



## Ear to Asia podcasts

- Title:** Power, privilege and race in Singapore
- Description:** Is the playing field truly level in Singapore, which touts itself as the ultimate meritocracy? Or are the ethnic Chinese making up the majority privileged over the other sizeable ethnic groups? Seasoned Asia watchers Assoc. Professor Michael Barr and Dr Lewis Mayo join host Ali Moore to examine the politics of race in Singapore. An Asia Institute podcast.
- Listen:** <https://player.whooshkaa.com/episode?id=594639>
- Voiceover:** The Ear to Asia podcast is made available on the Jakarta Post platform under agreement between the Jakarta Post and the University of Melbourne.
- Michael Barr:** In Singapore, when it comes the positions of power, real power, that's where we have prime minister and deputy prime minister, one after another saying, "No, no one's ready for a non-Chinese prime minister. That has to stay Chinese."
- Lewis: Mayo:** Singapore is a society where the state has argued consistently, "If you don't like it here, you can leave." The idea is that, well, you know, if you're not happy with your situation in Singapore, just move back to Tamil Nadu. If you don't like Singapore, and you're Chinese, because you think it's too conservative, then you can move to Melbourne.
- Ali Moore:** Hello, I'm Ali Moore. This is Ear to Asia. In this episode, the politics of power and privilege in Singapore. Ear to Asia is the podcast from Asia Institute, the Asia research specialists at the university of Melbourne.
- Singapore presents itself to the world as a model of modernity, efficiency, prosperity, and social harmony. It attributes its success to its full-throated adherence to meritocracy, embraced and imposed by the People's Action Party or PAP which has been the Island nations governing party since 1959.
- The government claims to select the best and most capable minds to lead the nation "regardless of race, language, or religion" – a phrase every Singaporean school child recites before class every day. Contrast this with the social reality of neighbouring Malaysia where the privileges accruing to the dominant Malay ethnic group have been enshrined in law for half a century.
- But is meritocracy the equaliser that it's cracked up to be in Singapore? Are ethnic Chinese who make up some 75% of the population, in fact, privileged over the other sizeable ethnic groups like Malays and Indians? What are the



historical and ideological roots of such privileges and what does it mean for the lives of ordinary Singaporeans?

Joining us to unravel the politics of race in Singapore, are long time Southeast Asia Watcher Associate Professor Michael Barr from Flinders University in South Australia. He joins us via Skype. And Asia historian Dr. Lewis Mayo from Asia Institute at the university of Melbourne. Welcome Michael and welcome back Lewis.

Michael Barr: Hello Ali.

Lewis Mayo: Hello Ali.

Ali Moore: Look, let's get straight to the core question here, ethnic Chinese, as I just said, make up 75% of the population of Singapore. Michael does dominant population equal privileged population?

Michael Barr: In Singapore it effectively does. I mean Chinese make up a 73% of the population and they are dominant politically and economically and socially as well as demographically. This is to a considerable extent institutionalised in the sinews of society and government.

Ali Moore: You just said 73% of the population so in fact while dominant, is it falling as a proportion?

Michael Barr: Yes. It used to be 75% only a census or two ago. The Chinese are the lowest reproducing section of the population and the fact that the government has done everything it can to maintain ethnic Chinese immigration into the country hasn't been enough to maintain that.

Ali Moore: You talk about the institutionalised domination of ethnic Chinese and I want to return to what that actually means in a moment. But Lewis, Singapore has long held up its diversity as strength. It's defining ideals. Multiracialism, meritocracy and good governance. There are four official languages. There's a guarantee of religious freedom. How does all that sit with an institutionalised domination of ethnic Chinese?

Lewis Mayo: One thing to say about ethnic Chinese is as it is in so many contexts a very broad category. Someone who ticks ethnic Chinese on their census form might be a naturalised mainlander from North China with little historical depth in Singapore or they could be a Peranakan English, historically Malay, speaking Chinese person whose connection with the culture of the person recently arrived from China is minimal.

You could argue that the state is attempting to smooth out and homogenise what is actually an extremely historically complex group of Chinese people.



This is made further complex by the fact that the Singaporean Chinese population was historically drawn from a number of different regions in China. There is in no sense a homogenous Chinese Singaporean culture.

Ali Moore: Michael, is that recognised in Singapore? Is that significant or is this smoothing out of this complex group essentially means that those differences within ethnic Chinese as a group become irrelevant?

