

Religious Harmony Act to be updated to meet new threats

Changes to be made with the agreement of key stakeholders, including religious leaders

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Amid the prevalence of identity politics and hate speech on social media, Singapore will need to update a 30-year-old law that safeguards religious harmony, Minister for Home Affairs and Law K. Shanmugam said yesterday.

The amendments to the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act, enacted in 1990, will be made with the agreement of key stakeholders, including religious leaders and

the people, he added.

Mr Shanmugam was speaking at a forum on religion, extremism and identity politics organised by the Institute of Policy Studies and the Ministry of Home Affairs, where he said the Government had discussed the matter extensively with various religious groups and their leaders.

"They are all in sync, they all agree, with broadly the direction we want to go," he added.

The Act was mooted in the late 1980s by first Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, who was concerned by

the rising religious fervour and the mixing of religion and politics globally, and the harmful impact these trends could have on Singapore.

The law allows the Government to issue restraining orders against those sowing discord among faiths.

Since it went into effect in 1992, it has never been invoked, although the authorities have come close to doing so on a number of occasions.

Yesterday, Mr Shanmugam said the law's very existence has set the parameters for social conduct and signalled the political will to act against those who cross the line.

"I am a believer in making sure the power is there. But I am also a believer in not exercising that power. You shouldn't have to exercise the power because if you did, society

will not be what it is," he said.

The minister did not elaborate on the planned changes, but flagged two key aspects of the update: It will make the law effective against those who make derogatory remarks about religions in the new information age, and reaffirm Singapore's commitment to prevent religion from being exploited for any political or subversive purposes.

Noting that the Government took efforts 30 years ago to discuss the issue and make sure that the law was understood and accepted, Mr Shanmugam signalled that similar efforts would be made this time to engage religious groups and the public.

The issue will also be discussed in Parliament, he said.

But the minister emphasised that legislation was only one part of Singapore's approach to maintaining racial and religious harmony.

The Government actively ensures that people of different faiths come together, through its policies on housing and education, among others – an approach borne of Singapore's experience with racial and religious riots in the 1950s and 1960s.

"We will not adopt a passive approach to securing religious harmony," he said.

"That has never been the Singapore way, and... the fact that we have managed to achieve some degree of success in the path that we have taken should give us confidence to deal with the problem in unique ways if necessary," he added.

Other speakers at the forum spoke on how religious identities were becoming a greater factor in politics globally, creating "us versus them" divides that played into the hands of extremists. They also noted that religion was playing a greater role in politics in the region.

S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies professor Rohan Gunaratna noted that Sri Lanka, where Buddhist extremists have

been targeting Muslims, was in the process of introducing a Harmony Act modelled on Singapore's Act.

Mr Shanmugam noted that all religions are capable of being exploited and have been, citing cases of errant Christian and Muslim preachers here as well as militant Buddhist ideologues in Myanmar and Sri Lanka.

Singapore, he said, must remain a place where all religions co-exist.

"We made a conscious determination to be multiracial, multi-religious, and that no one would be squatted upon on account of racial or religious beliefs," he said. "That commitment to our people will not waver... We should not allow it to waver, and we must update our laws to make sure that we keep to that commitment."

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Political movements misusing and abusing religion: Academic

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While doing his research as a professor of security studies, Professor Rohan Gunaratna met and interviewed Galagoda Aththe Gnanasara, head of the Sri Lankan Buddhist nationalist group Bodu Bala Sena, in early 2014.

Relating the encounter at a forum on religion, extremism and identity politics yesterday, Prof Gunaratna said that as a Buddhist, he paid his respects to the monk, although he was reluctant to do so due to the monk's anti-Muslim views.

But the academic took the opportunity to make his position clear. "I told the monk – if you continue to call the Muslims pariah – there will be a riot like in July 1983.

"And this monk told me, this is exactly what must happen," said Prof Gunaratna, who is from the Nanyang Technological University's S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies. In July 1983, dubbed "Black July", anti-Tamil riots in Sri Lanka resulted in hundreds of people from the ethnic minority group being killed.

When asked about his ideology, Mr Gnanasara told Prof Gunaratna that it was from Myanmar Buddhist monk Ashin Wirathu, Hindu right-wing group Shiv Sena, the British National Party, and French far-right leader Marine Le Pen – all of whom have made incendiary remarks on Islam and Muslims.

Prof Gunaratna said he told the monk then that these had nothing to do with religion.

