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Selected Findings on Religious Relations from the IPS-OnePeople.sg Indicators of Racial and Religious Harmony

INTRODUCTION

This short background paper provides selected findings on Singaporean sentiments on religious relations. It is an excerpt of a 2019 IPS Working Paper that reported on the state of racial and religious harmony in Singapore.[1] It used a series of indicators created by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) and OnePeople.sg and compared data over two waves, 2013 and 2018.

The data presented in this short paper are from the second wave of the IPS Race, Religion and Language (RRL) Survey conducted between August 2018 and January 2019. Altogether, 4,015 Singaporeans and Permanent Residents were surveyed using a drop-off, pick-up survey administered at respondents' residences. The survey covered issues ranging from aspects of respondent's racial and religious identity, to experiences of living in a multi-racial society.

1. High level of racial and religious harmony

Singaporeans believe that there is a good level of racial and religious harmony in Singapore. Nearly six in 10 respondents reported that the level of racial and religious harmony currently was high or very high. Less than 4 per cent of respondents stated that the level of harmony here was low or very low, with the remaining 39 per cent classifying harmony here as moderate (see Table 1).

Table 1: Respondents' views towards levels of racial and religious harmony in Singapore (%)

What would you say is the level of racial and religious harmony in Singapore currently?	Very Low	Low	Moderate	High	Very high
Overall	0.9	2.6	39.4	46.2	10.9

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[1] For full paper please refer to Mathew, M., Lim, L. and Selvarajan, S. (2019). IPS-OnePeople.SG Indicators of racial and religious harmony: Comparing results from 2018 and 2013. *IPS Working Papers No. 35*. Available from https://lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/docs/default-source/ips/ips-working-paper-no-35_ips-onepeoplesg-indicators-of-racial-and-religious-harmony_comparing-results-from-2018-and-2013.pdf
For queries on the full report, please contact Mathew Mathews at Mathew.mathews@nus.edu.sg
Mathew Mathews and Alicia Wang assisted with the preparation of this summary document.

2. Inter-religious trust is increasing

In 2018, more than 59 per cent of respondents said they could trust either more than half, or all or mostly all, Buddhists, Taoists, Muslims, Christians, Hindus, or those with no religion, to help if there was a national crisis (see Table 2). The proportion of respondents who reported that they were willing to trust people from different religious backgrounds had increased considerably from the earlier 2013 wave.

Table 2: Respondents' levels of inter-religious trust in times of crisis in Singapore (%)

What proportion of people from the following race do you think can be trusted to help you if Singapore faced a national crisis (e.g., SARs)?	Buddhism	Taoism	Islam	Christianity	Hinduism	No religion
All or mostly all	40.7	39.3	33.7	38.0	35.3	36.7
More than half	31.6	31.6	25.9	33.4	25.6	26.3
About half	19.5	20.4	23.5	20.3	22.8	23.2
Less than half/ None or mostly none	8.2	8.8	16.9	8.3	16.3	13.8

3. Attitudes towards diversity

Singaporeans appreciate the cultural diversity found in Singapore and agree that accommodation for religious and cultural practices are needed. The survey sought to ascertain if respondents felt enough accommodation had been made for various customs of the different races and religions. More than eight in 10 respondents felt that enough accommodation had been made in various areas, including dietary needs of guests at government functions, grassroots events, and work gatherings, as well as cultural celebrations in public that may involve road closures or noise (see Table 3). Less than 11 per cent of respondents felt that not enough accommodation had been made in these areas. Even fewer respondents felt that too much accommodation had been made.

Table 3: Respondents' views of levels of racial and religious accommodation in Singapore (%)

How much accommodation do you think Singaporeans have made for various customs and practices by the different races and religions?	Not enough	Just enough	Too much
Dietary restrictions of guests at government functions/grassroots events	7.7	86.0	6.3
Dietary restrictions of friends/colleagues at social/work gatherings	8.6	86.0	5.5
Cultural/religious celebrations in public areas that may involve road closures	8.4	85.9	5.7
Cultural/religious celebrations in public areas that may involve noise/other forms of pollution	10.8	81.6	7.6

While most respondents including minorities agreed that the right amount of accommodation had been made for various customs and practices, expectedly there was a higher proportion of minorities among those who felt that not enough accommodation had been made (see Table 4). For instance, at least 12 per cent of Malays and Indians felt not enough accommodation was made for dietary restrictions at social or work gatherings, compared to 7.6 per cent of Chinese respondents.