Michael Barr: Not irrelevant. The differences have diminished within actual Singaporean, Chinese. There is a serious level of resentment towards PRC Chinese, what they call China Chinese. But within Singapore the common teaching of Mandarin, one language, rather than multiple what they call dialects, other Chinese languages, that has made a dramatic difference. But yes, there are still people who speak dialects. Hokkien is the main one, but everyone is conscious that the government has deliberately homogenised the various Chinese communities into one. It's accepted up to a point.

Ali Moore: Let's go back to Lewis that question I put to you before, how does this dominant ethnic Chinese population mix or fit in with the fact that multi racialism is a defining ideal? There are four official languages, there's guarantee of religious freedom.

Lewis Mayo: Well, cultural pluralism is of course the norm in Southeast Asia. All of Singapore's surrounding societies are linguistically, culturally, and religiously heterogeneous. All of them are targets of government programmes of cultural homogenization. And that varies in context to context. An old theory of these kinds of societies is that they were plural in contrast to the nation states of supposedly coherent European countries.

They were internally diversified. Now there's an interesting comparison with the ideology of multiculturalism in Australia, which of course was a society originally conceived of as culturally homogenous as a British and, to an extent, protestant dominated white society. That was created actually at roughly the same time that Singapore was in formation with a totally different set of immigration profiles.

You could argue that when we think about contemporary Australian multiculturalism as an ideology of the left largely, and opposed by Pauline Hanson's One Nation Party, what Michael has argued in some of his work is that Singapore is an example of an ethno-nationalist society. So that pluralism of these four different groups that make up Singapore's official structure-

Ali Moore: Chinese, Indian, Malay and-



- Lewis Mayo: Eurasians. That these four groups essentially are, in a sense, in cylinders. That an overarching Singaporean identity is supposed to preserve people's ethnic specificity. This is similar to the situation in Malaysia, and that reflects a common British colonial approach to ideas of ethnicity which many observers would say when faced with the challenge of revolutionary communism in the 1950s, the British as the retreating colonial power sought to entrench this sense of ethnic loyalty as a way of resisting the internationalism and anti-colonial pan racial ideologies of communism.
- Ali Moore: Michael, can I ask you just to, in a very big picture sense, is there a fundamental contradiction between the ethnic Chinese domination and indeed privilege and this long-held commitment to diversity?
- Michael Barr: And multiculturalism and meritocracy. Now, there is a fundamental contradiction and this has not been resolved and I can't see how it can be resolved. Everything needs to be seen through the prism of the politics of the dominant group, the leadership group. When it suits them, they talk the politics of race and inclusion. When it suits them they talk about the politics of democracy and majoritarianism. When it suits them they talk about the politics of meritocracy, so the smartest people need to be on top. There is a fundamental contradiction between saying that we're going to look after everyone and we're going to see everyone as being in their cylinder, as Lewis said, and treating everyone as being equal and everyone having an equal opportunity.
- Ali Moore: Let's take that to the presidential election in 2017 which seemed to be one of these extraordinary situations. Essentially that election, the role of president was reserved for ethnic Malay candidates of which only one was deemed eligible, and essentially, that was because that ethnic group had not been represented in the position for some... I think it was five consecutive terms. On the one hand you had a situation that is upholding ethnic diversity, on the other that would seem completely contradictory to the notion of adherence to meritocracy, Michael.
- Michael Barr: Completely. They actually changed the constitution so that they could do this. But the president actually doesn't have a lot of power. If one likes to have a turn at being president and the Indians and other minorities had several turns, but there's not much power in the position of president. It's very easy to say, yes, let's have everyone having a turn. But when it comes to the positions of power, real power, and that's particularly the prime minister office, that's where we have prime minister and deputy prime minister one after another saying, no, no one's ready for a non-Chinese prime minister. That has to stay Chinese.
- Ali Moore: We'll get back to that question, but on this particular election in 2017 how did that fit with government rhetoric?



Michael Barr: Well, they've got a long history of reserving particular seats in parliament for particular ethnic minorities. But this was really quite contrived on this occasion. They had a very peculiar way of counting the number of presidencies so that they could come up with the fact that they needed Malay. They were really trying to stop one particular person who is ethnic Chinese from standing for president because he almost knocked off the government's preferred candidate the election before and that's Tan Cheng Bock who has since set up his own political party. He's a former government man, former PAP man and he came within a few thousand votes of defeating Tony Tan back in 2011.

