people from different levels of education including those trained in vocational institutions have the desire to leave Singapore and experience life overseas. He also highlighted that nowadays many overseas Singaporeans and their children retain their Singaporean citizenship despite living and raising families abroad. Thus, it is important to consider how Singaporeans born and bred overseas can be connected to Singapore and what narrative could engage them. As for the future of heartlanders, prospects for their long-term economic outlook will remain optimistic, with emphasis on SkillsFuture and continuing education and training. He added that heartlanders also aspire to gain some kind of overseas work experience.

Leong concluded his presentation by raising questions on future economic systems and whether “Singapore Inc.” would be bounded by geographical space. He argued the geographical boundary, whether real or imagined, will be less important than the economic boundaries Singaporeans impose on themselves. In other words, there will be Singaporeans working for Singapore-based companies and Singapore-centric entities in other parts of the world. He noted working in either environment will contribute to Singapore Inc.

My People: Open for Business

Lee Tzu Yang, Chairman, The Esplanade Company Ltd



Lee Tzu Yang

Lee Tzu Yang articulated that Singapore continues to remain open for business because of the need and drive to earn a living and provide for one's family. Lee

also stressed the long history of Singapore as a business environment with a great deal of diverse trading partners. Different sources of culture and knowledge came to intersect in Singapore and today, the economy remains driven by trading and investment involving external counterparties. Thus, the ability to deal with diversity is necessary – whether one is a cosmopolitan or heartlander.

Lee noted the difficulties in dealing with diversity and working with external business partners. In some cases, large Singapore corporations have not worked together easily in ventures outside of Singapore. He argued that among the Asian Tigers, Singapore is the least united in putting together local groups of companies to do business overseas. Moreover, local small and medium enterprises bemoan the lack of government support to do so. It is unclear why Singaporean companies are less cooperative in terms of branching out overseas compared with those from countries such as Japan, South Korea, or Taiwan.

However, the international nature of the Singaporean economy continues to require individuals who can engage as well as work with diversity. Lee underscored the presence of different cultures and nationalities across industries and sectors in the country. Furthermore, access to popular culture, imported TV shows, and foreign entertainment models contributes to the experience of diversity. Therefore, Lee argued, overseas Singaporeans are not the only ones learning to deal with diversity.

The rise of Asian soft power and its possible impact on the value of heartland status was emphasised by Lee. He explained that the provision and influence of Asian music, films, fashion, and even food continues to grow and these are attractive to some people in Singapore particularly the young. He stated that this trend demonstrates that what is interesting and aspirational is no longer just western-based and this will guide work choices, lifestyles, art and innovation.

Aside from Asian soft power, Lee sees local education opportunities as a game changer in young Singaporeans' choices to study abroad. He reasoned that as local education opportunities continue to improve, particularly in the vocational and future skills areas, Singaporeans could be more selective in considering

foreign education options. He illustrated that for many years foreign degrees were seen as superior and a path to economic success. However, this is becoming less and less the case. Lee stated that as an employer, he can attest that progress made by a new employee in the first few years on the job far outranks his or her paper qualifications.

Lee explained that the term “heartland” came into use as a contrast with “cosmopolitan”; however, it should be noted that there are many aspects to explore around the heartlander concept. He pointed out that while “heartland” implies strong attachment to the local neighbourhood or people, preference for familiar faces, places, and ideas, it could also imply conservative, political, and religious beliefs and values. The term has also been associated with the less economically advantaged, who are also sometimes seen as less socially adept and inflexible. However, Lee stressed it is a mistake to equate such attitudes to the less well-off. He affirmed that there is tremendous diversity within what might be labelled as heartland beliefs and values.

Whether one is a heartlander or a cosmopolitan, Lee argued that it is important to improve one’s ability to engage and deal with diversity and uncertainty. He underlined that in Singapore, there is no lack of opportunity to do this. However, if individuals decide to live overseas, they should seek experiences that will enrich their life or help prepare them for more diverse challenges. Although going away also means giving up certain experiences that can only transpire in Singapore. Whichever choice is made, dealing successfully with diversity and uncertainty is a skill and a necessity.

