

# **Interethnic harmony and governmental policy in the city-state of Singapore.**

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## **Abstract**

This essay is dedicated to one of the most unique examples of the interracial governance – the city-state of Singapore. World community today is challenged to find effective measures for peaceful co-existence of different races, ethnic groups and religions, and Singapore provides one of the most positive examples in this field. My argument is that interracial harmony in Singapore was achieved via governmental management and successful transformation of separating factors (language, education, religion, culture, labor activity inclinations, ability to exercise power) into a uniting force. This was possible due to the following reasons:

1. Constant monitoring of the ethnic factor and the use of preventive flexible policy in accordance with monitoring results and interracial harmony set as a goal;
2. Direct use of authoritative measures by the government being the only source of power.

To show the transformation of the factors stated above, I will turn to sometimes descriptive approach to show how the government was able to react and change policy in the face of new realities.

## **Introduction**

Singapore is a multinational state comprising more than twenty ethnic groups. Most numerous of them are Chinese (76,8 % of the population), Malaysians (13,9 %) and Indians (7,9 %)<sup>1</sup>. Government of the city being the government of the state possesses powerful law enforcement instruments. Taking into account peculiarities of ethnic structure of the Singapore society, government aims to support harmony in interethnic relations and to realize the idea of “united people, united nation, united Singapore”, which builds a basis of the state ideology. The given motto provides for coexistence of two ideas. The first one implies being conscious of the ethnic heritage and exercising cultural traditions. According to the second idea the members of the Singapore society are expected to promote mutual enrichment of various cultures, strengthening mutual understanding and trust. Government takes considerable notice of maintaining harmony in the interethnic relations, which is seen as a major component of political stability and national security. Especially when it comes to the presence of “disturbing factors” in the nearby Indonesia and Malaysia. I would assume that seeing interethnic harmony as a part of the national security system contributes to a more effective and active policy.

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<sup>1</sup> CIA The world factbook Singapore <http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/sn.html>

## **Transformation of separating factors into a uniting force**

### ***1. Language and education***

Language is one of the first things to come up when we look at the factors separating ethnic communities. Linguistic distinctions create obstacles for communication. Approach to this issue in Singapore is not conventional, and appears to be successful enough. Today there are four official languages in Singapore. In the early 60s when the government was aiming at the reunion with Malay, Malayan was supposed to be introduced as official language. But as the idea of independence grew stronger, the ruling People's Action Party and Lee Kuan Yew as the prime-minister recognized that attachment of members of various communities to native language was deep and that only English language could become a working language and language of interethnic dialogue. "Use of English language did not give advantage to any nationality. We have decided to keep four official languages in Singapore: Malayan, Chinese, Tamil and English"<sup>2</sup>. However, it was necessary to find a way of their successful combination and to prevent language segregation. For this reason compulsory second language was introduced at schools. Pupils were obliged to learn English as a first language and the language of their origin as a second. It was supposed to bring the whole population of Singapore to bilingualism with English as a means of communication in trade and business sphere. Use of the English language allowed creating a comprehensible communicative element for all ethnic groups, not infringing upon the rights of minorities. Use of other official languages along with English stimulates interethnic dialogue.

However, the selected language policy did not allow the linguistic social system to develop by itself. Social developments revealed some problems, such as the problem of the second language choice for children born from mixed marriages. Chua Beng Huat, professor at the National University of Singapore, describes curious collisions within the state language policy: In this case ethnicity and second language were assigned in accordance with ethnicity of the child's father without consideration of language spoken at home, or future prospects of speaking a language for a carrier<sup>3</sup>. It was aimed at protecting an ethnic child from westernization and preserving ethnic culture and tradition.

### ***Shift in the language policy***

Legislation had to be changed for the same reason (preserving ethnic culture) and showed the necessity of a flexible policy. Children of mixed marriages were allowed to choose the second language. Moreover, the trend to introduce English as the main means of communication was also altered, when the government realized the threat of "westernization" to ethnic identities of the people's of Singapore. Nowadays the trend seems to be directed at the growing weight of the Chinese language as the language of the biggest and strongest community in Singapore. The government puts force into implementing the projects of Special Assistance Plan schools for the brightest Chinese students, launches Speak Mandarin Campaign to unite the different dialect speaking groups, calls for creation of a Chinese cultural elite fluent in Mandarin, steeped in Chinese culture, history, literature and the arts<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Ли Куан Ю. Сингапурская история: из «третьего мира – в первый» (Lee Kuan Yew. From Third World to First: The Singapore Story)/Перевод с английского А.В. Боня – М.: МГИМО-Университет МИД России, 2005, с. 142.

