Latest rule on "double-barrelled" race draws mixed response

SINGAPORE: The latest rule allowing a person's "double-barrel" racial heritage to be recorded on his identity card has drawn a mixed response.

While most observers said the implications on Singapore's ethnic policies are still unclear, some noted that this could, in the long term, dilute the need to have racial classifications at all.

Eliza Harun de Silva is of Eurasian-Malay heritage. When she turns older, she may choose how she wants to be categorised.

But for now, parents Terence and Yann are open to having both recorded in official papers.

Harun Terence De Silva said: "She's not categorised as a particular race just because of convenience. It's more based on her heritage and her culture."

But Terence is concerned that Eliza's declared ethnicity will affect her in some way.

In Singapore, race determines the subsidies you get from community self-help groups and where you can buy your housing board flat.

Some said the new rule may prompt people to declare their race based on these considerations.

Hri Kumar Nair, MP, Bishan-Toa Payoh GRC, said: "When you come to a situation where some people can decide, administratively, what their race is, then that seems to be that you are promoting a policy to make it administratively convenient, as opposed to upholding a person's racial heritage."

The implications of the new rule on policy, especially housing policy, are still unclear. But some said racial indicators may still be "helpful" in preventing ethnic enclaves.

Assistant Professor Eugene Tan, SMU, said: "So long as there is a tendency for Singaporeans to group along racial lines, then there will be a need for housing authorities to have racial quotas."

Figures from 2008 showed that the proportion of inter-ethnic marriages are going up.

Among non-Muslims, it is now 13.8 per cent, up from just under nine per cent a decade ago. Among Muslims, it has increased 20.4 per cent to 30.9 per cent.

The new rule is seen as a response to changing realities.

Associate Professor Kirpal Singh, School of Social Sciences & Humanities, Singapore Management University, said: "For what it is worth, the very idea itself, of actually recording
my twin inheritances of my mother and my father, actually in some ways, do now in some way, give a legal status to an individual that is of mixed parentage."

Some observers said with more new immigrants coming in and more mixed marriages, calls for the removal of racial classifications and indeed racial policies could get stronger.

In fact, generations down the road, there could well be a Singapore where the need to classify a person by race becomes redundant. That is the hope of the de Silvas. But till then, the issue of race will continue to weigh on their minds.

- CNA/vrm