

A Singaporean Rapper Tried to Call Out Racism. He's Been Sentenced to Jail For His Statements

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Four years ago, Singaporean siblings Subhas and Preeti Nair packed their camera gear, headed to a popular hawker center in downtown Singapore, and shot a video that would become the talk of the town—and ultimately land Subhas with a jail sentence.



Subhas Nair, a rapper convicted of violating Singapore's racial harmony law, attends court on Sep. 5, 2023.

In the video, they rapped about racism in Singapore in front of a large banner—part of a nationwide advertisement campaign—plastered across the open-air food court's entrance. Meant to show how an electronic payment system was accessible to Singaporeans from all walks of life, [the ad featured actor Dennis Chew portraying several characters using the app](#)—from a man dressed in literal blue-collar attire to a woman in a headscarf typically worn by Malay Muslims to a man in business attire with his skin artificially darkened to appear Indian, complete with a name badge that read: “K. Muthusamy.”

The ad garnered [significant backlash on social media](#), with many pointing to the problematic use of what they identified as “[brownface](#).” The siblings' video joined the wave of criticism.

“It was very offensive,” Subhas, a rapper, tells TIME of the ad campaign's portrayal of other ethnicities by a Chinese actor. “We wanted to end brownface in Singapore. The goal is that no one should ever have to see this again.”

Together with his sister Preeti, a popular social media personality, the siblings posted “K. Muthusamy,” a parody music video—a remix of Iggy Azalea's “F*ck It Up”—in which they lambasted what they saw as a pattern of Chinese people, Singapore's dominant ethnicity, committing racial insensitivities against minorities.

“How can a man wear brown and wear a tudung?” the brother-sister duo rapped. “Chinese people always out here fucking it up,” went their chorus.

The video quickly went viral—with many viewers supporting its message and others offended by its vulgarity—before it was ordered to be removed from the internet by Singapore's authorities and followed by a police investigation into the siblings.

About the music video, the country's Law and Home Affairs Minister K. Shanmugam [said](#): "When you put out statements that wound racial, religious feelings, that's an offense in Singapore. ... We cannot allow these sorts of attacks." As for the ad itself, media authorities noted that "it was done in poor taste" but did not pursue any legal action against its makers. The companies behind the campaign, including the country's state-owned broadcaster, [apologized](#), admitting in a statement that "the portrayal of some races in the advertisement was done in an insensitive fashion."

Both the Infocomm Media Development Authority and the police declined to comment for this story, citing, respectively, the ongoing nature of Subhas' court case and the confidentiality of its investigations.

Subhas and Preeti had initially been handed a two-year "conditional warning" after posting the video, which they maintain was intended only to call out racism and not to malign an entire race. But Subhas was charged in 2021 after he made further race-related comments on social media that authorities found objectionable, including statements alleging that Chinese Singaporeans are treated more leniently after wrongdoing than Indian or Malay Singaporeans—a charge the government vehemently denies.

Subhas was sentenced to six weeks in jail on Tuesday after being convicted of four charges of attempting to promote "[ill will between different racial groups](#)." During the sentencing, the judge [said](#) that allegations that Singaporean authorities discriminate against people by race or religion were "just as serious as the casting of racial slurs."

Experts say the case speaks to both the effectiveness and limits of the government's heavy-handed approach to minimizing uncomfortable discourse in Singapore, where self-censorship is already pervasive.

For his part, Subhas—who is now 31 years old, has long used music and humor as a platform for social justice messages, and plans to appeal his conviction—says that his drawn-out legal battle is a price worth paying to call attention to enduring racial injustice in a country that takes pride in maintaining an image of harmonious multiculturalism.

"I didn't say anything that most of us didn't already think or feel. I just said the quiet parts out loud," Subhas says, adding: "The quiet parts remain quiet because of fear—fear that whatever is happening to me will happen to them too."

Racism has long been a touchy subject in Singapore, where [about half of the city-state's population](#) either doesn't think racial discrimination exists in the country or believes it can be eliminated in the next decade. Authorities have typically shied away from addressing the realities of systemic injustices while relying heavily on a legal framework that [penalizes racially motivated violence](#)—but that has also been used, observers allege, to crack down on critical discourse related to race and religion.

Against a backdrop of potential legal repercussions for talking about racism, parody videos like what the Nair siblings produce have become a common way to voice social commentary in tongue-in-cheek ways, Crystal Abidin, a professor of internet studies at Curtin University who has done extensive research into Singaporean internet culture, tells TIME.

"For citizens who live in the country, it actually takes a lot of special skill to say things without going over [out-of-bounds] markers, without violating any law, while still being able to deliver your

message,” Crystal says, noting that the lines regulating acceptable discourse are largely invisible until someone is penalized for overstepping.

Because the laws governing racial and religious offenses are written broadly, the state has considerable latitude to interpret language subjectively. In the Nairs’ rap song, for example, authorities were most aggrieved by the refrain of “Chinese people always out here f*cking it up,” which the court [described](#) as “clearly offensive and insulting.” The phrase “f*cking it up” in Azalea’s original song refers to having a good time, says Vincent Pak, a linguistics researcher at the National University of Singapore and King’s College London [who has published on the topic](#), while in the Nairs’ music video it means botching something—a definition that Subhas reiterated during his trial. But the way authorities interpreted the phrase, Pak says, was simply that it “contains vulgarities” that “[target] the Chinese community and therefore it is offensive.”

“An ‘f up’ in this context means a mistake,” Subhas [told](#) the court in March, “and brownface in my opinion is categorically wrong and racist.” He also [acknowledged](#) that he had known the Chinese community would find his video offensive, but argued that art sometimes provokes discomfort. (The court [rejected](#) Subhas’ arguments and deemed that he had knowingly tried to promote ill will among races in violation of [Section 298A of Singapore’s Penal Code](#)).

“Powerful institutions are able to impose certain meanings on what citizens say. And of course, those serve particular interests, such as maintaining the racial order in Singapore,” Pak adds. “What Subhas and Preeti intended back then was a form of anti-racism ... but it’s been interpreted as racism itself because it upsets a certain racial order or upsets certain communities.”

[Shanmugam](#), the cabinet minister, acknowledged in 2021 the limits of a strictly prosecutorial approach to eradicating racism in Singapore. “You can’t bring about harmony and racial tolerance and acceptance just by having laws and enforcing them, you need to do much more,” he said, adding that the government and society have to “work very hard to maintain harmony.”

In 2021, authorities announced that they would [introduce a new law](#) to consolidate existing laws regulating racial issues and to incorporate more rehabilitative recourses to racial offenses. There have not, however, been any concrete updates on any legal changes since then, though authorities have been trying to foster conversations about race, including through [dialogue sessions](#) between ministers, academics, and civic groups.

“What was previously considered a taboo topic has largely gone mainstream,” Norman Vasu, a senior lecturer at Singapore’s NUS College who researches local politics, tells TIME of the Singaporean public’s increasing attention to racial issues in the country. This has put the government in an “unenviable” position of trying to manage the “tone and form of discussions,” Vasu says, which can have far-reaching consequences. “Too harsh a response may lead to a stifling of future discussions while a lack of response may embolden the irresponsible.”

Subhas, who has been working on a [new album](#), *The State vs Subhas Nair*, says his ordeal should reveal to the world more about the Singaporean government and its ability to intimidate people into silence than about him personally.

“In the future, I never want another rapper, or anyone else, to be in this situation,” he says. “Pointing out that something is racist, is not racist. Calling something for what it is, is the first step towards addressing the issue.”

Koh Ewe

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