Ali Moore: In other words, ethnic Chinese are in a privileged position unless they pose a challenge to the PAP. Is that your argument?

Michael Barr: The Chinese as an entire community are not politically or economically or socially harmonious. There are different classes. There are poor Chinese, there are Chinese who are disadvantaged, there are working class Chinese. A lot of the Chinese population, like everyone else, would like to see a nicer version of the government. So there is a lot of discontent at the moment about the government per se on issues that have nothing to do with race or anything like that. It's just about performance. And people look for a way to express that.

Ali Moore: Lewis, let's wind back the clock in Singapore. Where did everybody come from and when did they come and why did they come?

Lewis Mayo: You can take the long term and the short term view of these issues. One is that Singapore is located on the historical access or point of convergence between the trade routes of the Indian ocean and those of the South China sea. It is a meeting place of the dominant cultures of Eastern Eurasia plus the local cultures of Southeast Asia. But I guess the modern history of Singapore is generally dated to the establishment of a British sponsored state there in 1819 by Stamford raffles and that it was a replacement as a trading port of a number of rival sites in the region. It marks the ascendancy of British power in the Indian ocean and what was later to become the British sphere of influence in South China centred on Hong Kong.

So you have an old tradition of migration from Southeastern China, particularly from Fujian province in that early period that dates back four to five centuries. In the period after the establishment of the British sponsored state, you have a combination, both of the old trading groups of the Indian ocean including Arabs. There's even an Armenian Street in Singapore, which represents an Armenian interest in that area.

In that sense, Singapore is no different from places like Bangkok or Ayutthaya, which earlier were sites of convergence for people from



everywhere essentially. But the Chinese population emerged in Singapore, we can argue in line with the expansion of the plantation and mining structures in the Malay Peninsular in the 19th century, and the importation of Chinese labour and Chinese capital and Chinese fighting power to help structure those areas.

So it was a site of commercial concentration, capital concentration, and also labour migration. The elite group that set up independent Singapore was drawn from people of a diversity of backgrounds, which included a Jewish Eurasian of Iraqi background, Indians and Chinese Singaporeans of a culturally diverse set of origin points. English speaking Singaporeans, Chinese Singaporeans, Malay speaking Singaporeans, speakers of Hakka, Hokkien and Cantonese, et cetera.

And so in a sense it was a ethnically heterogeneous group of people who might or might not be seen as having real solidarity with each other but with common interests in the preservation of a capitalist economy, I think we could argue. At the same time as being under pressure from communists and other activists arguing for rights for the poor in those societies, and for working people.

- Ali Moore: Michael, on the demographics, is it correct that the balance that we have now, the breakup that we have now has long been the case certainly since British rule and Singapore?
- Michael Barr: Certainly since independence, the Chinese became the majority more than a hundred years ago. The Malays used to be the majority for just a few years and they've gradually shrunk back to being about 13%.
- Lewis Mayo: It's important to add here that the common language of Singapore in the 19th century was Malay and that Chinese speakers of Malay exerted a significant effect on the structure of that language helping to popularise it. That said, the common language of identity in Singapore, I would argue is Singlish. The form of modified grammatically nonstandard English. That is the common language. I would say the native language of all Singaporeans and is the language of relaxation and solidarity. The language of the key institution for the creation of a sense of at least male solidarity in Singapore, which is national military service. In speaking about division and in speaking about cultural difference, Singlish is in fact the de facto symbol of shared Singaporean experience.
- Ali Moore: Michael, do you agree with that? Is Singlish the great leveller in Singapore?
- Michael Barr: Yes, except that once you get to the upper class, the ruling elite themselves in Singlish, would be called the Atas, the higher ups. They spurn Singlish and their natural way of speaking is closer to Oxbridge English. This becomes a



problem for them when they're trying to relate to ordinary people and be politicians. The other thing I've mentioned is that for centuries, Malay was the lingua franca of the region. It was the trading centre and became the language that was spoken far and wide, not just on the Malay peninsula or in what we now call Singapore.

Ali Moore: Let's go back to when Singapore became independent and I guess look at what led to Singapore becoming a Republic, which was its expulsion from the Malaysian Federation. And that followed the race riots of 1964. Michael, to what extent have the politics of race been key since the very day Singapore became independent?

