

Almost a quarter of Singaporeans would allow religious extremists to post views online: IPS Report

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SINGAPORE: While it is “unacceptable” or “very unacceptable” for religious leaders to incite violence or hatred against other religions, one in four Singapore residents polled said they would allow religious extremists to post their views online or on social media, according to a working paper published by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) on Thursday (Mar 28).

The paper, Religion in Singapore: The Private and Public Sphere, analyses Singapore data from a multi-country survey conducted in late 2018 for the International Social Survey Program Study of Religion.

The Singapore component of the survey examined the views of a random sample of 1,800 Singaporean residents on issues relating to religious beliefs, religiosity and the role of religion in the private and public spheres.

According to the paper, more than 97 per cent of respondents said religious leaders should not incite violence or hatred against other religions.

But 26.8 per cent of respondents were open to religious extremists posting their views online or on social media.

This is a point of concern, the report said, pointing out that younger respondents were much more open to allowing extremists such freedoms, with nearly half of respondents aged 18 to 25 indicating that they would allow such views to be espoused.

Researchers noted that this same segment does not have an issue with extremist views being propagated online, as long as these do not stray into the realm of instigating harm on others, according to the paper.

“Given the rise of self-radicalisation in terrorist incidents, hate speech and Islamophobia both globally and in Singapore, it is comforting that the majority of Singaporeans would not allow religious extremists to post their views online,” the report said.

“But the significant quarter of the population, as well as higher proportions among the young, who would permit such freedoms is worrying.”

The paper said there is a fine line between espousing extremist views that consider other religions as enemies and straying into the arena of 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,” it added.

RESPECT FOR RELIGIOUS ORGANISATIONS SIMILAR TO THAT OF PARLIAMENT

According to the survey, 52.8 per cent of respondents expressed complete or a great deal of confidence in religious organisations, including churches, temples and mosques. This was similar, the report said, to the proportion of respondents holding such views about Parliament.

It was also higher than the 47.6 per cent of respondents who expressed similar views about business and industry.

Confidence levels, however, were higher for that of the courts and legal system. Additionally, more than 60 per cent of respondents expressed complete or a great deal of confidence in each school.

Overall, the report showed that despite the high level of religiosity in Singapore, there is strong support for inter-religious harmony, with 72.7 per cent of respondents saying they feel that people of different religious backgrounds can get along when living close together.

Religiosity measures religious orientation and the extent to which respondents identify as religious or spiritual.

Despite this, a small number of respondents view some religions as threatening, when asked whether they considered Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Jews, and atheists threatening or not threatening.

In total, 84.5 per cent found Muslims "not at all" or "not very" threatening, for Christians it was 93.5 per cent and the number for Hindus was 95.8 per cent. Buddhists were seen as the least threatening, with 97.1 per cent finding them not very threatening or not at all threatening.

RELIGIOSITY, RELIGIOUS ORIENTATION HEAVILY INFLUENCE OPINIONS

Whatever the religion of Singaporeans, religiosity and religious orientation heavily influence opinions of issues and this has far-reaching implications, the report noted.

These perceptions could translate into support or lack thereof for public policies that would apply to all, regardless of religious orientation, it explained.

"Emerging divisiveness in the realm of public policy, as informed by religion, can create fault lines across various religious groups," the paper said, adding that potential tensions may also emerge with increasing divisiveness along religious lines in attitudes towards morally-charged issues.

It pointed to the recent nationwide dialogue on decriminalising homosexual sex between men in Singapore, following its repeal in India in September 2018.

Christians, Catholics and Muslims were more likely to advocate for retaining the law, with organisations such as the National Council of Churches, Singapore Islamic Scholars and Religious Teachers Association (Pergas), and the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Singapore coming forward to denounce any form of repeal.

On the other hand the president of the Buddhist Fellowship and the Humanist Association were supportive of this repeal.

Still, respondents were in broad agreement that it was not acceptable for religious leaders to encourage followers to treat the Government's laws as less important than their religion.

However, Muslims, Catholics and Christians were also more likely to say it was acceptable or very acceptable for religious leaders to speak up against potential changes to existing laws because they go against their teachings.

MORE EDUCATED, YOUNGER RESPONDENTS HAVE DIFFERENT VIEWS

Age and education have an impact on respondents' view, with younger and more educated respondents much more likely to not find homosexual sex always wrong, said the paper.

By analysing the data by both religious background and age, the report found that the differences among Muslim and Christians from different age brackets were "much more pronounced".

About 75 per cent of Muslims aged 18 to 35 indicated that homosexual sex was always wrong, compared to 93.2 per cent of Muslim respondents aged above 55. Similarly, 54.2 per cent of Christians aged 18 to 35 said that homosexual sex was always wrong, compared to 88.8 per cent of Christian respondents aged above 55.

"This shows that even if one's religion preaches strong views towards homosexuality, respondents' age has a significant influence on their attitudes towards homosexual sex, with younger cohorts demonstrating more liberal attitudes," the report said.

When it came to education, about 79 per cent of respondents with a secondary school and below level of education found homosexual sex always wrong, compared to 55.2 per cent of respondents with a bachelor's degree and above.

RELIGION ENCOURAGES OPENNESS TO THOSE OF DIFFERENT BACKGROUNDS

The paper also highlighted the role of religion in encouraging Singaporeans to be more open to those from other backgrounds.

Those from a major religious community (Islam, Catholicism, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism) were less likely to be ambivalent or distant towards other religions, compared to those with no religion.

Further, those who were more religious were less likely to be ambivalent towards other religions.

"Perhaps this has been the result of the many engagements by the State directed at religious communities urging them to be more open to those of other faiths," the report said.

It may be necessary in the longer term to also find ways to engage those with no religious affiliation so more of them can develop a positive view of the many religious communities in Singapore, the report added.