

RESEARCHERS AT SINGAPORE'S *INSTITUTE OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES* SHARE THEIR UNDERSTANDING OF CURRENT EVENTS

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## **Singapore's Population White Paper: Impending Integration Challenges**

*By Terence Chong*

The Singapore's government's much awaited Population White Paper was finally released on 29 January 2013. Within it, two primary challenges are recognized which like pincers are closing in at an alarming rate. On the one hand, the country's population is aging rapidly, while on the other, its total fertility rate (TFR) of 1.2 is one of the lowest in the world. This shrinking and simultaneously ageing tendency of the population not only heralds slower economic growth for the near future but also draws attention to some key concerns, such as the impending inability to meet the nation's military and security needs.

In order to address this future scenario, the White Paper has projected the population trajectory to hit 5.8 million to 6 million by 2020, and between 6.5 million and 6.9 million by 2030.

In light of these stark recommendations, the White Paper's introduction to the public needed to be a politically managed event. The government had long sought to impress upon Singaporeans in the lead up to its release, the gravity of the population situation and the difficult decisions in store.

But even best laid plans go awry. Initially scheduled for release at the end of 2012, the White Paper was held up by the Punggol East by-election. However, that did not only delayed its release, leaving reports from DBS Vickers of a possible figure of 7 million to circulate unchallenged, but also led to a curious situation where concrete government measures to address the population issue were unveiled even before the public knew what the relevant figures actually were.

For instance, during the election campaign, the government seized the opportunity to publicise several major policy initiatives. The enhanced Marriage and Parenthood package that included increased Baby Bonus; extended paternal leave to encourage more local births; the building of 200,000 new homes by 2016; and the slew of public transportation measures to ease overcrowding, were announced in the heat of the campaign to double up as national sweeteners for Punggol East voters. For a brief surreal moment it was as if the medication was being prescribed before details of the ailment were made known. These measures, in the end, did not stop the drastic swing of 11 per cent of votes away from the incumbent party, and may now have only limited impact in assuaging public concerns about a future population of 6.9 million.

## ANXIETIES

To be sure, going beyond the headline-grabbing figures, there are several matters with regards to national identity and integration that beg to be addressed first.

The first is the anxiety over national identity. According to the White Paper, “Singaporeans form the core of our society and the heart of our nation. To have a strong and cohesive society, we must have a strong Singaporean core”. But with Singaporeans making up only 3.8 million of the projected 6.9 million, or half of the total population, it is uncertain if this core will be stable or not, or if it will even be identifiable. While it may be true that identity and values are things that are constantly evolving, if 1 out of 2 people in Singapore is a foreigner, local identities and values will evolve at a rate so accelerated that it will cause strong anxiety and insecurity among core Singaporeans. The rate of incoming foreigners will be unprecedented, especially in relation to the island-state’s small population size. The proportion of citizens to foreigners may take the country past the tipping point where the idea of Singapore will grow increasingly ambiguous, and thus consign the nation-building project to a constant state of arrested development.

The integration process comprising only of state-sponsored institutions such as the People’s Association or interested individuals like Integration and Naturalisation Champions is also woefully inadequate. This is because there are already psychological forces at play that cause anxiety over immigrants. One of these is the worry over limited national resources. Consequently, the spectre of foreigners “out in force” in the property market “snapping up almost one in three new private homes in Singapore” only serves to fuel fears that Singaporeans will be increasingly priced out of dream homes.<sup>1</sup> At the mid to lower end level, citizens may grow more resentful of the variety of subsidies that Permanent Residents (PRs) enjoy in key areas such as health, housing and education. To complicate matters,

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<sup>1</sup> *The Straits Times*. 19 Dec 2010. “More foreigners buying new private homes”. By Cheryl Lim; see also *The Straits Times*. 25 May 2011. “Foreign home buyers hit record in Q1”. By Esther Teo

the persistent perception that the Singapore government is parsimonious when it comes to welfare benefits may well strengthen the belief that foreigners have better access to the nation's material resources than needy citizens. This sense of loss is especially exacerbated in Singaporeans who have expressed suspicions of discrimination by foreigners in hiring positions, who prefer to appoint candidates of their nationality or ethnicity.<sup>2</sup>

