

Racial and religious harmony should not be taken for granted

Source: Lianhe Zaobao

Date: 11 July 2010

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Harmonious integration of diverse races, religions and cultures is one of the strengths of Singapore. This however, is not a natural product of societal development, but a result of a series of meticulous governmental planning. Singaporeans, therefore, should continuously strive to maintain this harmonious relationship and not take it for granted.

That was the response from Guest of Honour, SMS Grace Fu, Senior Minister of State for Ministry of National Development and Ministry of Education, during the conference held yesterday in conjunction with the “Orange Ribbon Celebrations” to commemorate Racial Harmony Day.

In light of the recent racial riots in some countries, a student asked if the same scenario would occur in Singapore. He was also keen to know if the government has any counter measures in place.

SMS Grace Fu responded that similar riots have the potential of occurring in Singapore, but the government has been taking preventive measures, such as close supervision of religious extremists, and conducting conversations with them where necessary.

In addition, text literatures which contain racist elements to disparage other religions are banned. The Housing and Development Board ethnic policy also serves to prevent possible scenarios of mono-ethnic dominance in the neighbourhoods and schools.

In another example, she highlighted Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong’s National Day Rally anecdote of grassroots leaders helping to defuse a run-in between a Chinese family who wanted to hold a wake at the same void deck that was to host a Muslim wedding.

SMS Grace Fu said: “Our ancestors came from different countries and the establishment of a harmonious relationship started from their generation. Within these last few decades, Singapore has attracted increasing numbers of immigrants and foreign talents, and as such we should not forget the importance of the ongoing process of integration. We need to preserve our strength of being a multi-racial and multi-cultural society and government takes on the role of providing common spaces for all race.”

Mr Chan Soo Sen, Member of Parliament for Joo Chiat SMC and Chairman of the Inter-Religious Harmony Circle was also present as a panelist in the Conference. In response to a student’s query of whether Singapore merely pay lip service to integration, he reflected on his 1976 trip to Yugoslavia. He noticed the cohesion among the Serbians, Croatians and Bosnians, and the inter-racial marriages amongst the races. At that point in time, he believed that to be the epitome of racial harmony.

However, he added that no one would expect that 20 years later, multiple civil wars ensued due to political and religious frictions, resulting in total devastation of the country. In view of this, it can be seen that tensions can still exist among races despite the passing of several generations. Moving back to local scene, he mentioned that our last racial riot occurred in 1969, which, as a matter of fact, was not too long ago. Despite this, Mr Chan has confidence in Singaporeans. He spoke of how, Choo Jiat residents turned up to say farewell to their Muslim neighbours during a Haj send-off that took place soon after the Sept 11 attacks in 2001.

More than 300 students and guests attended the Orange Ribbons Celebrations at Nanyang Polytechnic yesterday. The event was organised by OnePeople.sg, the national body for racial harmony.