Discussion

A participant asked about the role of language in the heartlander-cosmopolitan dichotomy. A speaker pointed out that English is the common language used by Singaporeans who go overseas. However, Singaporeans in China need to have the ability not only to communicate socially but also to hold a business conversation and read Mandarin. Thus, English is not the only important language for cosmopolitan Singaporeans. He added that language also has a role in the shared experiences or memory of heartlanders and cosmopolitans as particular concepts in shared heritage and memories only exist in a certain language. Another speaker stressed that the plurality of language has increased over the years as more people from different parts of the world come to Singapore. He added that diversity will continue to increase over the coming decades but English will remain an important language for everyone in Singapore, and people who move to Singapore – whether for the short or long term – understand this. However, this does not mean there is no room for other languages to flourish, the speaker stressed.

Possible social effects brought about by returning overseas Singaporeans were brought up by another participant. A speaker explained that empirical evidence suggested that people who work overseas are more nationalistic or culturally aware of who they are and what their values are. He added that exposure to foreign cultures actually brings them closer to their origins. Another speaker highlighted the organisational aspect of returning Singaporeans and explained that the highest risk in an employee’s career is coming back from overseas. He argued they may face reintegration issues not just for themselves but also for their families and that the new job is expected to meet their aspirations. Thus, it should be noted that returning Singaporean employees also face issues and difficulties.

PANEL 3:

Gender and Sexuality

Promises and Practices: 20 Years of CEDAW in Singapore

Jolene Tan, Programmes and Communications Senior Manager, AWARE



Jolene Tan

Jolene Tan presented a broad overview of the state of gender equality in Singapore. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) was raised as a point of contrast between state commitment at an international level and national interests in advancing the position of women as equal members of society. In particular, state policies and practices were contextualised, unveiling a trend that favoured an instrumental view of the value of women as care-providers, workforce participants and child-bearers, as opposed to a commitment towards uplifting their status as equal members of society.

In October 1995, Singapore acceded to CEDAW, ensuring that as a matter of international law the city-state was committed to eradicating gender discrimination and achieving gender equality. However, what transpires at the level of international law and what happens in terms of both domestic law and practice may diverge. It is noteworthy that despite the commitments under CEDAW, the Constitution does not specifically guarantee non-discrimination on the basis of sex or gender. Further, while the Women's Charter has gone a long way towards the promotion of gender equality in Singapore, sections dealing with divorce laws and family violence the Charter have remained largely gender neutral, with

the notable exception of maintenance provisions.

While overt forms of discrimination against women in Singapore have declined, many other spheres of life in Singapore remain significantly unequal for women. In the time since Singapore acceded to CEDAW, areas such as access to education and medical benefits have been reformed and improved. As such, broadly speaking, educational outcomes are no longer different between genders. Women working in the civil service are now also entitled to medical benefits for their dependants, similar to men. It is now no longer difficult for women to obtain permanent resident status or citizenship for their children born overseas or for foreign-born husbands.

However, there is only one full female minister out of 20 individuals serving in the current cabinet. Further, women face substantial disadvantages in the roles they are expected to perform by society. A significant issue is that of caregiving. Singaporean society traditionally assumes that women would take on the role of caregiver of children, the elderly and the disabled, often on an unpaid basis and with no guarantee that they will be supported or compensated for such work. However, taking on long periods of unpaid work affects the earning capacity and future employability of these women. The caregiver role taken up by women often brings dire consequences for them in the long run, in terms of the capacity to afford medical care, retire and continue to afford a home. This position appears to be tacitly if not directly supported by state policy, seen for example through the granting of a maximum of two weeks paternity leave for new fathers, as compared to a maximum of eight to sixteen weeks for mothers.

In conclusion, Tan noted that while on paper Singapore has entered into an important treaty guaranteeing gender equality, in practice this has been rather sketchily advanced. While there has been some significant, very laudable advances, there remains a conflicted vision between promoting women as equal members of society for its own sake, and being tied to existing societal norms and the overarching instrumental view of a woman's worth.