Michael Barr: Yes, it was really the big problem which eventually under Lee Kuan Yew became the big opportunity. But the whole narrative of departure from Malaysia, the very narrative of it was that they were expelled, which they weren't. They asked to leave. And that it was all about race relations and the dominant and majority Malays in the Malay peninsula not being happy with the majority Chinese in Singapore.

This became very toxic. It was to an extent a code for [inaudible] not being able to find himself a place in the bigger picture that he was content with. I mean ultimately he wanted to be in cabinet. He wanted to be in government at the federal level and he wasn't able to find a place for himself. He wasn't able to settle on a place for Singapore. But the narrative was that everything was about race and avoiding riots and having a chance to build harmony and find prosperity.

And in Singapore the narrative was without being dragged down by these feudal thinking Malays on the mainland, on the peninsula. Having said that, the narrative became very much forward looking and it became for nearly a couple of decades about multi racialism and how all the races and all the communities are pulling together to try to build a new Singapore.

There were elements of that that were honest and truthful and a lot of the members of cabinet really believed that. This started to change in the late 1970s.

Ali Moore: But I guess at that time, in the early days of Singapore as a Republic, it had no choice. Did it? But to embrace all its ethnicities.

Michael Barr: Yes, but you can do that in a number of ways. I mean you can do that by having a civic nationalism in which every citizen is treated the same and is treated equally. But as soon as you start saying the Chinese are going to be channelled through these organisations, the Malays are going to be channelled through these organisations, the Indians through these. We're going to determine what language you speak in school according to what



race your father is. Then you're not doing that. That's not obvious or inevitable as the path forward. It is a choice. It is a social choice and it is a political choice.

Lewis Mayo:

A Marxist might observe that this focus on race was a way of distracting people's attention from issues of class. If you look at the Lee Kuan Yew speeches of the 1960s and 70s, his comment was the English educated classes in Singapore don't riot, the Chinese educated classes riot. I remember as a small boy visiting Singapore in 1976 and seeing things that scared me a lot, which was people being arrested at the Singaporean universities for being in possession of communist literature.

The argument was that essentially Chinese was in the 1960s and through to the 70s a language of communism. With the death of now and the embrace, I suppose, of a form of capitalism in China, that changed the dynamic. That's the point at which Lee Kuan Yew shifted his own identity and became much more aligned to Chinese culture than he had been, in a sense, in his youth.

Michael Barr:

This actually comes back to another element of the politics of multiculturalism and race in the 1960s and 1970s. At that time, as Lewis has indicated, the Chinese were regarded as being a problem rather than an asset. Part of the reason for that is the things Lewis has been talking about. Another part was that the ruling elite had very little point of identification with them because they literally did not speak the same languages.

We're talking about an English educated government and a Chinese population that hardly had much English at all. When the politics of so-called chauvinism and communism was often a disguise for stopping the perpetuation of the teaching of these languages and the celebration of these languages, and converting the population into an English speaking population.

Only when the government, and this is particularly Lee Kuan Yew, thought that that problem had been solved and the Chinese community or at least the younger generation had been turned into something that was a bit of a mirror of itself, English educated, aspiring to be middle-class. That's when the Chinese population started to become an asset for the government rather than a problem. And that's the period in that late 1970s, early 1980s when we see the beginning of what I've called the sinification of Singapore.

Lewis Mayo:

Of course, what you also have in the 70s is a shutting off of migration from China. Sixties and seventies people don't leave China, they're not coming into Singapore. You have a chance, in a sense, for Singaporeanism to emerge without new influxes of Chinese people. Now that changes in the 1990s and early two thousands when you have people coming in to China again.



Again, in part to reinforce the demographic situation that Michael has discussed before, this genuine anxiety, which is a common racist set of images that in a sense the browner people are breeding faster than the paler people in the population. That the Chinese population is at risk from, in a sense, say, poorly educated but prolific an over child-endowed set of minorities who will eventually wipe out the majority. This is an interesting element of racial paranoia in this, which is of course manipulated by the government by invoking, we're just a tiny Chinese Island in a Malay Muslim sea and that we need to preserve ourselves against the dangers represented by these neighbouring populations.

