Politics and Ethnicity: Framing Racial Discrimination in Singapore

by James Gomez

Abstract

Racial discrimination is a global phenomenon that the United Nations seeks to eradicate. In contemporary Singapore, research shows that the basis for racial discrimination is anchored in the role of ethnic identity and how it frames the formulation of policies related to education, employment, housing, immigration and politics. These policies have been formulated and implemented by the People's Action Party (PAP) government that has been in power for over 50 years. When confronted with its racially based policies, the PAP government insists that it follows a tolerant approach towards different races and that it propagates the idea of multiculturalism and meritocracy as a racial equaliser. However ethnic minorities in Singapore complain they are being discriminated daily on the basis of their race or religion. They argue their views are often not given airing in the local mainstream media and are further prevented from discussing these issues openly due to legislations restricting freedom of expression and assembly on these matters. Given this background, the first ever visit of the UN Rapporteur on Racism to Singapore at the invitation of the PAP government in April 2010, allowed the city-state's racialist based policies to be put on an international spotlight. This paper examines the visit of UN Rapporteur, his initial findings, government and civil society responses and the significance of this first UN mission. The paper locates its research on racial discrimination in the context of Singapore's political framework and the United Nations efforts to eradicate racism. It argues that ultimately policy changes in Singapore can only take place as a result of politically challenging the PAP government.

Key words: ethnic identity, racial discrimination, public policy, Singapore, United Nations

Introduction

> "..it is absolutely necessary in a free society that restrictions on public debate or discourse and the protection of racial harmony are not implemented at the detriment of fundamental human rights such as freedom of expression and freedom of assembly."

(UN Press Release: 28 April 2010)

Mr. Githu Muigai, the UN Special Rapporteur on Contemporary forms of Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance made these remarks at the end of his eight day mission from 21 to 28 April 2010 to Singapore. He came to the city-state at the invitation of the PAP government to dialogue with the authorities and members of civil society and to gather "first-hand information on the main issues facing people living in Singapore in relation to racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance." (Office of High Commissioner of Human Rights (OHCHR), 19 March 2010)

On the same day that the UN Rapporteur released his preliminary findings, the PAP government took issue with his call for greater freedoms to discuss race related issues. In a statement released

just hours after the one by the UN Rapporteur, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) made this point about freedom of expression and its concern over balancing religious and racial harmony:

> "This balance is only for the Singapore government to determine because only the Singapore government bears the responsibility should things go wrong. The UN bears no such responsibility and we see no reason to take risks for the sake of an abstract principle."

(Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Singapore Press Release: 28 April 2010)

This paper analyses The UN Rapporteur's week long visit that covered meetings with official government representatives and civil society, the Rapporteur`s initial findings and the PAP government and civil society responses to it. The research for the paper was undertaken during the week of the UN Rapporteur's visit in Singapore from 20 to 30 April 2010. Activities included a focus group meeting with Mr Muigai as part of the Singaporean's For Democracy (SFD) delegation[1] on 22 April 2010, attendance at the UN Rapporteur press conference on 28 April 2010, interaction with selected civil society groups and tracking local media reports and online postings.

Themes surrounding ethnicity and nation-building in Singapore are a well researched and published area of study. Most works focus on nation-building and the management of ethnic relations in Singapore. Over the last three decades these studies have appeared as single journal articles or as chapters in collections that discuss nation-building and ethnic relations in Southeast Asia. There also have been several reports that look at the state of ethnic relations which are relevant for gauging contemporary racial attitudes in Singapore (Lai 2002, Chin & Vasu 2007). However, the number of works that focus on the actual practices of racial discrimination has been limited (Barr 2009; Barr & Skrbis 2008; Rahim 1998, 2009; Velayuthum 2007).

