How the (dual) race card may be played

Parents could declare their child’s race based on expedient rather than cultural reasons

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SINGAPORE — Could the latest rule change, allowing a child’s dual race heritage to be reflected on his identity card, in the long term dilute the point of racial classifications at all?

Some observers note this possibility, even as they feel the implications for Singapore’s race-based policies — especially public housing quotas — are still unclear.

“I don’t think they’ve worked out the different permutations,” said Singapore Management University (SMU) Assistant Professor Eugene Tan, who thinks existing policies would not be substantially affected for now.

For instance, how would a flat applicant with a double-barrelled race be considered when quotas come into play?

Because parents are still required to pick the primary order of race for their child, sociology professor Chua Beng Huat believes that the HDB will stick to this allocation basis; hence, nothing will change.

“If a person is listed as Chinese-Indian, he or she would still be placed on the Chinese quota,” he said.

“However, if the HDB were to allow the person to use either Chinese or Indian to purchase flats, then clearly it would give the person an advantage because he or she can strategically decide which race to use depending on the quota situation in the desired location or block.”

One view is that with race determining the subsidies one gets from community self-help groups and where one can buy a housing board flat, it may prompt people to declare their child’s race based on these expedient considerations.

It is up to the individual and their families to make decisions with regard to their race, after fully considering the facts and implications based on their circumstances and aspirations.

Ministry of Home Affairs

Said Mr Hri Kumar Nair, MP for Bishan-Toa Payoh GRC: “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.”

In the case of his two-and-a-half-year-old daughter, who is half Chinese and half Indian, he added: “Regardless of how my wife and I should decide to classify her, we’re not going to raise her differently.”

Similarly, Mr Harun Terence De Silva said his daughter Eliza, who is of Eurasian-Malay heritage, will not be categorised “as a particular race just because of convenience. It’s more based on her heritage and her culture”.

NEED FOR RACIAL CLASSIFICATIONS STILL

Figures from 2008 show, the proportion of inter-ethnic marriages is rising: Among non-Muslims, it is now 13.8 per cent, up from under 9 per cent a decade ago, while among Muslims, it has gone up to 30.9 per cent.

The new IC rule is a response to changing realities, said Associate Professor Kirpal Singh of SMU’s School of Social Sciences & Humanities.

“For what it is worth, the very idea itself of recording my twin inheritances of my mother and my father, does now in some way give a legal status to an individual of mixed parentage”

But it is not time to do away with racial indicators in policies where such indicators are still “helpful” in preventing ethnic enclaves.

Said Asst Prof Tan: “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.”

Still, some believe with more new immigrants coming in and more mixed marriages — including among children themselves of mixed marriages — calls for the removal of racial classifications could get stronger.

Said Mr Hri Kumar: “There will come a time — and I think it will take some time, not in the next 5 to 10 years but perhaps the next one or two generations — Government policy may well be very different, may not be based on racial classifications. So maybe the relevance of race will diminish.”