Ali Moore: You're listening to Ear to Asia from Asia Institute at the university of Melbourne. I'm Ali Moore and I'm joined by Associate Professor Michael Barr of Flinders university and Dr. Lewis Mayo of Asia Institute. We're talking about the politics of race in Singapore. Michael Barr, you just talked about at the sinification of Singapore and Lewis was helping to explain how this started and why this started late seventies and into the 80s. Do you agree with his analysis of some of the reasons why it changed, why Lee Kuan Yew's view towards how he should treat the Chinese community changed?

Michael Barr: Yes. The other element of it is that Lee Kuan Yew had since the 1950s, since he was a relatively young politician being an admirer of Chinese culture. He didn't really know what it was. What he admired was the great discipline that he saw amongst the left wing, what he saw as communist Chinese students when they were rioting, when they were organising themselves, when they were participating in politics. That's what he admired. What he wanted to do was actually reach a stage where he could capture that and use that and turn that into something that is useful for capitalism and for Singapore and for his own group.

Ali Moore: How did he go about that? What were the sorts of policy changes and physical changes that we saw in Singapore at that time?

Michael Barr: Well, in 1979 he did a complete about face and started a speak Mandarin campaign along with an eat frozen pork campaign.

Ali Moore: Can you just explain that? The eat frozen pork campaign. Why... What was the link?

Michael Barr: Because it was... Their emphasis was on the freezing of the pork because that was safer and it was less likely to be contaminated because there'd been problems with food poisoning. But of course the Malays section of the population for whom eating pork is *haram* looked at this and thought they were being encouraged to eat pork. Totally insensitive.



Ali Moore: The teaching of the Mandarin, the speak Mandarin campaign. How widespread was that? I mean, what sort of an impact did that have across the Island and particularly on some of those minorities?

Lewis Mayo: Can I come in there to talk a little bit about the politics of Mandarin itself? Now, with the schooling riot, it's not simply the Chinese sinophile elites in Singapore that are promoting Mandarin, but that it's a longstanding policy. Particularly after the establishment of the Republic of China in 1911 to promote Mandarin education in Southeast Asia.

It was initially a problem because in the colonial era, the Dutch in Indonesia promoted Mandarin because they thought it was a proper form of Chinese and a standardised language equivalent to the standard Malay that they promoted across the Dutch East Indies. But the Chinese nationalists promoted it because they thought that Chinese nationalism was a project of overcoming dialect differences and parochialism amongst the various cultural groups that prevented China from being strong.

What this carried with it was prejudice against what are called dialects. What you see with language nationalism in Taiwan with a strong advocacy of what in Singapore is called Hokkien but in Taiwan is called Taiwanese now, is a resistance to this programme of Mandarinization.

But it's interesting if you watch Singapore films this days, and I encourage people to go and have a look at Singapore cinema. It's much neglected, especially Singapore comedies, the films of Jack Neo in particular. What you see now is a picture of constant code switching between Mandarin, Hokkien, English and Singlish. The languages move in and out of each other's, but where previously the move would have been between Hokkien and Singlish. It now tends to be much more a move between English, Singlish and Mandarin. In other words, Mandarin has taken over a slot previously occupied by Hokkien.

Ali Moore: Actively encouraged by the government.

Lewis Mayo: Actively encouraged.

Ali Moore: Michael, if you look at the impact of the speak Mandarin campaign on the minority ethnicities, where did that leave the Malays or the Indians or the Eurasians? Is it something that they could simply learn? Because as we all know, that is no easy task.

Michael Barr: No, it's no easy task. But the other thing is that there was, except for a tiny, tiny minority, usually if people who have power... children whose parents have powerful connections, there was almost no opportunity for non-Chinese to learn Mandarin. If you are a Malay, you have to learn Malay.



If you are an Indian, you have to learn Tamil or there was a small selection of alternate Indian languages that you could learn at least at primary school.

Ali Moore: So that's under the government rule of English first, home language second?

Michael Barr: Yes. Mother tongue, they called it, and they tried to give them equal priority which became impossible for children to learn either language properly in that way. That became a problem in itself.

Lewis Mayo: One argument about that of course is that this reinforces the silos that disguise class differences. Because Mandarin was no one's mother tongue. It was a state imposed language that no one spoke at home. People learned it at school but there was no mother or father tongue speaking Mandarin. It's a process of people embracing this language.

The interesting thing about it is that it has been embraced and I would argue that the situation is quite complexly similar to the situation in Taiwan, where Mandarin was imposed by the Kuomintang state in the 1940s and resisted but actually used by people as a language of schooling until it actually came home with them. I think Mandarin has come home to the younger generation of Singaporeans in an interesting way.