This paper discusses racial discrimination in the context of Singapore's political framework and the United Nations efforts to eradicate racism. The PAP led Singapore government claims the city-state is a multi-racial society whereby each citizen is provided equal opportunities. Yet it has not signed one of the first human rights treaties called the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (1966) nor is Singapore a signatory party to United Nation's Amendment to article 8 of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (1992). By analysing the UN Special Rapporteur's first mission to city-state, this paper brings in the international perspective to racism research as it relates to Singapore.

---

[1] The author is also the founding Executive-Director of Singaporeans for Democracy (http://sfd.sg)

UN Special Rapporteur on Racism

According to the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination the term "racial discrimination" means 'any distinction, exclusion, restriction or preference based on race, colour, descent, or national or ethnic origin which has the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing the recognition, enjoyment or exercise, on an equal footing, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural or any other field of public life'(United Nations 1966). In the year 1993 the Commission on Human Rights appointed a Special Rapporteur to examine incidents and related governmental measures on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination and xenophobia and related intolerance. In cases of racism and racial discrimination the Rapporteur is required to make representations to the respective states. Hence for nearly two decades, the UN has been undertaking missions to various countries to assess the state of racial discrimination and to publish reports often much to dislike and often aggressive rejections by the countries reviewed.

As part of the mandate to investigate racism, the Rapporteur carries out 'fact-finding' visits to two countries in a year and also presents a 'country-report' to the Human rights Council and the General Assembly (OHCHR website accessed 12 July 2010). These visits are initiated on the willingness and the invitation of the government of the respective countries. Sometimes such assessment missions are taken unofficially at the invitation of non-govermental organizations (NGO) as was the case in Japan when the former Rapporteur Doude Diene undertook trips in 2005 and 2006 at the invitation of the International Movement Against All Forms of Racism and Discrimination (Johnston 2006). Such visits include utilising the available resources of information and evaluating the mass media in order to get authentic information and reports of allegations against the government and obtaining government's reaction.

Apart from the country reports, the Rapporteur is required to submit 'annual or thematic reports' to Human Rights Council and 'interim report' to the General Assembly. Additionally, the special Rapporteur exchanges views with other mechanisms and treaty bodies in the UN system so as to enhance their effectiveness and mutual cooperation. The 'field missions' give the Rapporteur the opportunity to collect 'first hand information'. But these missions are not only meant to be investigative, they are also instigated to identify and recognise the measures already adopted by the respective government(s) towards fighting racism and race related discrimination (OHCHR website accessed 12 July 2010).

Additionally whenever information surfaces that the rights or interests of minorities in a country are being violated, the Rapporteur communicates the facts in the form of an 'allegation letter' or 'urgent appeal' to the respective government. This allegation letter or the urgent appeal is kept confidential until it gets published in the annual report which is submitted to the Commission on Human Rights (OHCHR website accessed 12 July 2010). The Rapporteur's appeal to the respective government is intended to get the cases investigated so as to help in identifying the

contemporary forms of racial discrimination. Adhering to the mandate of the Commission on Human Rights, the Rapporteur can only ask the government to keep the UN updated on the investigation. In practice, states have often resisted or challenged the findings of Rapporteurs and this continues to be an issue in the fight against global racial discrimination.

Supplementing the Rapporteur process has been the 2001 World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance which took place in Durban, South Africa that resulted in the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action. In 2009 the Durban Review Conference titled World Conference Against Racism (WCAR), also known as Durban II took place at the United Nations Office in Geneva, Switzerland. In both meetings leading countries such as the US, those from Europe and Israel did not participate in the meetings or sent only junior delegations citing the presence of anti-Semitism and proposal for laws against blasphemy as reasons. Racism continues to a problem many governments are reluctant to directly address because of the associated political consequences.

Against this contested background of the UN efforts to combat racism, Mr Githu Muigai was appointed in the year 2008 as special Rapporteur on racism and racial discrimination. He is the third mandate holder since its inception in 1993. Muigai is a Kenyan national and a lawyer, Associate Professor at the University of Nairobi and senior partner in Mohammed Muigai Advocates in Kenya. Before visiting Singapore he had been to Germany and United Arab Emirates on similar missions. The visit of the Mr Muigai is the ever first visit by an UN Special Rapporteur to Singapore.

