

# *The pandemic, moral panic and 'folk devils'*

## Beware of 'moral entrepreneurs' seeking to undermine social harmony amid Covid-19

**Mathew Mathews  
and Shamil Zainuddin**

For The Straits Times

In 1972, American sociologist Stanley Cohen authored an influential study on media and youth culture. In it, he defined "moral panic" as a condition where certain groups are demonised as a threat to societal values and interests.

These groups thus stigmatised were called "folk devils" and the instigators were termed "moral entrepreneurs". Dr Cohen identified the mass media as a main culprit in sowing moral panic.

Now, almost half a century later, social media and other digital

platforms have made amplification even faster.

Moral panic can spread in times of crises. Chinese communities around the world have been targeted as the source of Covid-19 because the virus first came to the world's attention in Wuhan, and has reported links to the consumption of exotic wildlife, a habit that prevails among some Chinese communities.

In Singapore – a majority Chinese society – non-Chinese populations are also stigmatised during the pandemic. A letter published in a local Chinese newspaper insinuated that migrant workers, largely from Bangladesh and India, were dirty and backward and therefore a vector for infections.

The letter earned a swift rebuke from the Minister for Home

Affairs and Law, Mr K. Shanmugam, who called it out for being racist.

Since this pandemic is set to last for some time, it is reasonable to expect that more "moral entrepreneurs" will appear to find new "folk devils" to blame.

The latest group to be targeted is the Muslim community. In the United Kingdom, there has been malicious talk centred on claims that Muslims will intentionally congregate for their customary practices during the fasting month of Ramadan, ignoring the lockdown there.

In the United States, the Council on American-Islamic Relations called a tweet Islamophobic for suggesting Muslims might be getting preferential treatment during Ramadan and not be forced to close their places of worship.

Given how easily information can cross borders these days, it should not be a surprise if such sentiments were to surface in Singapore soon.

But any concerns that Muslims in Singapore will be socially irresponsible are unfounded.

Singapore's Islamic religious authorities have told Muslims here about their religious responsibility to take preventive measures and avoid public places, including mosques, so that healthy people are

**The health panic that comes with Covid-19 is real and people are right to be worried even though the pandemic will eventually pass. Moral panics, however, require just as much vigilance and Singaporeans should never lose sight of that.**

not infected. That ruling draws on the compiled sayings and traditions of Prophet Muhammad which exhort Muslims not to leave their places of residence during an outbreak of disease.

In fact, Singapore was one of the first countries in the world to enforce the closing of mosques, showing how seriously Muslim leaders here take the issue. To help educate and garner support for that unprecedented decision, the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore quickly put out videos on how easily Covid-19 can spread.

As a result, Muslims in Singapore understand that Ramadan is observed not only by fasting but also by time devoted to an increasing amount of worship, reflection and charity. Family and community bonding are also emphasised as family members and faith congregants, as well as people from the inter-faith community, come together to break their fast together.

The Muslim community has also accepted that this year's celebration will be markedly different. There will be no bazaar. Mosques – the centre of Muslim community and spiritual life – are closed.

Some are planning to observe the breaking of their fast virtually with others in the community. And mosques are ensuring that religious devotions and instructions can be delivered online.

Notwithstanding these efforts, there may be some "moral entrepreneurs" who want to paint the community as the next "folk devils". Last year, around this time,

the Institute of Policy Studies published a report called Religion In Singapore: The Private And Public Spheres. Based on an international survey programme that interviewed 1,800

Singaporeans, it revealed that about 15 per cent of respondents here expressed fears that Muslims were at least somewhat threatening.

This suggests a fault line which can be manipulated by "moral entrepreneurs" and others seeking to undermine social harmony.

Those who harbour such anxieties should consider the facts carefully and confront their fears before they express them on social media and other platforms.

Those who know better not to stereotype should help educate and correct misguided perceptions.

The mass media, both mainstream and alternative, should also be careful that they do not inadvertently create new "folk devils" as this pandemic plays out.

The health panic that comes with Covid-19 is real and people are right to be worried even though the pandemic will eventually pass.

Moral panics, however, require just as much vigilance and Singaporeans should never lose sight of that.

[stopinion@sph.com.sg](mailto:stopinion@sph.com.sg)

• Dr Mathew Mathews is head of IPS Social Lab and senior research fellow, and Shamil Zainuddin is research associate at the Institute of Policy Studies, National University of Singapore.