Ali Moore: Michael, where does that leave these vast sways of minority groups if they have no access to learning Mandarin, but it is increasingly common and indeed required in many jobs in Singapore?

Michael Barr: Yes, and that is a new problem. New in the last 10-15 years. The 25 plus percent of the population that does not speak Mandarin are often routinely excluded socially from conversations. In schools we have documented cases of teachers, Chinese teachers speaking to a mixed race class and slipping into Mandarin, which some of the class just simply cannot understand.

We have textbooks, school textbooks in primary school from the 1980s that are presenting blatantly racist stereotypes of the different racial groups with the Chinese being smiling and strong and leadership and wealthy, and the Malays being lazy and naughty and the Indians being argumentative. It's shocking stuff.

But this actually reinforces it, especially since we now have clusters of Chinese-only schools, elite schools with special funding, which means that you have a whole lot of Chinese, particularly, who only know the other races through stereotypes and through what they learn in school. You have a minimal interaction between the most privileged of the Chinese children and the rest of the population. They even have actually minimal contact with the lower class, if I can use that term, Chinese, the working class Chinese.



Lewis Mayo: But this is where the army plays a role as an institution that for males at least reinforces this old perception of Singapore as a society of multi-racial mixing. Without compulsory military service, we can argue, interestingly enough, many people say that the place that they learn, even Hokkien as their native language, is actually in the army. From what are called Hokkien Peng – Hokkien soldiers of working class background who are seen as in a sense the backbone of Singapore’s defence. It’s actually in an odd way, the army recaptures the Singapore of the fifties and sixties that brought the PAP into existence.

Ali Moore: However, only with half of the population because of course military service is not required for women.

Lewis Mayo: Exactly, but as with many spaces of nationalism and especially in Singapore, nationalism is conservative. It’s conservative in the sense that it is not revolutionary as a deliberate response to communist ideas of a revolutionary form of Malaysian nationalism or the revolutionary nationalism of Indonesia. It’s conservative and therefore highly masculinist.

Michael Barr: Even in the army, we still have the separation. The idea that this is where the mixing takes place, it has some elements of truth, but it also reinforces the hierarchy because the children, the boys from the elite Chinese schools end up as officers. And the Malays, most of the Malays don’t get into the army in the first place. They get syphoned off into the civil defence force or into the police. Those that are in the army end up as the drivers and the cooks.

Ali Moore: But Michael, what about more broadly away from the army? I mean if you look at many Singapore in workplaces and indeed if you look even at the cabinet, there are a wide number of ethnicities represented. Where do you see this domination of Chinese ethnicity? Where do you see it as being most apparent?

Michael Barr: With most apparent in the scholarship system whereby people who matriculate, get government scholarships to go overseas in particular to study at universities and then come back to become members of the elite because that is overwhelmingly Chinese. Chinese are all ready easily the majority of the population. They dominate at this level to an even higher degree.

Within the military scholarships, which is the most prestigious of all, they are utterly dominated. This is partly because they have their own special schools and the elite schools which were reinforced and refunded in the 1980s have become overwhelmingly Chinese themselves. You’ve got all these biases built in really from kindergarten. And kindergarten onwards through to university. So that by the time we get to the stage of the



government using supposedly meritocratic filters to choose the best of the best, all the damage has been done.

The Malays have been going to ordinary schools. They haven't had the opportunities, the social opportunities the Chinese have had and a large but still select group of Chinese boys and girls, particularly the boys, have been privileged and been given basically a free ride providing they work hard and provide are a bit smart into the saddle of power.

Ali Moore: Where does that leave the Malays and the Indians and the Eurasians? Just quietly sitting by while this happens? Is there an acceptance of Chinese privilege because they are the dominant population?

Michael Barr: Well, this probably comes back to why they felt some need to make it look like they were doing something for the Malays by giving them a shot at the presidency. Because there is a discontent there and it is becoming an undercurrent that is being expressed much more frequently and openly than it used to be. It's not as though the other ethnic groups are being oppressed or are poor or exploited or anything like that, but they are missing out on the opportunities that the socially privileged group within the Chinese are getting.