UN Rapporteur on Racism visits Singapore
The UN team of Mr Githu Muigai, the UN Special Rapporteur and Ms Anh Thu Duong, the Associate Human Rights Officer, Special Procedures Division, OHCHR in Geneva arrived in Singapore on 20 April 2010. Prior to the mission, Ms Anh had been writing to different agencies, groups and individuals to set up meeting opportunities in Singapore. In order to facilitate the information gathering, the OHCHR representatives in particular contacted civil society organisations which are active in the area of racial intolerance and minority communities to assist them in gathering the details regarding ground realities much before the arrival of the UN Rapporteur[2].

On the first day of his visit Mr Muigai met the Minister for the Environment and Water resources who is also the Minister-in-charge of Muslim Affairs, Mr Yaacob Ibrahim. As reported in the local mainstream daily, the two officials discussed the enhanced living style of people in Singapore and how the system recognises their potential and allows it to rise irrespective of their

---

[2] Email to Singaporeans for Democracy on 14 April 2010.

ethnic background. Mr Ibrahim also highlighted the government's commitment to meritocracy and the multi-racialism (The Straits Times, 22 April 2010). At the official level, Mr Muigai was also scheduled to meet with Minister for Foreign Affairs Mr George Yeo, Minister for Community Development, Youth and Sports Dr Vivian Balakrishnan, Minister for Law and Second Minister for Home Affairs Mr K Shanmugan, and Chief Justice Chan Sek Keong (The Straits Times, 20 April 2010). He also received briefings from Government Ministries, the Courts and the Presidential Council for Minority Rights. Mr Muigai also met various religious leaders and leaders of ethnic self-help groups. These meetings were widely publicised in the local mainstream media (The Straits Times, 23 April 2010).

Mr Muigai had also met with representatives of civil society[3], including community members, academics, lawyers and private individuals. Most of these meetings were conducted privately with very little coverage in the mainstream media. Some groups such as the Think Centre and the Singapore Democratic Party (SDP) reported their meetings on their own or other websites. Think Centre, regarded as Singapore's oldest registered political society met the UN team and handed a report covering a variety of issues that affect Singaporeans. Some of the issues covered included maintenance of Religious Harmony Act, ethnic quotas for home ownership of public housing, and the Sedition Act and Undesirable Publications Act (Forum Asia, 2010). The SDP choose to highlight the discrimination faced by minority communities in Singapore. In particular, the SDP emphasised the marginalisation and discrimination faced by the Malay Muslim community in Singapore (Shamin, 2010).

The meeting with the NGO Singaporeans for Democracy (SFD) received some local media coverage and was reported extensively online by alternative media. The meeting was a result of prior arrangements with the office of Special Procedures Division at the OHCHR. A group of SFD members submitted an extensive report to the rapporteur to acquaint him with the prevailing situation related to race and ethnicity issues in Singapore. The report attempted to bring the UN official's notice towards the existing racism in Singapore that was guised behind the ideas of 'multiculturalism' and 'meritocracy' (SFD, 2010). Furthermore SFD representatives pointed out that public policy in Singapore is influenced by race and this has adversely resulted in the consciousness of an individual's racial identity. Specifically the SFD report stated that the inclusion of "race" on the Singaporean Identity Cards has accentuated racial categorisation, which has largely contributed towards racial discrimination among various ethnic groups.

Mr Muigai's visit raised high expectations among the civil society members as it provided them an opportunity to communicate the day to day issues of racial discrimination felt at the grassroots

---

[3] Here the term civil society refers to those groups registered with the Registrar of Societies in Singapore whose activities are aimed to be independent of the PAP government. For a fuller discussion of civil society in Singapore see also Lyons, Lenore and Gomez, James, *Sojourn: Special Focus on Democracy and Civil Society: NGO Politics in Singapore.* (2005) 20 (2). (Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore)

level. The PAP government representatives on the other hand were emphasizing its 'best practice model' and how racial harmony has been achieved in Singapore through its policy of meritocracy.

