

**THE MULTIPLE REALITIES OF MULTIRACIALISM UNPACKED:
RECONSIDERING CONVENTIONAL WISDOM
IN THE MANAGEMENT OF ETHNIC RELATIONS
IN SINGAPORE**

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ABSTRACT

How has the policy of multiracialism evolve in Singapore and how has its operation in key areas of Singapore life impacted on ethnic relations in a secure but vulnerable island-state? The thesis attempts to distill the thematic essence of state policy, the practice and rhetoric of multiracialism in the light of the imperatives of a sophisticated, authoritarian developmental state. The thesis challenges the conventional wisdom that multiracialism in Singapore as being race-blind or non-ethnic in its approach.

It proposes that Singapore is an ethnic-conscious state wherein race, culture, and language are mobilized as key resources in state-building, nation-building, and to enhance the regime security of the ruling People's Action Party. Institutions and policies that are framed as promoting multiracialism have either ethnic/racial enhancing or polarizing dimensions within them.

Although the policy of multiracialism contributes to ethnic stability, key institutions of state and state policies have the unintended effect of heightening ethnic consciousness and impeding the nation-building process. This heightened state of ethnic consciousness can potentially engender inter-ethnic competition, insecurity and fear about an ethnic group's cultural, and religious security.

Despite the prevalent ethnic harmony and stability, inter-ethnic dialogue is confined to the elite level and is superficial at the grassroots level. The government's top-down control of all key institutions pertaining to issues of race and religion has stifled the development of genuine inter-racial grassroots organizations that could generate cross-cutting cleavages and develop social capital. This stunted state of development could undermine the sustainability of the multiracial framework in Singapore.

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