“Behind Closed Doors”: Sex, Gender, Sexuality and the Sex Industry

Vanessa Ho, Project Coordinator, Project X



Vanessa Ho

Vanessa Ho provided an in-depth examination of the sex industry in Singapore, delineating the major laws governing the industry as well as a cross-section of societal views and reactions towards sex workers. In particular, she analysed the contradictions between the government’s “pragmatic” approach and regulation of the sex industry and the struggle to maintain Singapore’s clean and conservative image. Ho concluded with examples of how these contradictions are played out in everyday situations.

A common misperception is that sex work in Singapore is legal, while soliciting for customers is not. However, a closer look at the laws regulating the industry shows that sex work in almost all its forms are criminalised to a certain extent. For example, soliciting for the purposes of prostitution is criminalised under the Miscellaneous Offences (Public Order and Nuisance) Act. The Women’s Charter criminalises many aspects of the sex industry in Singapore such as pimping and owning or managing a brothel or a space in which prostitution takes place. Despite this, there are licensed brothels in Singapore – a situation which is perhaps testimony to the state’s view that prostitution cannot be totally stamped out.

Sex workers in licensed brothels are normally migrant women who come to Singapore to find work in the sex industry through agents. They undergo a series of

checks conducted by authorities and are issued a work permit to work in Singapore, as well as a yellow card which is in essence a medical health check-up card. The card obliges its holder to undergo monthly health screenings. However, licensed sex workers face other restrictions. For example, a mandatory re-entry ban is issued once their work permit expires and they leave Singapore. Under the ban, they are not allowed to come back into Singapore, some for a period of three years while others may get a lifetime ban imposed on them. Further, as such workers go down on governmental records as having been a sex worker in Singapore, they run the risk of not being allowed into certain countries, such as the United States. Workers who have been found to test positive for the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) are immediately deported from Singapore. With these restrictive policies in place, many sex workers choose to work illegally rather than be a licensed sex worker.

In such a disadvantaged situation, sex workers in Singapore have to endure discrimination and acts of violence, including from members of the public, family, intimate partners and law enforcement officers. Such situations are fuelled by perceptions created in society that these are immoral women and thus should be punished. Some examples include clients abusing sex workers and resorting to violence, members of the public coming around to harass sex workers using derogatory terms, and family and intimate partners ostracising sex workers because of the job they choose to do. Many of these cases go unreported due to the fear that authorities will not be impartial and they will be deported without having their cases heard.

Ho concluded by discussing the case of the transgender community in Singapore, many of whom end up resorting to sex work due to the lack of employment opportunities as they do not fit in with society’s binary idea of male and female. In general, discrimination against sex workers exists in large part due to societal norms on sex, gender and sexuality – discrimination that punishes individuals who cross the line of what society deems acceptable.

Ain't I a woman? Gender & Its Intersectionalities in Social Justice

Sangeetha Thanapal, Independent Researcher



Sangeetha Thanapal

Sangeetha Thanapal's presentation explored the limits of discourse on gender in Singapore, which tends to group all Singaporean women together under the category of gender without considering the intersections of other marginalised identities. This leads to a superficial and piecemeal examination of gender and limits the access of these groups to social justice. In particular, multiple marginalisations faced in the areas of representation, employment and the culture of beauty were considered in this presentation.

The term intersectionality comes from a body of work commonly referred to as critical race theory, with origins in the American Civil Rights movement as well as radical feminism. Intersectionality considers the question of "which women?", taking into account the fact that there are women who operate at the intersections of sites of oppression. For example, a combination of constructs such as sexism and racism together play a part in the double discrimination that certain groups face. Such intersectional discrimination makes it harder to frame policy or laws protecting potential victims; where there are laws and policies which may protect a person in terms of gender, it is harder to prove discrimination in terms of both race and gender at the same time.

While the information provided showed the low number of women represented in government and the boards of public listed companies in Singapore, it is difficult to draw conclusions when intersectionality is considered.