UN Special Rapporteur's Press Release
At the end of his visit on 28 April 2010, Mr Muigai held a press conference at a local hotel. There he acknowledged some of the initiatives taken by Singapore towards maintaining racial harmony. He noted the work done towards maintaining social harmony by the National Integration Council, National Steering Committee on racial and religious harmony, The People's Association, One People and Inter Racial and Religious Confidence Circles (UN Press Release: 28 April 2010). Appreciating the Singapore Government for their 'cooperation and openness' in the organisation of his visit Mr Muigai reiterated he came without any preconceived notions. He also reaffirmed the agenda for his visit which was to get a better understanding of Singaporean society, to conduct constructive dialogue with the government representatives and civil society partners, to identify the 'best practices' followed by the Singapore government that could be held as a model for the international community and above all preparation of an objective report.

After the above opening remarks, Mr Muigai went into the more substantial part of his comments. He began by noting that there where restrictions on free speech that prevents open discussion on issues related to race and religion. He stressed the importance and necessity of public debates and discourses in a free society adding that racial harmony cannot be achieved by compromising these fundamental rights. He suggested that these legal restrictions be re-examined so as to provide space for the different ethnic groups to exchange ideas and to find solutions for any issues creating problems   (UN Press Release: 28 April 2010). He said as a result of these restrictions blind spots to some of the government policies have arisen and these are contributing to racial and other discrimination. He then spent the remaining part of his press conference highlighting specific blind spots in some of the PAP government's policies.

He started out by citing the issue of race on Singapore citizens' identity cards. He said by including race in the identity cards it accentuated racial difference that contributed to racially based policies which then led to racial discrimination. As multiculturalism and inter-racial marriages increases it also created confusion over accessing self-help groups that are organized on ethnic lines. Group Representation Constituencies (GRC), which were purportedly created to make sure that the minorities get equal political representation but were in actual practice, the Rapporteur noted have ingrained the status of the minority community in Singapore and have furthered their institutionalization   (UN Press Release: 28 April 2010). He therefore recommended eliminating race from national identity documents. After this overarching recommendation, Mr Muigai went on to make comments and recommendations on the ethnic dimensions of policies as it related to education, employment, housing, immigration and politics.

On the housing issue, the Rapporteur picked up on the 1989 Ethnic Integration Policy and urged for more flexibility to the existing ethnic quotas in each state-subsidised apartment block and neighbourhood. He further added that though this policy was initiated to prevent the emergence of a specific ethnic majority neighbourhood but with the passage of time this policy has caused inconvenience to the people of minority community who wish to buy or re-sell their accommodation. Mr. Muigai pointed out that education programmes in Singapore are well in place to promote tolerance and respect among various communities. But referring to the free national education programme for Malay students he noted that presently the system does not take into account the disadvantage caused by the historical inequalities in the Malay community. Turning to the Special Assistance Plan (SAP) schools, Mr Muigai pointed out that in practice they favour Chinese culture and Mandarin language and adds to the marginalisation of the minorities (UN Press Release: 28 April 2010).

Under policies related to local employment, the Rapporteur pointed towards language discrimination against Indian and Malay communities in the employment sector. He also added that the Malay community is under represented in senior positions at key institutions which is not reflective of the ethnic diversity in Singapore. In relation to the employment of foreign workers, the Rapporteur noted Ministry of Manpower's (MOM) policy of "approved source country" for recruiting workers. This, Mr Muigai argued, can perpetuate negative stereotypes against migrant workers of a specific country (UN Press Release: 28 April 2010). This could also lead to cases of hidden favouritism in the employment system. Related to the issue of foreign workers was that of the PAP government's immigration policy. Mr Muigai noted that there was resentment in Singapore over the recent waves of immigrant and encouraged the government to formulate immigration related policies in a more open and transparent manner.