Table 4: Respondents' views of levels of racial and religious accommodation in Singapore, by respondents' race (%)

How much accommodation do you think Singaporeans have made for various customs and practices by the different races and religions? (Not enough)	Chinese	Malay	Indian	Others
Dietary restrictions of guests at government functions/grassroots events	6.9	10.8	11.3	4.7
Dietary restrictions of friends/colleagues at social/work gatherings	7.6	12.4	12.8	2.8
Cultural/religious celebrations in public areas that may involve road closures	7.2	11.2	14.5	9.9
Cultural/religious celebrations in public areas that may involve noise/other forms of pollution	10.7	10.1	13.3	9.0

Indians respondents, meanwhile, were most likely to express such sentiments in the area of public celebrations that may involve road closures compared with Chinese respondents. This could potentially stem from guidelines related to Thaipusam. Nonetheless the proportion of Indians who felt that there was insufficient accommodation for religious celebrations was small.

4. Inter-racial and religious acceptance

Singaporeans are comfortable with living with people from other religions. The survey asked respondents if they were comfortable with people of various religious backgrounds in the public sphere. The vast majority (at least nine in 10 in most

instances) were comfortable with Buddhists, Muslims, Catholics, Protestants, Taoists and Hindus, as colleagues, bosses, employees and next-door neighbours (see Table 5). This high level of comfort for someone of a different religion bodes well for cross-cultural relations in the workplace.

Table 5: Respondents' levels of comfort towards people of other religions, in the case of relationships in the public sphere (%)

Level of comfort	Buddhist	Muslim	Catholics	Protestant	Taoist	Hindu
As your colleague in the same occupation	95.9	91.1	94.7	93.7	94.0	90.0
As your boss	95.2	86.2	94.0	93.1	93.2	86.2
As your employee	95.1	89.7	94.4	93.6	93.7	89.6
As your next-door neighbour	95.7	90.2	94.8	93.7	93.4	88.1
As the majority of people in Singapore	85.7	62.5	82.2	81.7	81.1	66.7

There was more variation when it came to private sphere relationships with someone of a different religion. For instance, seven in 10 respondents were comfortable with a Buddhist, Catholic, Protestant Christian or Taoist being their brother- or sister-in-law (see Table 6). Only half of the respondents expressed similar sentiments for a Muslim or Hindu being their brother- or sister-in-law. This difference was replicated for spouse, son- or daughter-in-law, and close friendships. Almost all respondents (80 to 90 per cent) also reported being comfortable having close friends from all other religions.

Table 6: Respondents' levels of comfort towards people of other religions, in the case of relationships in the private sphere (%)

Level of comfort	Buddhist	Muslim	Catholics	Protestant	Taoist	Hindu
Brother/ sister-in-law	75.2	53.8	75.7	73.8	74.5	53.2
Son/ daughter-in-law	67.7	43.4	70.9	70.8	68.0	43.4
Spouse	60.8	29.7	59.8	60.5	59.6	32.2
Close friend	93.4	81.6	91.4	90.3	90.2	80.8

The survey also asked a question to better understand the level of comfort respondents had for various places of worship near their home. Around half or more of the respondents were moderately or very comfortable with having a church, Buddhist or Hindu temple, or a mosque in close proximity to their residence (see Table 7). The general acceptance of various religious buildings being situated in close proximity to Singaporeans' homes is testament to the racial and religious harmony and inter-cultural acceptance and understanding that has been built among citizens over the years.

However, it is undeniable that close to half of respondents in some cases were uncomfortable or only slightly comfortable with a place of worship near their place. While the survey did not probe as to the source of this discomfort, the disamenities relating to places of worship (such as religious music, festivities, chanting, and incense that the respondents might find too loud or pungent) might have weighed on

respondent's mind. The discomfort could also stem from a lack of understanding of the different religious rituals and celebrations that are conducted at these religious sites.