Even in the sense of just ordinary people going for jobs, there is a real social displeasure over Indians, in particular, doing what they call job hopping – going from one job to another and try to look after themselves. Do their best, be ambitious. For Chinese, this is normal. A Chinese can have half a dozen jobs in half a dozen years and everyone says, "Oh they are really energetic." An Indian does that they say, "Oh, they're trouble makers. There not reliable."

Lewis Mayo: It's interesting to put this into a larger regional context to understand how it's justified. One of those things of course, is to say that we'll next door in Malaysia, that's a system of entrenched so-called privilege for Malays. And also that there is entrenched defacto discrimination against Chinese people in particularly the army in Indonesia.

These are used to say that, well, we're not doing anything other than protecting the interests of the majority group in Singapore in the way that our neighbours do. In relation to the Indian population, and indeed this is true of the Chinese population too in Singapore. Singapore is a society where the state has argued consistently, if you don't like it here, you can leave.

The idea is that, well, if you're not happy with your situation in Singapore, just move back to the Tamil Nadu. If you don't like Singapore and you're Chinese because you think it's too conservative, then you can move to



Melbourne. This set of rationalisations has underpinned the system for a very long time.

Ali Moore: At the same time though, if you were dealing with a population that was one or 2% or even 3% yes, but you're dealing with ethnic minorities that make up 25% of the population. So that's hardly going to be a particular option for people. Is it?

Michael Barr: If I can just say, the other thing is that this government very proudly says that they are not like Indonesians and they are not like the Malaysians. That's one of their big selling points. They claim to be a meritocracy and to be inclusive. They look at the bumiputra system in Malaysia where the institutionalisation of racism is everything that Lewis says and more. They say, we are not like that. We don't look at race when we're choosing the best of the best, but in fact they do.

Ali Moore: So in Singapore with the ethnic minorities, is there an acceptance of privilege, but with, I think Michael, you talk of the social contract that the Chinese is the dominant ethnicity, but minorities will be given opportunities, they'll be treated well. There'll be good governance that that social contract is what's been key.

Michael Barr: That's correct. That's a social contract has operated for, well since independence and it is still operating, but it is fraying at the edges. The ethnic minorities are feeling increasingly that they're making all the concessions and getting less in return. They are... They often feel like they're outsiders in their own community. I mean an Indian or a Malay Singaporean is more likely to be asked, "Where are you from? Are you Singaporean?" than is a PRC Chinese. It'll be an assumption that the Chinese is Singaporean. That's until they speak and someone hears the accent that can make the difference.

Lewis Mayo: One thing I find helpful in thinking about Singapore as an outsider to its society is an argument by some political scientists that essentially Singapore is run primarily in the interest of multinationals. With multinational capitalism and Singapore being interested strongly in Singapore's identity as a connector to China that is protected from the direct influence of the People's Republic of China.

There's a strong interest in maintaining on the part of the Singapore elites and ensuring that Singapore's cultural systems continue to serve those foreign interests. The issues that Michael is talking about, are issues that concern Singaporeans who to a very great extent are not linked to that structure. You could argue that Malay Muslim capitalism is centred in the historically Chinese city of Kuala Lumpur and that builds a set of linkages to



wealthy people in the Muslim world, in West Asia, so in the Arab world and that Indian capitalism is, to a much greater extent, centred in India itself.

Because of the relationship with multinationals and structuring the agendas of the Singaporean state, these concerns which we would call concerns of the working class and the middle and lower middle class are ignorable in their view because they're serving another interest.

Ali Moore: If we now look at a situation as Michael describes it of fraying, and we began this conversation talking about the 2017 presidential election. If we look at the role of prime minister, and Michael, you said the outset as well that there have been many comments. I think it was Lee Hsien Loong who said...well, he said it in 2008 that Singapore wasn't ready for a non-ethnic Chinese prime minister, but he's anointed successor, the finance minister said just last year. While he was saying that the older generation is not ready for a non Chinese prime minister. How does that fraying play into that and is that an active live issue in the Singaporean environment?

Michael Barr: Well, just as the reserved presidency for Malay was to exclude a Chinese candidate. The preservation for [inaudible] of the prime ministership for the Chinese is to exclude a very prominent Indian candidate. Who until recently was a deputy prime minister and who was a much better politician than Lee Hsien Loong or any of the others.

Ali Moore: This is Tharman Shanmugaratnam.