Information on multiple marginalisations is not likely to be readily available. Examples can however be taken from the United Kingdom where the phrase "multiple disadvantages" has drifted into popular use in recent years; this essentially means that having more than one characteristic typically associated with a disadvantage increases a person's likelihood of experiencing that disadvantage. For example, studies have shown that disabled people already suffer from low rates of unemployment; however, when other factors such as belonging to an ethnic minority group are added, the number dips further below. This shows that minority people who have other perceived disadvantages are finding it even harder to obtain employment and that in general, when a person carries one or more marginalised identities, things become even more difficult for them.

In terms of the culture of beauty, racism and body discrimination are occurrences faced by minority women who do not fit the description of standards of beauty in Singapore. There are two broad categories of discrimination that are often faced here: (i) secularised racism, wherein for example, what is expected from society are portrayals of East Asian women as overly submissive; and (ii) racialised sexism, which includes cases such as the discrimination of Muslim women for wearing the hijab in Singapore, something which Muslim men do not have to face.

In conclusion, Thanapal expressed the view that racism is foundational in society and it is a regime regenerated through gender, class and race. As such, there needs to be an acknowledgement that not all women suffer equally as class, race and sexuality intersect constantly to disproportionately affect struggles and access to social justice.

Discussion

A question was raised asking whether quotas in managing gender equality would be a viable solution in dealing with the unequal representations in parliament and in the boards of companies in Singapore. A speaker replied that there were other approaches that could be used to increase gender representation such as switching recruitment procedures from the traditional old boys' network to executive search companies and through means such as training and managing

unconscious bias when selecting candidates. Another speaker disagreed, however, and noted that quotas would actually bring in much needed diversity into boardrooms and the workplace in general. A question was raised regarding which laws should be changed to improve the lives of sex workers in Singapore. A speaker responded that while there have been suggestions for the decriminalisation of the sex industry, what may be a more viable alternative would be for the state to

engage in consultation with sex workers as the industry is so diverse, from those working on the streets to high-end sex workers. An important point to note was that it is not just about changing the laws that regulate sex workers but also considering the social issues involved. This is an important aspect as many sex workers come from lower income groups, which have lower education levels.

PROGRAMME

Friday, 23 October 2015

0900 – 0930hrs **Registration**

0930 – 0945hrs **RSIS Corporate Video & Welcome Remarks** by **Shashi Jayakumar** *Senior Fellow and Head, Centre of Excellence for National Security, RSIS*

0945 – 1145hrs **Panel 1: Religion**

Chair:

Norman Vasu, *Senior Fellow and Deputy Head, Centre of Excellence for National Security, RSIS*

Speakers :

Offence, Blasphemy and Humanism in Singapore by **Paul Tobin**, *President, Humanist Society*

Negotiating Religious Demands in Singapore by **Mathew Mathews**, *Senior Research Fellow, Institute of Policy Studies*

Rethinking “Religious” in Interreligious Engagement by **Albakri Ahmad**, *Dean of MUIS Academy and Senior Director for Capacity Building & Nazirudin Mohd Nasiri*, *Deputy Director, Office of the Mufti Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS)*

Q & A

1145 – 1300hrs **Lunch**

Venue :

Pool Garden, Level 5

1300 – 1430hrs **Panel 2: Revisiting the Cosmopolitan and Heartland Dichotomy: Opportunities and Challenges**

Chair :

Shashi Jayakumar, *Senior Fellow and Head, Centre of Excellence for National*

Security, RSIS

Speakers :

Finding the “Cosmo” within the “Heart” by **Leong Chan Hoong**, *Senior Research Fellow, Institute of Policy Studies*

My People: Open for Business by **Lee Tzu Yang**, *Chairman, The Esplanade Company Ltd*

Q & A

1430 – 1500hrs **Networking Break**

Venue :

Vanda Ballroom Foyer, Level 5

1500 – 1700hrs **Panel 3 : Gender and Sexuality**

Chair :