On the legal and institutional front, Mr Muigai raised the issue that Singapore has yet to sign the International Conventions on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, as well as the International Convention on the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families. He requested the government to comply with these international conventions. Mr Muigai also pointed out the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action as well as the Outcome Document of the Durban Review Conference as useful frameworks for the PAP government to engage (UN Press Release: 28 April 2010). He encouraged the government to review the Presidential Council for Minority Rights (PCMR) so as to make it independent and to give it power to consider any public policy on its own initiative. To sum up his discussion on legal issues affecting minority groups, Mr Muigai suggested that the government take measures in legal terms to eliminate and prohibit discrimination on the basis of ethnic identity and county of origin.

His press statement had a mixed tone. On one hand it appreciated the government policies and regulations for maintaining racial and religious harmony. Mr Muigai noted the cohabitation and interaction of people of diverse ethnic, religious and cultural identities. He found that Singapore as a society, despite the religious riots of a few decades earlier, was an example of peaceful coexistence of the different ethnic groups. On the other hand, the Rapportuer felt more freedoms were now appropriate to discuss contemporary challenges of racial discrimination facing Singapore society. He suggested changes that required present legislations to be more relaxed or modified and new ones implemented. He urged the PAP government to take reformative actions to bring about an overall harmonious society. His suggestions for corrective actions reflected the inputs he received at meetings with civil society groups and individuals. This allowed voices, apart from the government's views, to be reflected in his initial findings.

PAP government and civil society responses to the UN Rapporteur
If we are to understand the responses to the UN Special Rapporteur's first mission's initial findings, it is instructive to go the beginning of the Rapporteur's visit when both the Singapore government and the UN issued their press releases. In the statement issued by the UN Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights, the press release stated that Mr Muigai in addition to speaking with government officials he will also consult non-governmental organisations (NGOs), community members, academics and other people working in the field of racial discrimination (OCHCR, 19 April 2010).

A Singapore Ministry of Foreign Affairs' statement issued the same day regarding Mr Muigai's visit and reported the next day had a different slant: "Singapore welcomes the opportunity to share with the UN, through Mr Muigai, our experiences and efforts at combating racism and racial discrimination and our policies to encourage racial and religious tolerance and harmony" (The Straits Times, 20 April 2010). This set the stage for the different set of responses to the UN Special Rapporteur's initial findings.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) was focused on defending the PAP government's 'best practices' and policies which it felt was well in place to maintain racial harmony within the city-state. The tone of MFA response was harsh and it agreed with none of the Rapporteur`s findings. The MFA statement not only overall disagreed with Mr Muigai's findings but it also added it will wait for the final report to respond further (MFA- Press Statement, 28 April 2010). They rejected all of Mr Muigai's suggestions which gave the impression that perhaps the PAP government only invited him to highlight and reaffirm the practices they considered as 'best practices' so that they could be shared with the international community.

The main strategy in the MFA press release was to personalise the civil society findings of the Rapporteur and to attack Mr Muigai personally or negate his findings. The MFA release also used the words of the Special Rapporteur against him, for instance on the issue of the removing

race from Singaporean identity cards, the MFA release mentioned that race existence in Singapore could not be denied and that Mr Muigai had reportedly confirmed in an earlier meeting that there is no 'correct approach to this issue' (MFA- Press Statement, 28 April 2010). On the issue of the marginalization of the Malays, MFA responded by saying that 'great progress has been made in the last decades' which Mr Muigai himself was reported in the media to have acknowledged. The MFA release further stated that even the president of the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS), Mr Mohd Alami Musa in his meeting with Mr Muigai's reflected 'a sense of pride' and rejected any need of any "special provisions" for the Malay community.

MFA also "emphatically" disagreed with the rapporteur's suggestion of bringing flexibility in the Sedition Act and the Penal Code so as to allow freedom of expression to citizens on ethnic issues. The MFA statement stated that such issues are sensitive and it is the PAP government responsibility to maintain a balance between 'free speech and racial harmony' (MFA- Press Statement, 28 April 2010). MFA response obliquely hinted at the UN as being only a recommendatory body without any power to dictate terms. At the same time it asserted the position of the PAP government as being a responsible and accountable one. The tone of the MFA statement also indicated that the PAP government would not be interested to comply to any of the proposed Human Rights Conventions stating it would only accede to them if it finds some 'substantial value' in doing so.