Michael Barr: It's Tharman Shanmugaratnam, who was still a senior minister. He stepped down from being deputy prime minister to make way for Heng Swee Keat who seems to be going to be the next prime minister. He's certainly the anointed one providing he doesn't keep making a mess of things. He will get there presumably.

Ali Moore: Yet Shanmugaratnam has polled very well. It seems that he would be a highly popular choice. Is that a fair comment?

Michael Barr: Yes. He's smarter than the rest of them. He has a global figure without being a politician. He's an economist. He has a much better affinity with ordinary people and is able to express it than any of the Chinese candidates who were lined up to be prime minister. But no, he's probably too smart. Probably too good and he's not Chinese, so he had to be excluded.

Ali Moore: But in fact, he's fascinating, and in many ways, a perfect example of how Singaporeans don't always fall cleanly along racial lines, isn't he? He's a Sri Lankan Tamil. He's married to a lawyer who's of Chinese, Japanese decent. I mean there's...



- Michael Barr: He also doesn't speak Tamil. He's only got English.
- Ali Moore: You can't put him in a box. But does that essentially mean that Singapore is not ready for a non-ethnic Chinese prime minister? Or is it only the older generation? Or is it only the PAP?
- Michael Barr: I think it's only Lee Hsien Loong and his cabal. I think the older generation of Chinese actually would be happy enough with Tharman Shanmugaratnam. He really is that popular and obviously that competent. He's the one who has been leading and implementing social welfare reforms – very mild reforms, I should say. Trying to look after the older generation. This was his call, this is his work. And that is recognised.
- The older generation, the younger generation, I think they're ready. In a sense, this should be regarded as being great achievement of Lee Kuan Yew and his successors work on building a civil society and a polite society and an inclusive society. Instead they turn around and say, no, we're not ready for it yet basically because we want someone else.
- Ali Moore: So where does this end, Lewis? Where does this fraying end?
- Lewis Mayo: There's some interesting questions about Singapore as part of a number of societies that have been interested in phasing out state responsibilities for welfare and particularly for the poor. There's an argument that the strengthening of the narrative of Chineseness and Confucianism and all of that was really to say we don't have to pay pensions because Chinese people look after their own parents.
- A similar narrative has been advanced about state Hindutva in India. That in other words, you're actually invoking these cultural narratives. The state may be starting to use them to step away from its responsibilities in these areas. It may well be that the fraying you're talking about is actually a consequence of that retreat of the state from responsibilities in educational terms and in general, especially in the area of housing and pensions and other areas.
- Lewis Mayo: And that in fact it will be this constituency that is the most alienated from an elite that seems entirely allied essentially with an international structure of capitalism. It's interesting to see what Singaporeans will make of the situation in Hong Kong where you can argue that, that that fraying and that cleavage between the elite and the ordinary people is part of what's fueling the anger that we see on Hong Kong streets every day.
- Ali Moore: Michael, where do you see that fraying leading to?



Lewis Mayo: The entire system is unravelling very slowly. It's hard to see the handing over of power to another generation of Lees, a third generation of Lees. To see that going smoothly. The systems of government, the delivery of services, the so-called long range vision that the governments planners are supposed to have. They've been letting people down, and Lewis is right, since the 1990s the government has become increasingly regarding the international Capitol as being its primary constituency rather than its own people.

That has created attention that is going to become impossible eventually. It could result in the end in a split in the elite that is probably the most likely scenario. I think at some stage Singapore is going to be engaged in what's going to look like a very slow glacial deterioration of standard of services, the social harmony, the courtesy between the races, that sort of thing.

It'll look like it's going to go for generations. Then all of a sudden like the fall of the Berlin wall, something's going to happen overnight and it's going to happen very quickly. What system that's going to take, what form it's going to take I really cannot guess.

Ali Moore: As you say, anyone can try and crystal ball gaze, but to try and work out what exactly is going to happen and getting that answer right is virtually impossible, but absolutely fascinating to watch it as it happens. Michael Barr and Lewis Mayo thank you very much for talking to Ear to Asia.

Lewis Mayo: Thank you Ali.

Michael Barr: Thank you very much.

Ali Moore: Our guests have been Southeast Asia researcher, Associate Professor Michael Barr from Flinders university and Asia historian Dr. Lewis Mayo from Asia Institute at the University of Melbourne. Ear to Asia is brought to you by Asia Institute of the University of Melbourne, Australia. You can find more information about this and all our other episodes at the Asia Institute website.

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