NTU SURVEY ON RACE AND RELIGION

Singaporans more open-minded now

By FENG ZENGKUN

A NEW study claims that Chinese people and Christians in Singapore have become more likely to accept other races and faiths in the past four years.

Singaporeans in general are now more likely to be open-minded, said Dr Norman Vasu and research fellow Yolanda Chin from the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies at Nanyang Technological University (NTU), who led the project.

The survey was conducted last year before the recent spate of online racist posts. The researchers interviewed 2,100 citizens and compared the findings to an identical survey they conducted in 2007.

They singled out Malay, Chinese and Christian respondents for analysis in the latest survey because of several high-profile cases of discrimination in the past four years.

In 2010, a Christian pastor was caught on video disparaging Buddhism and Taoism. Later that year, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong devoted a substantial part of his National Day Rally speech to religious tolerance.

Dr Vasu acknowledged that the positive findings could be due to political correctness but sociologists said Singaporeans have become more bold and honest due to national discussions on race and faith.

In 2007, a group of Christians took over leadership of the secular Association of Muhammadans, Christians and Jews in Singapore. People were asked the following questions about each of the three major races in Singapore, Malays, Indians and the Chinese, and five religions, Hinduism, Christianity, Muslim, Free-thinking and Buddhism or Taoism.

Social
- Would you mind if your next-door neighbour were a ___? Would you mind if your teacher were a ___? Would you mind being treated by a doctor who is a ___? Would you sit next to a ___? When you need help in public, would you approach a ___?

Political
- Would you vote for a ___ Member of Parliament? Would you mind if Singapore's Prime Minister were a ___? Would you vote for a ___ President of Singapore?

Security
- Would you mind being helped by a policeman who is a ___? Would you trust a ___ soldier to protect you?

Work-place
- Would you mind if your boss were a ___? Would you mind if your co-worker were a ___? If you were a boss, would you hire a worker who is a ___?

Majority-minority
- Would you feel uneasy in a place full of ___? Would you feel uneasy if the majority of the people in Singapore were ___?

Researchers from Nanyang Technological University surveyed 1,000 people last year on their opinions on race and religion and compared it to an identical survey they conducted in 2007.

People were asked the following questions about each of the three major races in Singapore, Malays, Indians and the Chinese, and five religions, Hinduism, Christianity, Muslim, Free-thinking and Buddhism or Taoism.

Malays remain less likely to accept other faiths and races while Singaporeans in general are now more likely to be tolerant.

Malays Christian Chinese

Singaporeans are still very likely to accept a president, prime minister or Member of Parliament from any of the three major races and five religions in Singapore.

SOURCE: NTU

For example, some noted. They said the researchers' analysis should have been focused on Muslims and not Malays as Mr Lee Kuan Yew's controversial statement was about the religion and not the race.

National University of Singapore sociologist Tan Ern Ser added: "While we should continue to be vigilant on ethnic and religious issues, my own sense is that the relatively more troubling spots are in terms of class and nationality."

Prof Singh noted that warm relations could easily sour in the wake of sudden events. "After the Sept 11 terrorist attacks, Americans, even the open-minded ones, changed their views about Muslims around them," he said.

But all the sociologists said the report reflected well on Singapore, especially after the recent cases of young adults posting racist comments online.

"Very often, the moral outrage over high-profile cases distracts us from the everyday and routine interactions between ethnic groups and faiths," said Dr Terence Chong, a sociologist at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.

"This study shows our multicultural ties have been resilient in the past four years.

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