<sup>3</sup> Communitarian Politics in Asia/ edited by Chua Beng Huat. – London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004, p.89.

<sup>4</sup> Mauzy D.K., Milne R.S. Singapore politics under the People's Action Party. – London and New York: Routledge, 2002, p. 102 – 109.

Another reason for the shift in the language policy was opening of China. Chinese community is historically a support of the Singapore society and the Government and renders significant influence upon educational, commercial, cultural and social spheres of the Singapore society. Opening of China to the world market increased the status of Chinese in Southeast Asia. Revival of connections of the Singapore Chinese with China revived feeling of belonging to the Chinese culture. Seeing China as the main influential political and economic partner of Singapore, the government tries to impart interest to culture and language of China to local pupils and students. It argues that international and Singapore companies, which aim to reach key positions on the Chinese market, need experts with knowledge of Chinese traditions, customs and language. Authorities call upon representatives of the Chinese community to actively participate in public life of the country.

Thus, I would argue that the government of Singapore has monitored the linguistic changes in the country and adjusted its policy in order to preserve ethnic cultures of Singapore and keep population competitive in the world market. Language as a factor has undergone transformation from a negative to a constructive force. Nevertheless, this is not a finished task and government has to continue monitoring.

## ***2. Religion and culture***

Today religious factor proved to be a powerful source for conflict and separation. Main religions in Singapore are Buddhism (42,5% of population), Islam (14,9%), Christianity (14,6%), Daoism (8,5%), and Hinduism (4 %) <sup>5</sup>. Singapore being a secular state names none of those a state religion. The degree of influence of each religion depends on the size of the ethnic group. According to the Constitution of Singapore every person has the right to profess and practice his religion and to propagate it. Every religious group has the right to manage its own religious affairs; to establish and maintain institutions for religious or charitable purposes; and to acquire and own property and hold and administer it in accordance with law <sup>6</sup>.

Religion is a very sensitive issue for Singapore. The government has proved to be careful with taking steps concerning religion. The Report on Moral Education of 1979 recommended that Religious Knowledge courses be introduced in schools. Students could choose from different religious courses (Bible Knowledge, Buddhist Studies, Hindu Studies, Islamic Knowledge, World Religions, Confucian Ethics and Sikh studies). However the new system did not prove to be successful, on the contrary, it appeared to be exacerbating religious differences and in 1989 the Religious Knowledge courses were taken out of the curricula <sup>7</sup>.

Government of Singapore faced a necessity of not only having to take into account religious differences, but also to learn to use them in order to strengthen unity of the nation. For example, in the national army priority value was given to providing equal conditions for recruits, not allowing discrimination on the basis of ethnicity. In the Singaporean army religious practices of Buddhists, Indians, Moslems, Sikhs, Christians, Zoroastrians, as well as meals restrictions for Moslems and Indians are observed.

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<sup>5</sup> CIA The world factbook Singapore <http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/sn.html>

<sup>6</sup> The Constitution of Singapore [http://statutes.agc.gov.sg/non\\_version/cgi-bin/cgi\\_legdisp.pl?actno=1999-REVED-CONST&date=20060315&method=whole&doctype=](http://statutes.agc.gov.sg/non_version/cgi-bin/cgi_legdisp.pl?actno=1999-REVED-CONST&date=20060315&method=whole&doctype=)

<sup>7</sup> Mauzy D.K., Milne R.S. Singapore politics under the People's Action Party. – London and New York: Routledge, 2002, p. 104.