He related this anecdote yesterday to around 200 academics, policymakers, security practitioners and religious leaders at a forum at Orchard Hotel, as an example of how political movements are "misusing and abusing religion".

The mixing of religion and politics, along with the rise of identity politics and its implications to societal harmony, were discussed by experts at the event organised by the Institute of Policy Studies and the Ministry of Home Affairs. Minister for Home Affairs and Law K. Shanmugam also said at the forum that the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act would be updated.

Professor Mark Juergensmeyer of the University of California, Santa Barbara, pointed out how in a globalised world – where issues surrounding identity, accountability and security are prevalent – religion fulfils a special role as it provides people with a "personal and spiritual identity".

At the same time, the return of religion to public life also has a sinister edge, seen in the global rise of religious nationalism, said the founding director of the university's Orfalea Centre for Global and International Studies.

Ms Farah Pandith, an adjunct senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, highlighted that there are one billion Muslims under the age of 30 globally, many of whom may be questioning what it means to be a Muslim in the modern, post-9/11 era.

Ms Pandith said these youth can be preyed on by extremist groups, which have the "loudest voices" and can provide answers that res-

About the Religious Harmony Act

Singapore introduced the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act in 1990 against a backdrop of rising religious fervour and the mixing of religion and politics worldwide as well as in Singapore.

The law allows the Government to issue restraining orders against preachers who engage in conduct or speech that undermines religious harmony, and fine and jail those who breach such orders.

The Government's fear, then Deputy Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong told Parliament in 1990, was that a collision between religions or between religion and the state would affect harmony here.

"We wanted a law that could deal with the problem in a very fine way instead of having to resort to the Internal Security Act or the Sedition Act, or to use court prosecution," he said.

"It is like trying to use a scalpel to make a precise incision to deal with problem cells, instead of having to use a chopper to amputate."

The Act took effect in 1992. No restraining orders have been issued under the law since it went into effect, though the Government has come close to invoking it several times to stop religious leaders from mixing politics with religion and putting down other faiths.

These leaders stopped their activities after being warned by the police and Internal Security Department officers.

onate emotionally with the youth. It is therefore critical to find ways to present alternative narratives to the ones put forward by extremists, which might make sense to them in a climate of prejudice. "Governments need to scale up and do that in a real way," she said.

In addressing fundamentalism, Professor Jonathan Fox, Yehuda Avner professor of religion and politics at Israel's Bar-Ilan University, said governments might choose to give members of fundamentalist or hardline groups a "form of limited cultural autonomy" over their dress, institutions and even isolation from society.

He noted that this is a serious concession, but the compromise in return would be for fundamentalists guaranteeing they will not infringe upon the religious freedoms of non-fundamentalists, he said.

"Fundamentalists tend to thrive better when they can depict themselves as being challenged... When they are not oppressed, a lot of their arguments tend to fall apart and become less popular.

"So, a free religious marketplace actually might be a more effective way to manage them and control the level of violence," he added.

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3 forces could challenge social cohesion: Bilahari

Three external forces could pose a challenge to social cohesion here as people around the world increasingly emphasise their cultural and religious identity, veteran diplomat Bilahari Kausikan said. They are the arabisation of Islam, attempts by foreign countries to stress identity and the rise in evangelical Christianity, said Mr Bilahari, who chairs the National University of Singapore's Middle East Institute (MEI).

The first challenge is not peculiar to Singapore, he said, noting that traditional Islam in this region was very Sufist and syncretic. "That is gone. And I don't think you can put it back together."

He shared how he sometimes asks Muslim women with headscarves what they are called. "Half the time they say hijab. Now, you have got a good Malay word for this thing, it is called tudung. Why must you use the word in Arabic?"

"There is a certain lack of cultural confidence among South-east Asian Muslims, probably glob-

ally," he added, noting how Middle Eastern influences are uncritically accepted as authentic.

The second threat, Mr Bilahari said, are attempts by states to use identity as a tool of state policy. Singapore once had to expel an American diplomat for trying to impose a Western political identity in the Republic. Mr Bilahari has recently written extensively about Chinese influence operations that try to impose a Chinese identity on multiracial Singapore, and the dangers are self-evident.

The third threat comes from certain strands of evangelical Christianity, which are having a profound influence on Christianity here, he added. He said an MEI researcher recently received anonymous online threats from a member of an evangelical group, which did not like what he had written about the Middle East. The matter is currently being investigated by the police, Mr Bilahari added.

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