The release of the MFA statement hours after the Rapportuer`s press conference was to negate and reduce the full impact of the Mr Muigai`s initial findings. The MFA seemed more interested to defend the PAP government's official position and in no way appeared interested to accept any of those suggestions and recommendations. The MFA instead asserted that given the ground realities of the city-state and the distribution of ethnic communities the steps taken by it are appropriate for Singapore. According to the MFA, the PAP's government's measures to ensure racial harmony have been successful and without problems. The MFA statement in no way showed any flexibility in accepting any criticism of the existing policies and practices. In fact it seemed to take no meaningful interest in the suggestions of the Rapporteur.

Other the hand, civil society response was different. Taking the case of Singaporeans for Democracy (SFD), it too issued a press release on the same day to state that it will establish a racial discrimination monitoring committee that will run with immediate effect to the duration of the UN Special Rapporteur on Racism's submission of his report. Further, it took the Rapporteur`s recommendation on race identification on identity cards and turned into a Facebook page advocacy project which had 300 members joining in 24 hours (The Online Citizen (TOC), 5 May 2010). SFD decided to focus on the issue of race identification as a key policy issue and tried to generate attention around it. This online project was set up as part of SFD's efforts to monitor the report of the UN Special Rapporteur on Racism who will present his findings on

Singapore before the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva (in June 2011) and the UN General Assembly in New York (in November 2011).

Significance of the UN's 1st mission to Singapore
The value of the UN Rapporteur`s first mission to Singapore was in pointing out the blind spots in the PAP government's racially based policies. It puts these policy blind spots under an international spotlight through the auspices of the UN. Although most of the issues have been identified and highlighted in the past by civil society groups and in academic analysis, the independence of the UN mission lends credibility to the issues. The PAP government can no longer try to ignore the problems highlighted by the UN Special Rapporteur within the UN framework without being subjected to some level of international criticism and on public record.

But based on the response of the PAP government to the UN Special Rapporteur's initial findings, observers can accurately predict how Singapore government officials will respond to the Rapporteur's final report. The PAP government is likely to maintain that they are the best judge to maintain the balance between the freedom of expression and racial harmony. If the initial governmental response is anything to go by, it is likely to reject the bulk of the suggestions on the basis that they are not feasible in Singapore. It is apparent from the government's response to Mr Muigai's suggestions, the government holds a strong ideological position about the value of meritocracy and is in no way prepared to acknowledge the existence of policy blind spots or agree to policy revisions. Any concession to look into a policy change following the Rapporteur's final report will be motivated more by a public relations exercise to appease the UN community and international media but not motivated by practical implementation.

The UN special rapporteur's visit also brought to the attention of Singapore's civil society of UN mechanisms through which local groups could have their views recorded. Although the Rapportuer met with civil society groups on an individual basis and there was little cross communication or prior coordination between the different groups in Singapore, it would have been better if civil society groups meet together prior to the Rapporteur`s visit to prepare some form of joint report with the additional option of submitting individual reports were appropriate. In spite of this shortcoming, the visit has increased interest among local civil society groups about UN mechanisms and awareness of their ability to contribute inputs into the different processes. Hence, several groups are currently cooperating to formulate joint reports for submission to the Universal Periodic Review where Singapore is up for review in 2011[4].

