

Singaporeans frown on religion influencing politics

But one in four open to extremists sharing views online or at events, finds IPS report

Linette Lai
Political Correspondent

Most Singaporeans are religious, but still frown on religious behaviour that could influence politics or disrupt social harmony, a new report by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) has found.

They also feel that having different religious views is no barrier to getting along when living in close proximity.

But the researchers noted that a sizeable proportion of people have no qualms about letting religious extremists publish their views online, or hold public meetings to talk about them.

When surveyed, one in four people said putting such views online is acceptable as long as they do not instigate harm against others, and younger respondents were even more likely to think so – possibly because of more liberal attitudes towards free speech among the

young, the researchers said.

But the overwhelming consensus across all age groups is that it is unacceptable for religious leaders to incite hatred or violence against other religions.

The working paper's authors, however, noted there is a fine line between espousing extremist views that consider other faiths as enemies and making hate speech.

"How the Government navigates the desire by this significant segment of the population for freedom of speech pertaining to extremist views in future will be of interest," they added.

The findings on people's attitudes towards religion were part of an international study involving multiple countries. It was written by IPS senior research fellow Mathew Mathews, research associate Leonard Lim and research assistant Shanthini Selvarajan.

"Religion is an influential and powerful force, and seeps into multiple domains of public and

private life," the authors said.

"Tracking the expansive reach and influence of religion is thus crucial in maintaining inter-religious harmony and surveying public sentiment in public policy."

A total of 1,800 Singapore residents aged 18 and older were surveyed for the local component of the international study.

Face-to-face interviews were carried out between August and December last year by market research company ML Research Consultants.

Participants were asked about their religious beliefs and how these influence their views on issues such as public policy, religious harmony and infidelity.

Although 80 per cent have religious beliefs, only 40 per cent said they would consider themselves to be a "spiritual person". Buddhists, Taoists and Hindus were more likely to have religious beliefs but not identify as spiritual.

Most also had at least some level of belief in life after death, heaven, hell and religious miracles.

On religious harmony, seven in 10 people said they feel people from different religious backgrounds can get along when living close together.

Even so, around 15 per cent of them said they found Muslims at least somewhat threatening. This was higher than for any other religious group.

When asked about religion and politics, most agreed religious leaders should not try to influence voting at elections or make remarks about politicians' characters.

Three-quarters also agreed the country's laws should not be based on a particular religion.

Religion was also found to influence people's views on moral issues such as infidelity, abortion and homosexual sex.

The younger and better educated respondents, as well as those with no religion, tend to have more liberal attitudes.

linettel@sph.com.sg

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Eight in 10 say it's not acceptable for faith leaders to sway voters

But report finds they are divided on whether such leaders should have close ties with politicians

Linette Lai
Political Correspondent

When it comes to religion and politics, Singaporeans mostly agree that religious leaders should not influence voting at elections. But they are divided on other issues such as whether religious lead-

ers should have close ties with politicians, and what individuals should do in the hypothetical situation of a new law contradicting their religious teachings. These were among the key findings in a new report by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) on religious beliefs and the role of religion in the private and public spheres. The findings were based on a survey of 1,800 Singapore residents, and are part of a larger study of religion involving multiple countries. The IPS paper said 81.9 per cent of people agreed that religious leaders should not influence voting behav-

If a new law contradicted their religious teachings, about 48 per cent said that they would definitely follow it, or would at least be likely to do so. Meanwhile, just over a third said they would most likely adhere to their religious teachings.

our, with 86.9 per cent saying it is not acceptable for such leaders to remark on politicians' characters. It was more difficult for them to come to a consensus on other issues. When asked if it was acceptable for religious leaders to have close ties to government officials, 55 per cent disagreed, while 44.9 per cent felt that this was fine. If a new law contradicted their religious teachings, about 48 per cent said that they would definitely follow it, or would at least be likely to do so. Meanwhile, just over a third said they would most likely adhere to their religious teachings. Three groups – Christians, Muslims and Catholics – had a larger proportion of people who said that they would follow their religious principles instead of the law. Six in 10 agreed that the Government should not interfere with attempts by a religion to spread its faith, although those with no religion tended to oppose this view. When asked about moral issues like abortion, infidelity and homosexual sex, researchers also found that a person's religious views tended to shape their answers. Better educated and younger respondents, as well as those with no religion, tended to have more liberal attitudes towards these issues. A total of 82.4 per cent believed

that infidelity was always wrong, but only 67.9 per cent felt the same way about homosexual sex. Just 38.3 per cent said that abortion was always wrong, even if the family has a very low income. Muslims tended to have the most conservative attitudes towards homosexual sex, with nearly 85 per cent believing that it was always wrong. Nearly 80 per cent of Hindus and Christians, however, held the same view. In comparison, only half the respondents with no religion said that homosexual sex was always wrong. But researchers noted that even among Christians and Muslims, younger members of these groups were less likely to see homosexual sex as always wrong. Similar trends were seen for abortion, although the researchers noted that education made a significant difference. When it came to abortion, about 66 per cent of Muslims and nearly 60 per cent of Christians with no more than a secondary school level of education felt it was always wrong. But among those with at least a bachelor's degree, these figures dropped to around 40 per cent for both Muslims and Christians.

linettel@sph.com.sg



Residents celebrating religious harmony at the Punggol North Racial and Religious Harmony Street Parade last year. A new report by the Institute of Policy Studies has found that most Singaporeans feel that having different religious views is no barrier to getting along when living in close proximity. ST FILE PHOTO

KEY FINDINGS

3 in 4 Singaporeans say they follow a religion.

72.7% feel that people of different religious backgrounds can get along when living close together.

97.2% per cent feel that it is not acceptable for religious leaders to incite hatred or violence against other faiths. But

26.8% are open to religious extremists publishing their views on the Internet or social media. Younger people are more

open, with **46%** per cent of those aged 18 to 25 saying they would allow publication.

76.1% agree that a country's laws should not be based on religion. But about **48%** would follow a law that contradicts their religious principles.

15% of respondents find Muslims threatening

Rahimah Rashith

More than 70 per cent of Singaporeans feel that people of different faiths can get along when living close together, but some 15 per cent find Muslims threatening, a report on religion in Singapore has found. Researchers found that those who dwell in private housing were more likely to think that Muslims are threats, compared with those who dwell in Housing Board flats. Muslims were viewed most positively by Buddhists and Hindus, but about one in five Catholics, Christians and those with no religion said that Muslims were either very or somewhat threatening. "There is little question that global terror and how it has often been associated with Muslims has fed into the minds of a small group of Singaporeans, who thus feel that Muslims are threatening," Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) senior research fellow Mathew Mathews told *The Straits Times*. "The lack of exposure to and opportunities for learning about Muslims might have left some of their fears unchallenged."

The findings from the survey, part of a global study, were captured in a report published yesterday by IPS, part of the National University of Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy. It was written by Dr Mathews, research associate Leonard Lim and research assistant Shanthini Selvarajan. A random sample of 1,800 residents were asked a range of questions, including whether they considered those from six groups – Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, Jews, Muslims, as well as atheists and non-believers – threatening or not. Buddhists, Hindus, Jews, and atheists and non-believers were viewed as the least threatening. Christians were found threatening by 6.5 per cent of respondents. Around 10 per cent of those with no religion and 8.9 per cent of Buddhists thought so, compared with 5.4 per cent of Catholics and 3.4 per cent of Muslims. The report said: "The majority of respondents from each religious group viewed those from other communities positively and not as a threat. However, our results suggest there may be possible tensions between some people from specific communities." It added that while there is a base of religious harmony, there are challenges and threats emerging. Nominated MP Mohamed Irshad, who founded inter-religious group Roses of Peace, felt the 15 per cent minority who found Muslims threatening "is still a significant number". "It is big enough to rile up anti-

Muslim sentiments. We need to figure out how we can improve social mixing," he said. Dr Mathews noted that Islamophobia can lead to varying levels of hatred, which can be explosive. Islamophobic material online radicalised a 28-year-old Australian, who this month carried out a terror attack on two mosques in Christchurch that killed 50 people and injured 42. Mr Mohamed Irshad said schools and workplaces can create spaces for meaningful dialogue on religion. "Actively preventing violent extremism is as important as countering it. Getting to know each other's faith beyond the surface can be a first step." Madam Riza Yacob of local group Creative Malay Arts and Culture was sad to learn that some still see Muslims as threatening. "The 15 per cent should be a motivating factor for Muslims and non-Muslims to reach out and promote an inclusive mindset," she said. An instance of such inclusivity was seen when New Zealanders here visited mosques following the Christchurch attack in a show of solidarity. Many other faith groups also condemned the attack and reached out to Muslim leaders here. Madam Riza's group will hold a three-day event at Geylang Serai from today for people to pen condolence messages to New Zealand and, among other things, remind Singaporeans of the need to stand united against all forms of extremism.

rahimahr@sph.com.sg

The four types of Singaporeans

SACRED SECULARS

People in this group are religious and morally conservative, but they also desire greater separation between religion and politics. They have complete confidence in state institutions and are open to people of other faiths. This group has the highest proportion of Hindus, and also a significant proportion of Buddhists and Taoists. In terms of socio-economic status, its members are middle class. Researchers said the group aligns well with Singapore's narrative of maintaining religiosity without compromising on secularism and inter-religious harmony. **SCEPTIC SCRAPPERS** These people are less religious and morally liberal. They desire some separation between religion and politics, and are ambivalent towards those of other faiths. They also tend to have great confidence in state institutions. About half the cluster consists of people with no religion. Sceptic scappers are also the youngest, most educated and most well-to-do. Researchers suggest the cluster, which represents the "perennial segment of less religious people in society", may encourage contestations over issues pertinent to religion and the law.

TEPID TRADITIONALS

They are somewhat religious, morally conservative, and desire some separation between religion and politics. They have some confidence in state institutions and are ambivalent towards those of other faiths. This group has a high proportion of elderly people. Its members also tend to be the least educated and least well-off. Researchers said the group's lack of positive perceptions of people of other religions may require greater community intervention. **FRIENDLY FAITHFULS** People in this group are more religious and want less separation between the state and religion. They are morally conservative but warm towards those of other faiths, and tend to be very confident of state institutions. This group has the highest proportion of religious respondents, and also the highest proportion of Muslims and Christians. They are middle class. Researchers say some may worry the group will increasingly demand the integration of religion in the political space. They, however, noted that the group will not want to undermine social cohesion.

Linette Lai