



Are Malay Singaporeans better or worse off?
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Singapore's Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew's remarks in an interview with the *New York Times* drew fiery responses from various quarters in Malaysia and Singapore.

Lee (*right*) had said, "If the Tunku (Abdul Rahman) had kept us together ... had Malaysia accepted a multiracial base for their society, much of what we've achieved in Singapore would be achieved in Malaysia",

Former prime minister Mahathir Mohamad was quick to respond that Lee's catchphrase "Malaysia for Malaysians" was responsible for planting the seeds of today's racism in Malaysia.

Former prime minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi also commented that Malaysia does not need any advice from Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew, because it has its own way of governing the multi-racial country, saying that the cultural diversity and racial composition of Malaysia was far different from that of Singapore.

MCA president Chua Soi Lek chipped in that the current affirmative action policy in Malaysia was justified because bumiputeras have not yet achieved the same economic level as other ethnic groups, or that of Singapore.

Umno Youth chief Khairy Jamaluddin chorused in that one should not compare the two countries, in his own words, "apple to apple".

So, the question that perhaps everyone is asking may be: are Singapore's Malays better off?

Well, let's allow the statistics themselves to do the "talking".

Open door policy on China

In 2006, Singapore *Straits Times* journalist Mafoot Simon did a study that revealed for the first time that - against popular belief - the Indian and Malay minority races have done better than the majority Chinese population in Singapore, in terms of proportional population mix, educational attainment, and increase in monthly household incomes.



The study debunked the general perception of Singaporeans and probably Malaysians as well, that Singapore's Malays were falling behind.

The study also put to rest questions that Singapore's policies favoured the majority Chinese and marginalised the minority races.

What this study may highlight is that sometimes the incompleteness or lack of statistics may do more harm than good, at least in terms of perception.



This is true in the case of not breaking down the Singapore labour statistics by residential status and race.

The Singapore government has repeatedly assured Singaporeans that it treats all permanent resident (PR) applicants of all races equally.

Singapore's acting minister for information and the arts told the Singapore Malay daily *Berita Harian* in 1991 that Singapore's policies did not give special preference to any particular group.

Berita Harian had asked whether there was a quota for Malay-Muslims in the allocation of PRs.

The perception then, as it arguably still is now, was that there would be droves of immigrants from China as a result of Singapore's open-door policy, that would eventually either boost the Chinese numbers, or at least preserve their ratio in the overall population.

This was in light of statistics showing that the Malays were reproducing more than the Chinese. The birth rate at 1.82 for Malays has always and still is almost double that of the Chinese at 1.08 in Singapore.

The Malays in Singapore have also raised concerns over the open-door policy towards immigrants from China.

Indians benefited significantly

How valid are these concerns? Two sets of statistics - Singapore's 2000 Census of Population and the General Household Survey of 2005, threw up some surprises.

The 2005 survey showed that out of 3.5 million residents (Singaporeans and PRs) in that year, the percentages of Chinese and Malays had dropped slightly, from 76.8 percent in 2000 to 75.6 percent for the former, and from 13.9 percent to 13.6 percent for the latter.

However, there was a significant increase in the percentage of Indians during the five-year period, from 7.9 percent to 8.7 percent, due to the inflow of Indian PRs.

Education statistics gave the clearest indication of the trend: while all ethnic groups showed improvements in achieving polytechnic or university qualification, the biggest jump was among Indians - from 20 percent in 2000 to 31 percent.

For the Chinese, it went from 20 percent to 27 percent, while for Malays, it went from 4.9 percent to 8.6 percent.

The increase in proportion of Indian university graduates was partly due to the inflow of Indian PRs with university qualification. Some 60 percent of Indian PRs were university graduates in 2005, up from 51 percent in 2000.

It was the same with average monthly household incomes. While it rose from S\$4,940 (RM11,475) in 2000 to S\$5,400 (RM12,543), with all races enjoying bigger pay packets, it rose the highest for Indian households, from S\$4,560 (RM10,592) to S\$5,170 (RM12,009).

The Chinese saw their average monthly household wages grow by S\$410 (RM952) to



S\$5,630 (RM13,077), while those of Malay households rose from S\$3,150 (RM7,317) to S\$3,440 (RM7,990).

For comparison, the average monthly household income for the Chinese between 1990 and 2000 rose from S\$3,213 (RM7,477) to S\$5,219 (RM12,145), from S\$2,246 (RM5,226) to S\$3,148 (RM7,325) among the Malays and from S\$2,859 (RM6,653) to S\$4,556 (RM10,602) among the Indians.

Contrary to the common perception that Singapore's foreign-talent policy had brought in proportionately more Chinese from China than from elsewhere, it is actually the Indians from the sub-continent who are taking full advantage of Singapore's talent search.

Singapore Malays undertake self-help

In the late 1980s, the Singapore government's responsibility for the free tertiary education programme for Malays, a relic from the Federation of Malaya years, was transferred to Mendaki, Singapore's Malay community self-help group.

The Singapore government gave Mendaki a one-time starter sum to set up the Tertiary Tuition Fee Subsidy. Instead of giving free education to all Malays, this subsidy pays 100 percent of fees for families whose monthly income is below \$2,000 and 70 percent of fees for families whose monthly income is between \$2,000 and \$3,000.

This move represented a significant step in eliminating perceived Malay dependence and in fostering community responsibility. It also allowed the Singapore government to shed itself of a pre-independence political anachronism that had become increasingly expensive with growing Malay tertiary enrollment.

The Singapore media in 2006 reported that a common electronic database of 105,000 Malay-Muslim recipients of financial aid programmes in Singapore had been launched.

According to the latest data from Singapore's Housing Development Board (HDB), only 14 percent of 162 neighbourhoods have reached the ethnic quota.

HDB's quotas, aimed at ensuring an ethnic mix in each neighbourhood, allocates 15 percent of the apartments in each HDB block or 12 percent in each precinct to Malays).

We await anxiously Singapore's 2010 Census to be completed and reported, so that perhaps another study can be done to answer once again the question - are Singapore's Malays better off?

In the final analysis, I suspect that whilst Singapore Malays may have progressed better than the other races on a proportional basis, they are very slowly inching towards being "on par" with the rest of the population.

LEONG SZE HIAN's late father moved from Kuala Lumpur to Singapore in 1952. Since he was born in Singapore in 1953, there may be some confusion as to whether he was conceived in Malaysia or Singapore.

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