Apart from the media releases immediately prior to the Rapporteur`s visit, there was little or no other pre-publicity about the important first mission to Singapore. Publicity was kept to a

---

[4] Groups such as Maurah and Think Centre have convened separate joint civil society meetings to find ways to draft joint submissions to the Universal Periodic Review process.

minimum, ensuring that the visit will remain a low key affair. But the UN Rapporteur's visit created some local attention in the mainstream media and much more in the new media landscape. There was considerable enthusiasm in discussing the UN Special Rapporteur's visit and its possible impact. For instance, when the media reports began to emerge and some civil society groups began to publicise their own meetings with the Rapporteur, online users were active in sharing their opinions. The majority of the web commentary questioned the government's stand and argued instead that there was everyday racism in Singapore. The internet commentaries showed that the PAP government which controls the media can no longer frame and control the discussion of race related issues. The discoursed on the internet helped to show that the PAP government's 'racial harmony is a myth' created by government controlled media (Journalism SG 23 April 2010).

Finally it has to be acknowledged that while the UN mission is helpful in putting the international spotlight on some of the policy blind spots discussed above, in reality policy changes in Singapore can only be implemented through political reform. For this to happen there has to be a political challenge to the PAP government in order carry through policy changes that can seek to address some of the issues related to racial discrimination in Singapore. Without a political challenge to the PAP government it is unlikely there will be significant policy shifts in the city-state in the near to medium term.

Conclusion

Many of the recommendations made by Mr Muigai the UN Special Rapportuer on Racism are not new. These have been raised over the years by opposition parties and civil society groups and have been discussed extensively in published academic works. As seen by the PAP government's response to the Rapporteur's initial recommendation, it is expected that Singapore officials at the UN meetings will be seeking to respond similarly to Mr Muigai's final report before the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva (in June 2011) and the UN General Assembly in New York (in November 2011). Even though the PAP government actively disagreed with the initial recommendations and likely to do so of the final report, the value of these policy suggestions lies in their appearing in an UN report and in an international domain. While in Singapore, the PAP government may try to control and frame the issue of racial discrimination via its influence over the local mainstream media, it cannot do the same in an international setting. Researchers working on issues of racial discrimination need to include this international dimension in future studies. While the UN may put these issues under an international spotlight, researchers also need to understand that ultimately changes to these policies can only take place by political challenging the PAP government.

About the Author

Dr. James Gomez is presently Deputy Associate Dean (International) and Head of Public Relations, School of Humanities, Communications and Social Sciences at Monash University, Australia. He is co-editor of a forthcoming book entitled *New Media and Human Rights in Southeast* Asia which part of Routledge's Media, Culture and Social Change in Asia series. His recent publications include, "Online Opposition in Singapore: Communications Outreach Without Electoral Gain", (2008) *Journal of Contemporary Asia. Vol.38, No.4* and "Citizen Journalism: Bridging the Discrepancy in Singapore's General Elections News", Sudostasien Aktuell - *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*. (6/2006) German Institute of Global and Area Studies, Germany. He can be contacted at james.gomez@monash.edu

----

References

Barr, M.D., 2009. *Lee Kuan Yew : the beliefs behind the man*, Kuala Lumpur: New Asian Library.

Barr, M.D. & Skrbis, Z., 2008. *Constructing Singapore: elitism, ethnicity and the nation-building project*, Copenhagen, Denmark: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies Press.

Chin, Yolanda and Vasu, Norman, (2007), *Ties that Bind and Blind: A Report on Inter-racial and Inter-Religious Relations in Singapore*, Centre for Excellence for Security Studies, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. http://www.rsis.edu.sg/cens/publications/reports/RSIS%20Social%20resilience%20report.pdf (accessed 18 Aug 2010)

DPA, "S'pore rejects UN's call for more openness on racial issues" (29 April 2010) http://yoursdp.org/index.php/news/singapore/3665-spore-rejects-uns-call-for-more-openness-racial-issues

Forum Asia, "Singapore- UN envoys visits for fact finding mission on racism", (3 May 2010) http://www.forum-asia.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=2535&Itemid=130 (Accessed on 16 July 2010)

Journalism SG, "Activists tell UN that racial harmony here is a myth", 23 April 2010 http://journalism.sg/2010/04/23/activists-tell-un-that-racial-harmony-here-is-a-media-myth/ (accessed 18 August 2010)

Johnston, Eric, "Racism rapporteur repeats criticism", Japan Times Online (18 May 2006) http://search.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/nn20060518a6.html (accessed 27 August 2010).