Table 7: Respondents' levels of comfort towards having places of worship located near their homes (%)

How comfortable are you if the following places of worship are close to your home?	Very Uncomfort-able	Moderately Uncomfort-able	Slightly Uncomfort-able	Slightly Comfort-able	Moderately Comfort-able	Very Comfort-able
Church	5.3	3.6	10.8	18.8	34.9	26.6
Buddhist temple	7.5	5.8	13.6	16.7	29.3	27.1
Mosque	9.3	8.7	18.5	16.9	26.0	20.6
Hindu temple	8.8	8.1	17.7	19.2	26.5	19.7

5. Inter-racial and religious tension

Reservations regarding religious spaces near us may arise due to unpleasant encounters in neighbourhoods, which are a potential setting for some types of tensions to arise. At least four in 10 respondents said they sometimes, often or very often or always *encountered and got upset* at the burning of religious items in their estate (see Table 8). This was the highest proportion among several items in the survey. Others included loud events at void decks or common areas, religious chanting or praying, and neighbours cooking ethnic food.

Close to half of respondents said that they had never encountered and got upset at their neighbours cooking ethnic food, at common corridors being blocked by neighbours' religious items, and by neighbours having noisy gatherings in their homes. There were fewer respondents however who said that they had never encountered and got upset at burning incense, loud events at void decks and religious chanting, singing or praying. This indicates that despite the generally harmonious communal relations in the neighbourhood, there are instances where religious practices can lead to some level of unhappiness. If not managed well, such upset can lead to tense inter-religious and racial relations. This finding also highlights that the building of multi-racial and multi-religious understanding and tolerance in society is still continuing.

Table 8: Frequency of respondents encountering and getting upset at the following events in their neighbourhoods (%)

In the past year, how often have you encountered and gotten upset by the following in your estate?	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Very often or always
Burning of incense/joss sticks/other religious items	31.8	26.5	25.7	9.9	6.1
Loud events at your void deck/common areas	31.1	32.9	26.7	5.8	3.5
Religious chanting/singing/praying	36.1	35.2	22.1	4.1	2.5
Neighbours cooking ethnic food	47.7	33.0	14.6	3.1	1.6
Common corridors being blocked by neighbours' religious items	48.6	32.1	13.9	3.5	2.0

Analysing the results by respondents' race, we found that respondents, regardless of race, were not likely to get upset with high frequency (often, very often or always) at such practices. Only a quarter of Malay and Indian respondents often, very often or always encountered and got upset with the burning of incense/joss sticks/other religious items in their estate. However, when we analyse the proportions of Malay and Indian respondents who sometimes encountered and got upset at the burning of incense, the proportions increased to 67.3 per cent of Malay and 57.6 per cent of Indian respondents (see Table 9). The corresponding proportion of Chinese who expressed similar sentiments was 35.7 per cent.

Table 9: Frequency of respondents encountering and getting upset at the following events in their neighbourhoods, by respondents' race (%)

In the past year, how often have you encountered and gotten upset by the burning of incense/joss sticks/other religious items, in your estate?	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Very Often/Always
Chinese	34.5	29.8	23.0	8.2	4.5
Malay	17.7	15.1	39.4	15.3	12.7
Indian	26.0	16.4	30.1	16.1	11.4
Others	39.1	18.2	24.5	10.9	7.3

6. Social connectedness between religious groups

Religious diversity can sometimes result in friction if there are misconceptions of certain religions and their practices. Fortunately, many Singaporeans do have existing networks with people of other religious groups with whom they can discuss cultural matters. The majority of respondents knew a Buddhist, Catholic, Protestant Christian, Muslim or Taoist whom they could ask for clarification if they had a concern about a religious practice or teaching (see Table 10).