Perceptions of immigrants as exploitative and calculative are, of course, not limited to Singapore. They are quite routine for example in the wake of the inflow of Third World immigrants into First World sites where different trans-border groups such as refugees, asylum seekers and economic migrants are often considered welfare scroungers. While Singapore's strict immigration laws and tight border controls may have reduced the presence of refugees and asylum seekers to almost nought, perceptions of immigrants as scroungers are perpetuated when immigrants from less developed countries such as China and India take up Singapore citizenship in order to facilitate their move to destinations that they had considered more attractive from the start. In other cases, local institutes of tertiary education may offer plum scholarships to PRC students to undergo their undergraduate or postgraduate courses, only to see many of these leaving for the US upon completion of their studies.

In March 2012, Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean revealed that as many as 300 of the 1200 citizens who renounced their citizenship each year were actually new citizens.<sup>3</sup> According to Lee Kuan Yew, "Some use us as a stepping stone, take courses at our university, then they go off to US, where the streets are paved of gold, and some don't come back".<sup>4</sup> With the population increase, higher numbers of new citizens renouncing their Singapore citizenship can be expected. The image of them as 'scroungers' persists primarily because they are from developing countries that are at least two or three generations away from the level of affluence Singapore enjoys.

## PAST AND FUTURE PATTERNS

While it is too early to speculate over the types of new citizens that will be inducted in the future, existing patterns are likely to remain. In other words, Chinese Malaysians will comprise the largest number of new citizens, with Chinese from China coming in second place. New citizens are likely to be in their twenties, thirties and forties, and in their economic prime. They are likely to have families, which would be in keeping with the government's drive to stem the decline in TFR. New citizens are also likely to be better educated than

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<sup>2</sup> *The Straits Times*. 1 March 2011. "Employment enclaves". Forum Page. By Lauralle Ho; *The Straits Times*.

<sup>3</sup> *The Straits Times*. 7 March 2011. "Yes, there are job enclaves". Forum Page. By Rohim Kalil; *The Straits Times*. 7 March 2011.

<sup>4</sup> *Singaporeans shouldn't be disadvantaged*". Forum Page. By Teoh Charn Hong

<sup>3</sup> *Straits Times*. 2 Mar 2012. "300 new citizens give up their status each year".

<sup>4</sup> *Straits Times*. 23 Jan 2008. "It's S'pore's gain even if 30-40% of immigrants settle here: MM Lee". By Li Xueying

local-born citizens. According to the Department of Statistics, 69.7 per cent of 'new citizens' at present have post-secondary education, in comparison to 44.1 per cent of 'existing citizens'.<sup>5</sup> How this greater influx of better educated new citizens will affect less-educated local-born citizens remains to be seen. It is likely that class envy will eventually take deeper root, accentuated by the differences in country of origin.

Another related issue is the requirement of state policy to maintain the ethnic balance in the country. The local Chinese population has a TFR rate of 1.08, the Indian population's is 1.09, while the Malay population's is 1.64.<sup>6</sup> While Chinese from Malaysia and China will augment the local Chinese population, and Indians from India the local Indian population, the local Malay population, despite its higher TFR, may decline proportionally given the low immigration rate from the region due to various sensitivities. This problem is bound to manifest itself in starker terms in the near future.

Finally, of the 6.9 million, it is estimated that 4.4 million will comprise the resident population, of which 3.8 million will be Singaporean citizens. This increase in PRs and new citizens will profoundly alter the residential landscape. One possible outcome is that PRs and new citizens who share the same country of origin may converge on certain residential areas to form exclusive communities and social networks. Anecdotal evidence suggests that this is already happening with Indian nationals. New citizens who live in such exclusive communities may not necessarily share common experiences with ordinary Singaporeans and may have little incentive to integrate. Ties to their country of origin may continue to be strong.

The question then is, will there be measures, perhaps akin to the existing HDB ethnic quota policy, to ensure that new Singaporeans do not converge according to their country of origin? This, and other questions, will require definite answers long before 2030.

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<sup>5</sup> Department of Statistics. <http://www.singstat.gov.sg/stats/themes/people/popinbrief2011.pdf> (accessed: 17/07/2012)

<sup>6</sup> Occasional Paper. "Marriage and Parenthood Trends in Singapore". June 2012. National Population and Talent Division: Singapore

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