Another initiative launched by the government to promote integration between ethnicities was public housing project. It implied that each ethnic group received its quota in each housing estate and in each block of public housing. The quotas were proportionate to the percentage of the ethnic group in the population of Singapore. Re-housing was not a smooth process, but it contributed to more understanding of each other's culture. Ivanova I.S. provides examples of how the skill to profess one's religion along with respect to the other's developed: "Imams call Moslems for a prayer not through loudspeakers from minarets, but via television. Routes of processions in Hindu holiday Thaipusam are laid in a way not to prevent movement of transport and not to frighten sensitive people by the sight of self-flagellation of Hindus. Chinese are obliged to restrain themselves at celebrating the noisiest holiday – New Year's"<sup>8</sup>. Thus, in such a sensitive issue, it is important to monitor possible seeds of conflict. I would argue that the government of Singapore has been able to maintain peaceful co-existence of different religious groups, trying to preserve unity of the nation.

### ***3. Labor activity inclinations.***

The differences in economic distribution between ethnic groups are amongst others defined by their economic culture, educational opportunities and historical developments. Uneven economic indices is a negative factor. However the policy of the government has led to a higher level and quality of life for all ethnic groups in Singapore<sup>9</sup>. It provided for integration of ethnic groups separated by their economic culture. It is not to say that there are no economic differences along the ethnic borders, but to show the possibility of transformation of such separating factors.

Low educational level of the Malay community which prevented its members from acquiring good jobs in Singapore was spotted both by the Malaysians and the government of the state in the 80s. With the financial help of the government Council on development of Malay-Muslim community (Mendaki) was established in 1982 with the purpose of increasing educational level of representatives of the Malayan community whose educational indices were worse than those of Chinese of Singapore. Statistic prove significant progress achieved by the Malayan community in the last decade. Percentage of students who graduated from schools and entered higher educational institutions increased almost twice. Percentage of Malaysians engaged in skilled work has also considerably increased. In 1990 12 % of Malaysians worked as managers, performed professional, technical and similar work. Whereas in 2000 already 23 %. The average monthly income rose from 954 dollars in 1990 up to 1790 dollars in 2000<sup>10</sup>.

Top management of the country meets representatives of a Malay-Muslim community on a regular basis. Maintenance of this dialogue benefits both: Malayan minority (to show, that the decisions influencing life of the Singapore society are coordinated with them) and the management of the country (to ensure interethnic stability).

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<sup>8</sup> Иванова И. С. Феномен Сингапура, XXI ВЕК. (Ivanova I.S. Phenomenon of Singapore, XXI century) [http://segzs.narod.ru/Fenomen\\_Singapura.doc](http://segzs.narod.ru/Fenomen_Singapura.doc)

<sup>9</sup> *Here is one of the lowest in the world children's mortality rates and the highest rates of life expectancy (76 years for men and 80 years for women). Level of literacy for adults - 93 %; almost 40 % of citizens acquire secondary and specialized secondary education, 12 % - higher education.* Source: Иванова И. С. Феномен Сингапура, XXI ВЕК. (Ivanova I.S. Phenomenon of Singapore, XXI century) [http://segzs.narod.ru/Fenomen\\_Singapura.doc](http://segzs.narod.ru/Fenomen_Singapura.doc)

<sup>10</sup> Progress of the Malay Community in Singapore since 1990 [http://www.mendaki.org.sg/content.jsp?cont\\_cat\\_id=12&cont\\_id=92](http://www.mendaki.org.sg/content.jsp?cont_cat_id=12&cont_id=92)

As for the Indian community, it plays a considerable role in socioeconomic life of the country. There are more than 1,400 Indian companies registered in Singapore. At the meeting with representatives of the Indian community and the Singapore association on development of the Indian community in the year 2005, the Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong noted that Indian children achieved significant results in the field of education; in 2003 76% of them had an opportunity to enter higher education, in 1993 this index was 41%<sup>11</sup>.

Council on development of a Malay-Muslim community and Association on development of the Indian community of Singapore actively participate in programs on retraining of personnel for their further work in Singapore. Thus, the government in its aspiration to preserve interethnic stability welcomes initiatives of local national communities in the decision-making concerning ethnicity and tries to work in close cooperation with them.

