

“Colour Matters”

The trending hot topic now would be the white supremacy and racial riots in the US. We are all going wild on social media sharing videos of racism acts in the US as if we are hearing racism for the first time. Supremacy, racism, and ethnocentrism have always been dormant in us and now it has finally exploded. I was prompted to write this article based on what is going around us now and it is my reflection on the subject of “**racism**”.

In the past **Slavery** was permitted and legalised by “Superpowers”. We have seen colonial history on how slavery was practised and how some humans were treated as commodities by a certain group. In the past, there were two groups of people living side by side – the masters and the slaves, could that mentality of our forefathers have evolved today into supremacy and racism? Why talk about the blacks in the US, what about the Palestinians in Israel, Rohingyas in Myanmar, Aborigines in Australia, Blacks in South Africa, the scheduled casts in India, trust me the list can go on and on.

One thing is clear, we have all been pretending to be happily dwelling in a multi-racial or diverse ethnic society, but inside us, the ethnocentric demon was waiting to plunge. Why go so far, what about our very own country, Singapore? Being a minority was already a challenge, try being a minority within a minority - that was me. I am proud of both my two heritages; I am a Muslim and Tamil. In Singapore, Tamil is an ethnolinguistic subgroup of Indians. Indians form a single-digit percentage in our 5.6 million population, making us the minority. Tamils are predominantly Hindus and people like me would be the minority of the minority. Malays in Singapore are predominantly Muslims and often people would unofficially categorise me as “Malay” just because I’m a Muslim. What surprises me is there are a lot of locals who are so ignorant of the minorities, I get questions like are you a Hindu (based on my looks), when I say I’m a Muslim they automatically assume I’m a Malay, clearly putting me in the grey area.

It also annoys me when nobody admits being racist while it is happening right in front of your eyes daily.

It was indeed a challenge growing up in Singapore as a minority kid, imagine you being called names and ridiculed by total strangers on public busses just because you belong to another ethnic group. I still remember my mom's golden advice "don't talk back just ignore them and mind your own business"; my mom even made me promise that I would not get into a fight or brawl. Her theory was "these people are the majority and they would seek revenge on us". Even animals have an instinct to defend but growing up in a society with your hands tied and getting emotionally bullied daily can cause a humongous psychological impact. Thank god I was strong enough to bounce back and be "normal". I was telling myself these are acts usually carried out by kids and they would outgrow as they grow up. I was proven wrong, lets fast forward my adolescence life, as a young adult I felt racism even more strongly. A particularly good example would be when seeking employment, I am not going to mention any name or agency or organization here. Despite being qualified I was denied several positions in Singapore just because I was not a Chinese. I was quite naïve and believed that perhaps knowing to speak Mandarin was a Job criterion, till a close Chinese friend of mine who is illiterate in Mandarin got the job that I could not because he was Chinese. The word Supremacy made more sense for the first time. Are we truly a meritocracy society? This is one of the many reasons that I chose to be self-employed. I have very little tolerance for inequality. I prepared myself to be more hardworking and I can confidently say I may not have been where I am today if I were to be regularly employed. Meaning I may not have progressed based on merits alone.

It is now known that our DPM Ng Swee Kiat is going to be our next PM, and I do not doubt his capability. But among the cabinet ministers, our former DPM Tharman was quite favoured by many including the local Chinese to be the next PM. It was mentioned openly by our PM

that we are not ready for a Non-Chinese Prime Minister; but why? What is there to be ready? Shouldn't the best man win, if we are a country based on meritocracy? We had an Indian DPM (Tharman), an Indian Chief Justice (Sundaresh Menon), an elected Indian President (Late SR Nathan), Indian senior Ministers like S. Iswaran, Vivian Balakrishnan, top-notch corporate leaders like J.Y Pillay who lead SGX and Singapore Airlines, our former senior minister S. Dhanabalan who lead DBS. With all these people why is Singapore not ready for a non-Chinese PM. Look at our HDB heartlands, there is a guideline on who qualify to buy a house not just based on their affordability but also their ethnicity, they must first meet the ethnic quota. You will never find a Malay to be more specific a Muslim holding a key position in the Army. Also, I have seen a lot of people from China offered citizenship and PR status compared to people from India. It is quite clear the government wanted to maintain the Chinese as the majority race in Singapore. All these make me wonder and re-visit our pledge – are we a united society regardless of language, race, and religion?

A quote from Prophet Muhammad – **“No man is superior to another other than of his character, good deeds and pioussness”**. We are far from civilization till the day we accept wholeheartedly that we cannot be inferior nor superior based on the amount of pigmentation in our skin.

- By A/Prof Abdul Raof

Written based on the author's reflection and observation