Table 10: Respondents' likelihood of knowing someone of another religion with whom they can clarify concerns about religious practices (%)

Suppose you have concerns of a practice, customs, or teachings of a certain religion. Do you know a person from that religion you can speak with to clarify the issue?	Yes
Buddhist	66.0
Catholic	63.2
Christian (Protestant)	60.0
Muslim	52.6
Taoist	52.5
Hindu	39.8
Sikh	22.4

Analysing the responses by respondents' religious background, we found that most knew someone from their own community with whom they could clarify such concerns (see Table 11). When it came to Muslims and Hindus however, there were noticeably lower opportunities both for them to seek clarification about issues relating to another religion, and for those of other religions to seek clarification about Islam or Hinduism. For instance, between 50 to 60 per cent of non-Muslim respondents knew a Muslim they could approach to clarify concerns relating to Islam. Less than 54 per cent of Muslim respondents, meanwhile, knew a Buddhist, Catholic, Protestant Christian, Taoist or Hindu they could approach to clarify concerns relating to those religions.

Table 11: Respondents' likelihood of knowing someone of another religion with whom they can clarify concerns about religious practices, by respondents' religion (%)

Suppose you have concerns about the practice, customs, or teachings of a certain religion. Do you know a person from that religion you can speak with to clarify the issue? (Yes)	Buddhist respondents	Taoist respondents	Muslim respondents	Hindu respondents	Catholic respondents	Protestant Christian respondents	Respondents with no religion
Buddhist	86.1	80.5	47.5	57.0	73.8	67.0	71.6
Taoist	65.2	77.3	33.4	38.5	54.2	46.8	53.2
Muslim	50.7	49.9	95.0	60.1	55.9	52.7	53.8
Hindu	38.2	31.8	47.7	86.5	44.3	41.1	37.5
Catholic	62.4	60.3	54.3	63.9	93.6	75.6	63.9
Christian	60.7	56.3	47.7	56.3	81.2	91.8	62.5
Sikh	19.5	14.2	27.6	51.6	24.1	20.8	20.2

7. Inter-cultural understanding

In addition to having inter-religious networks, Singaporeans express some willingness to understand other cultures. Around three-quarters of respondents showed some level of agreement to statements that they were interested in understanding other religion groups' customs and practices (see Table 12). It is notable however, that the level of agreement tended to be weak with nearly 40 per cent of respondents choosing the "somewhat agree" option about the issue.

Table 12: Respondents' levels of interest in understanding the customs and practices of other racial and religious groups (%)

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
I am interested in understanding other religious groups' beliefs and practices	4.4	7.5	15.4	38.8	26.8	7.1

The survey also asked respondents how often they thought they understood other religious groups' beliefs. About a quarter of respondents said they always, often or very often understood such beliefs and practices (see Table 13). On the related issue of sharing when asked about their religious beliefs, 27.1 per cent of respondents said they did this often, very often or always.

Table 13: Respondents' likelihood of asking others to share religious beliefs, sharing their own religious beliefs and understanding others' religious beliefs (%)

Often/Very Often/Always	2018
How often do you think you understand other religious groups' beliefs and practices	25.1
How often do you ask others to share their religious beliefs and practices	16.1
How often do you share, when asked, your religious beliefs and practices?	27.1

Malays and Indians were much more likely to express such sentiments (see Table 14). For instance, close to half of Malays and Indians often, very often or always thought they understood other religions' beliefs and practices, compared with just 19.2 per cent of Chinese respondents. Compared with Chinese respondents, racial minorities were also much more likely to share, when asked about their religious beliefs and practices.

Table 14: Respondents' likelihood of asking others to share religious beliefs, sharing their own religious beliefs and understanding others' religious beliefs, by respondents' race (%)

Often/Very Often/Always	Chinese	Malay	Indian	Others
How often do you think you understand other religious groups' beliefs and practices	19.2	42.3	49.0	32.5
How often do you ask others to share their religious beliefs and practices	10.8	33.7	34.3	24.8
How often do you share, when asked, your religious beliefs and practices?	20.8	49.5	47.4	36.0

CONCLUSION

Levels of religious harmony in Singapore are at present satisfactory; trust between individuals of different faiths have risen over the past decade. The Singaporean population is cognisant of the value of diversity, and is generally open to accommodate cultural differences. However, despite high levels of comfort for those of other religions, there are underlying concerns vis-à-vis religious spaces and practices. As such, careful planning and sustained engagement between communities and stakeholders are required to abate contestations about religious issues. Augmenting our efforts to advance inter-cultural education will also give rise to increased understanding and acceptance of the use of religious spaces, and a multitude of religious practices.

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