#### ***4. Exercise of power***

In a state where the almost 77% majority of population is Chinese, it is hard to achieve racial equality. The government has set a goal of achieving equal opportunity at the election process to ensure fair decision-making and exercise of power. In the 80s of XX century the election system was modified according to the mixture of various ethnic groups. The essence of Lee Kuan Yew's offer was the following: three or four one-mandatory districts merged in one integrated constituency in which three or four candidates were put to the vote as a united team. This team had to include one representative of national minorities, an Indian or Malayan candidate. Due to such a system the Chinese candidates could not exploit chauvinistic slogans, without losing 25-30% of votes of other nationalities. The majority electoral system with economic growth and tight control over opposition press did not allow domination of an ethnic group of the majority on the one hand, and provided stable majority in a legislature for the People's Action Party on the other.

#### ***5. Democratic behavior vs. results?***

Maintenance of national unity and formation of national identity was accompanied by a series of non-democratic measures. The government executed tight control over press and public life of citizens of Singapore. The control was especially strong over the English-speaking editions. Despite of that fact cultural distinctions between press in English, Chinese and Malayan language maintained. According to the Undesirable Publications Act import, sale or distribution of publications can be forbidden in cases when it contradicts public interests<sup>12</sup>. In 1986 the law was introduced which limited circulation or sale of foreign editions, interfering in internal policy of Singapore. Chua Beng Huat provides a good analyses of the anti-democratic legislation introduced during the over 40-years rule of the People's Action Party<sup>13</sup>. Those restrictions include Newspaper and Printing Act, Societies Act (restricted freedom of association), Public Entertainment Licensing Unit

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<sup>11</sup> Anjum, Zafar. Indians Roar in the Lion City <http://www.littleindia.com/November2005/IndiansRoarCity.htm>

<sup>12</sup> Undesirable Publications Act [http://statutes.agc.gov.sg/non\\_version/cgi-bin/cgi\\_retrieve.pl?actno=REVED-338&doctype=UNDESIRABLE%20PUBLICATIONS%20ACT%0a&date=latest&method=part](http://statutes.agc.gov.sg/non_version/cgi-bin/cgi_retrieve.pl?actno=REVED-338&doctype=UNDESIRABLE%20PUBLICATIONS%20ACT%0a&date=latest&method=part)

<sup>13</sup> Communitarian Politics in Asia/ edited by Chua Beng Huat. – London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004, p. 81 – 88.

(restricted freedom of speech), Internal Security Act. Professor argues that such anti-democratic measures resulted in the basic political unit being seen as a community – ethnic group or race, and not as an individual. Therefore individual natural rights are violated in favor of the rights of the group. Such a strong collective identity is a controversial concept, which ensures interracial harmony on the one side, and brings the government to notice the disappearance of the Singaporean nation as a unity on the other<sup>14</sup>.

Lee Kuan Yew government adhered to a consistent policy, adjusting it in accordance with modern realities. It is necessary to note basic importance of economic development of the country as a factor of a national policy. On the one hand, life standards if they are not strongly differentiated across ethnic borders reduce risk of discontent and growth of interethnic tensions. On the other hand, economic influence of the country in the world allows the government to execute non-democratic national policy. So due to “economic miracle” of Singapore the world community turned a blind eye to authoritative elements of governance.

### **Conclusion**

Chiew Seen Kong, professor at the National University of Singapore, believes that the government’s policies are designed “to reduce if not eliminate cultural and social distinctiveness of the races in order to achieve more and more common ground among the races and greater social harmony”<sup>15</sup>. After providing the above stated examples I would argue that the policy of the government of Singapore has been flexible and used measures to bring communities together as well as separating them in order to keep the stability. The ethnopolitical situation was managed through successful transformation of separating factors into a uniting force.

The experience of Singapore should be of special interest for the world community today due to its unprecedented management of interracial relations. National collective identity of Singapore may offer a variant of preservation of unity of a polyethnic society without collective violent assimilation and conformity to the dominating ethnic group. Implementation of a deeper research of this issue seems to be expedient, so as to extract useful lessons from Singapore and to see whether those can be adjusted and applied in other cities.

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<sup>14</sup> Communitarian Politics in Asia/ edited by Chua Beng Huat. – London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004, p. 93.

<sup>15</sup> Ethnic Chinese in Singapore and Malaysia: A dialogue between Tradition and Modernity/ [edited by] Leo Suryadinata. – Singapore: Times Academic Press, c2002, p.12.

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