Kumar Ramakrishna, *Associate Professor and Head of Policy Studies in the Office of the Executive Deputy Chairman, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies*

Speakers :

Promises and Practices: 20 years of CEDAW in Singapore by **Jolene Tan**, *Programmes and Communications Senior Manager, AWARE*

“Behind Closed Doors”: Sex, Gender, Sexuality, and the Sex Industry by **Vanessa Ho**, *Project Coordinator, Project X*

Ain’t I A Woman? Gender & Its Intersectionalities in Social Justice by **Sangeetha Thanapal**, *Independent Researcher*

Q & A

1800 – 2000hrs **Closing Dinner (by invitation only)**

Venue :

AquaMarine, Level 4

LIST OF SPEAKERS AND CHAIRPERSONS

SPEAKERS

Vanessa Ho

*Project Coordinator
Project X*

Lee Tzu Yang

*Chairman
The Esplanade Company Ltd*

Leong Chan Hoong

*Senior Research Fellow
Institute of Policy Studies*

Mathew Mathews

*Senior Research Fellow
Institute of Policy Studies*

Nazirudin Mohd Nasir

*Deputy Director
Office of the Mufti Islamic Religious Council of Singapore
(MUIS)*

Jolene Tan

*Programmes and Communications Senior Manager
AWARE*

Sangeetha Thanapal

Independent Researcher

Paul Tobin

*President
Humanist Society*

CHAIRPERSON

Shashi Jayakumar

*Senior Fellow and Head
Centre of Excellence for National Security (CENS)
S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS)*

Kumar Ramakrishna

*Associate Professor and Head of Policy Studies in the
Office of the Executive Deputy Chairman
S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS)*

Norman Vasu

*Senior Fellow and Deputy Head
Centre of Excellence for National Security (CENS)
S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS)*

ABOUT CENS

The **Centre of Excellence for National Security (CENS)** is a research unit of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) at the Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.

Established on 1 April 2006, CENS raison d'être is to raise the intellectual capital invested in strategising national security. To do so, CENS is devoted to rigorous policy-relevant analysis across a range of national security issues.

CENS is multinational in composition, comprising both Singaporeans and foreign analysts who are specialists in various aspects of national and homeland security affairs. Besides fulltime analysts, CENS further boosts its research capacity and keeps abreast of cutting edge global trends in national security research by maintaining and encouraging a steady stream of Visiting Fellows.

ABOUT RSIS

The **S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS)** is a professional graduate school of international affairs at the Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. RSIS' mission is to develop a community of scholars and policy analysts at the forefront of security studies and international affairs. Its core functions are research, graduate education and networking. It produces cutting-edge research on Asia Pacific Security, Multilateralism and Regionalism, Conflict Studies, Non-Traditional Security, International Political Economy, and Country and Region Studies. RSIS' activities are aimed at assisting policymakers to develop comprehensive approaches to strategic thinking on issues related to security and stability in the Asia Pacific.

For more information about RSIS, please visit www.rsis.edu.sg.

ABOUT NSCS

The **National Security Coordination Secretariat (NSCS)** was set up in the Prime Minister's Office in July 2004 to facilitate national security policy coordination from a Whole-Of-Government perspective. NSCS reports to the Prime Minister through the Coordinating Minister for National Security (CMNS). The current CMNS is Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Home Affairs Mr Teo Chee Hean.

NSCS is headed by Permanent Secretary (National Security and Intelligence Coordination). The current PS (NSIC) is Mr Benny Lim, who is concurrently Permanent Secretary (National Development) and Permanent Secretary (Prime Minister's Office).

NSCS comprises two centres: the National Security Coordination Centre (NSCC) and the National Security Research Centre (NSRC). Each centre is headed by a Senior Director.

The agency performs three vital roles in Singapore's national security: national security planning, policy coordination, and anticipation of strategic threats. It also organises and manages national security programmes, one example being the Asia-Pacific Programme for Senior National Security Officers, and funds experimental, research or start-up projects that contribute to our national security.

For more information about NSCS, visit <http://www.nscs.gov.sg/>



