

Govt policies on religion need to be constantly reviewed: Yaacob

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Policies put in place to maintain religious harmony need to be constantly reviewed amid societal changes like evolving views as seen among younger Singaporeans, said former Cabinet minister Yaacob Ibrahim yesterday.

He also said that faith-based debates that arise from time to time – for example, on why certain professions forbid the wearing of tudung – cannot be swept under the car-

pet but have to be managed in a way that does not compromise Singapore's national interest.

Professor Yaacob, who retired from politics earlier this year, was a panellist at a webinar on religious harmony organised by the Centre for Liveable Cities and the Institute of Policy Studies.

He outlined three trends that could impact the existing state of religious harmony in Singapore.

These include the “changing orientation of younger Singaporeans” on defining religious diversity.

“From their perspective, every-

one who professes a religious belief, no matter how different to those in the mainstream, must have a seat at the table,” said Prof Yaacob, who had helmed several ministries, including communications and information.

The former Minister-in-charge of Muslim Affairs also cited how segments of the Sunni group – to which most Muslims in Singapore belong – oppose the inclusion of a “small but growing number” of Shi'ite Muslims.

Fellow panellist Lily Kong, president of Singapore Management

University, noted that different practices of the same religion could lead to “divergent, divisive relations”.

Pointing to the increasing diversity of the Indian Hindu population in Singapore, she said it began with predominantly southern influences since colonial times but is now, owing to migration, encountering differing northern traditions and practices.

The social sciences professor also pinpointed the challenges posed by technological change – a trend Prof Yaacob had also highlighted.

“We all have greater exposure to what is happening elsewhere. This means that even without travelling somewhere else, there is the possibility that we'll import practices from other contexts into our environment,” she said.

Prof Kong cited the emerging

phenomenon of “halal-fication” in Malaysia and Indonesia, as well as among the Muslims in China.

Besides food, the halal concept is being expanded into daily-use items such as refrigerators, washing machines and even Internet browsers, as well as places like laundromats and gated communities.

Prof Yaacob cautioned that the spread of misinformation and the rise of “deepfakes” could have “devastating” consequences for Singapore's religious harmony.

The panellists were also asked how the Government could better manage issues like tudung-wearing for front-line officers.

In August, a woman was asked to remove her tudung to work as a promoter at Tangs department store. The decision was subsequently reversed.

Prof Yaacob said such efforts typ-

ically occur behind the scenes, with religious community groups having continual dialogue with the Government and private agencies.

Giving the example of a Malay nurse wearing a tudung, he said: “The lady wants to be a nurse but wants also to practise her beliefs. So how do you balance the two in such a way... without undermining whatever concerns that we have in society?”

Prof Yaacob, an engineering professor at the Singapore Institute of Technology, later told *The Straits Times* that even though he has left politics, people continue to ask him about the tudung issue.

“You need to explore it... but in a manner that preserves the trust and understanding that the (Muslim) community has reached with the Government,” he said.

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