How loyal are S’poreans?

Loyalty and pride remained stable, but two in three said national unity would be affected by foreign immigrants

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SINGAPORE — About nine in 10 Singaporeans (93 per cent) polled think the Republic is a better country than most other countries, according to a new report card on national pride.

This result is an improvement from the 85 and 84 per cent of Singaporeans who said so in 1999 and 2005, respectively.

An Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) survey also found two in three respondents felt the world would be a better place if people from other countries were more like them.

IPS interviewed 2,016 citizens last year, a representative sample, to probe their feelings.

The survey found national loyalty and pride held relatively steady between 2005 and 2009, even as Singapore’s economy and population were more exposed to global trends and migration.

Sociologist Tan Ern Ser, who conducted the study with Dr Gillian Koh, felt the stable scores are “good signs” that Singaporeans are “not fair-weathered” people.

Interviews were conducted between February and May last year and Dr Koh said the economic recession did not affect attitudes.

But Singaporeans’ chest-thumping attitudes took a slight dip when they were asked about their willingness to sacrifice for their country.

For example, four in 10 said they would not take a pay cut or pay heavier taxes for the nation. “It’s harder to sacrifice than say you identify,” Associate Professor Tan noted.

Some groups also did not score high during the survey.

For example, national loyalty and national pride weakened for those with higher socio-economic status. Chinese and younger respondents also had marginally weaker scores.

Political observer Eugene KB Tan raised another concern that the survey findings indicated Singaporeans’ national pride is intertwined with the Republic’s economic achievements.

The Singapore Management University law lecturer asked: “Does it mean that if this economy doesn’t do well, our sense of pride and identification weakens then?”

Singaporeans’ reactions to new immigrants in the society also gave policy-makers food for thought.

Close to two in three respondents (63 per cent) agreed national unity would be affected by their presence. In 1998, only 38 per cent agreed or strongly agreed such a policy could be a threat to unity, with 29 per cent choosing the neutral category.

This category was dropped as an option for the respondents for the latest study.

IPS research fellow Dr Leong Chan Hoong was not surprised by the survey findings.

He pointed out the “differentiation” Singaporeans make between a foreigner and a “foreign talent”.

Singaporeans’ acceptance of foreigners increased when viewed with the lens of the “economic imperative” — 66 per cent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the Government is right to increase the number of foreigners working in Singapore if the economy needs it.

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Fewer expressed views, but more want to be heard

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SINGAPORE — While the desire for political participation is strong, only eight out of 100 citizens here went on to express their views on public policy issues to the Government.

This is less than the number in 1998, when 8.6 per cent of citizens went on to express their opinions.

Respondents to the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) survey indicated this had more to do with not having “strong views” — rather than the perception of the lack of channels or that the channels are viewed to be ineffective.

But, this goes against an informed and critical population, political observer Eugene K B Tan argued.

The Singapore Management University (SMU) law lecturer said: “No strong views gets me worried. After all, we want an informed and critical population who don’t follow blindly.”

Sociologist Tan Ern Ser, who conducted the study with Dr Gillian Koh, preferred to look at “the positive development” that more are demanding political participation.

For example, 85 per cent of respondents agreed that voting gave citizens the most meaningful way to tell the Government how the country should be run, compared to 72 per cent in 1998.

However, SMU’s Mr Tan argued that voting at the ballot box is perhaps “a narrow understanding” of political participation.

“Citizens should also take an active interest in local matters and contribute to the discussion,” he added.

It seems more citizens want their voices heard.

Those who want to join and serve in Government-related bodies like town councils and grassroots organisations doubled to 48 per cent of respondents last year. But this is still less than the 58 per cent who would want to serve in a non-government related organisation.

Almost all 2,016 citizens surveyed would like the Government to take more time to listen to their views, even when a quick decision is necessary. In 1998, only 73 per cent would like to be consulted.

Noting that the authorities are promoting active citizenship and for people to be more engaged, Associate Professor Tan Ern Ser said: “I think it is happening. Maybe it is not happening in a big way, but it is happening.”