

Changes proposed to Singapore's religious harmony law to address impact of social media, foreign influence

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Channel NewsAsia, 2 September 2019

SINGAPORE: The Singapore Government is looking to update the nearly 30-year-old Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act (MRHA), with proposed changes introduced in Parliament on Monday (Sep 2) to address the impact of social media and foreign influence.

The first reading of the amendments to the legislation was tabled by Senior Parliamentary Secretary for Home Affairs Sun Xueling.

Some of the key changes proposed include expanding the Restraining Order (RO) to require those who post inflammatory content to take down the posts, as well as shortening the time before the RO takes effect. This is to counter the speed with which content that threatens to sow disharmony can now spread over the Internet.

The Ministry of Home Affairs is also looking to curb the influence of foreign actors, and it is proposing that key leaders in a religious organisation should be Singaporeans or permanent residents. Religious organisations will also have to disclose one-off "foreign" donations of S\$10,000 or more, it added.

A new tool called the Community Remedial Initiative was also introduced, and it is aimed at helping to defuse tensions between religious groups by offering the offender the opportunity to perform activities to mend ties. Some of these include making a private or public apology or participating in inter-religious events, the ministry said.

The MRHA, which was first enacted in 1990, provides for powers to maintain religious harmony in Singapore based on two principles: Followers of different religions should exercise moderation and tolerance towards each other and their beliefs and not instigate religious enmity or hatred and religion should be kept separate from politics.

The MRHA has not been invoked since it was passed almost 30 years ago, as was highlighted by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong during a recent Inter-Religious Organisation event.

It is not because the law is not needed, however.

Dr Mathew Mathews, the lead Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) researcher for a working paper called [Religion in Singapore: The Public and Private Sphere](#) released this March, said the MRHA has set "important norms" for the practice of religion here.

"There are clear restrictions to what religious groups can or cannot do including not getting involved in politics or harming religious peace," Dr Mathews told CNA in an email. He added: "While the law has not been actively used, it doesn't mean that no one could have been dealt with under the law. The very threat that the law could be applied has caused some who had conducted themselves in a way that could breach religious peace to quickly seek ways to make amends."

With the proliferation of the Internet and social media, however, Law and Home Affairs Minister K Shanmugam said in July there is a need to update the law to better keep up with developments.