Lai Ah Eng, (2002) Report on IPS Research Forum on Ethnic Relations in Singapore, Institute of Policy Studies, Singapore. http://www.spp.nus.edu.sg/ips/docs/reports/rp_erpforumreport.pdf

Lin, Rachel, "UN racism expert meets local leaders", Straits Times, 23 April 2010

Lyons, Lenore and Gomez, James, *Sojourn: Special Focus on Democracy and Civil Society: NGO Politics in Singapore.* (2005) 20 (2). (Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore)

Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Press statement (28 April 2010), "MFA's Response to the Press Statement of Mr Githu Muigai, UN Special Rapporteur on Contemporary Forms of Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance" http://app.mfa.gov.sg/2006/press/view_press.asp?post_id=6002 (accessed on 16 July 2010).

Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights, "First mission to Singapore by UN expert on Racism/Xenophobia", (19 April 2010) http://www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=9968&LangID=E (accessed on 19 July 2010).

Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights, "UN Special Rapporteur on racism / xenophobia concludes visit to Singapore" (28 April 2010) http://www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=10001&LangID=E (accessed on 19 July 2010).

Office of High Commissioner of Human Rights, "Country Visits", http://www2.ohchr.org/english/issues/racism/rapporteur/visits.htm (accessed 14 July 2010).

Office of High Commissioner of Human Rights, "Individual Complaints", http://www2.ohchr.org/english/issues/racism/rapporteur/complaints.htm (accessed 14 July 2010).

Office of High Commissioner of Human Rights, "Overview of Mandate", http://www2.ohchr.org/english/issues/racism/rapporteur/overview.htm (accessed 14 July 2010).

Rahim, Lily Zubiadah (2009), *Singapore in the Malay World; Building and Breaching Regional Bridges*, Routledge, London.

Rahim, Lily Zubiadah (1998), *The Singapore Dilemma: The Political and Educational Marginality of the Malay Community*, Oxford University Press, United States.

Shamin, Muhammad "Discrimination in Singapore is institutionalised", Singapore Democratic Party (27 April 2010). http://yoursdp.org/index.php/news/singapore/3644-discrimination-in-singapore-is-institutionalised (accessed 20 July 2010)

Singaporeans for Democracy, " SFD to establish racial discrimination monitoring committee ", (28 April 2010)
http://sfd.sg/content/sfd-establish-racial-discrimination-monitoring-committee (accessed on 16 August 2010).

Singaporeans for Democracy, "SFD written submission to UN Special Rapporteur", (22 April 2010)
http://sfd.sg/content/sfd-written-submission-un-special-rapporteur (accessed on 16 July 2010).

Straits Times, "UN expert's comments draw swift Govt reply", 29 April 2010,

Straits Times, "UN racism expert calls on MCYS minister", 24 April 2010,

Straits Times, "UN racism expert calls on Yaacob", 22 April 2010

Straits Times, "UN study of racial relations in S'pore", 20 April 2010

The Online Citizen, "Group wants "race" removed from NRIC", 5 May 2010.
http://theonlinecitizen.com/2010/05/group-wants-race-removed-from-nric/ (accessed on 18 August 2010)

UN Press release (28 April 2010), "Press Statement of UN Special Rapporteur in Singapore"
http://www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=10002&LangID=E (accessed on 16 July 2010).

World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance
http://www.un.org/WCAR/ (accessed 27 August 2010).

United Nations, Durban Review Conference
http://www.un.org/durbanreview2009/ (accessed 27 August 2010).

United Nations, International Convention on the Elimination of All of Racial Discrimination, New York 7 March 1966
http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/cerd.htm (accessed 27 August 2010).

Velayutham, Selvaraj, (2007) Everyday Racism in Singapore, Centre for Research on Social Inclusion, Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia.