

Religious harmony law to be updated

Shanmugam says S'pore will not 'adopt passive approach' to inter-faith peace

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Amid the prevalence of identity politics and hate speech on social media, Singapore will need to update a three-decade-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. He said the Government had discussed the matter extensively with 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 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 came into effect in 1992, it has never been invoked,

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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'm a believer in making sure the power is there. But I'm 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," said Mr Shanmugam.

He 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 political or subversive purposes.

Noting the Government took efforts 30 years ago to discuss

the issue and make sure the law was understood and accepted, Mr Shanmugam signalled 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 Mr Shanmugam emphasised that legislation was only one part of Singapore's approach to maintain racial and religious harmony.

He said the Government actively ensured people of different faiths come together through 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."

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.

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