

## **Commentary: On homosexuality and cohabitation - differences on moral issues need not lead to polarised society**

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SINGAPORE: Singaporeans remain generally conservative on issues of morality, as a recent Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) paper on Religion, Morality and Conservatism reported.

This was based on a comparison of results from the 2013 and 2018 waves of the IPS Survey of Race, Religion and Language.

There remains strong opposition to extra-marital sex (81.2 per cent felt this was wrong in 2018, compared to 81.4 per cent in 2013), having a child out of wedlock (64.9 per cent vs. 73.5 per cent) and gambling (74.4 per cent vs. 70.1 per cent).

Still, this 2018 edition (which polled over 4,000 Singapore residents) showed significant shifts in social norms on some issues over the last five years.

These include pre-marital sex (45.4 per cent felt this was wrong in 2018, down from 58.2 per cent in 2013) and cohabitation (36.1 per cent, down from 46.5 per cent).

Singaporeans were also more liberal towards homosexuality issues. Slightly more than 20 per cent of those polled last year said gay sex was not wrong at all, or not wrong most of the time, up from about 10 per cent of those polled in 2013. About 27 per cent felt the same way about gay marriage, up from 15 per cent in 2013.

The differences were particularly stark among the young, suggesting that this shift may persist with time. Half of those aged between 18 and 25 felt gay sex was not wrong at all or not wrong most of the time in 2018, up from less than 20 per cent five years before.

Perhaps as a consequence of moves to champion gay rights in many countries, in Singapore, rather than abortion, cohabitation or pre-marital sex, public discussion in recent years has been dominated by this particular subset of moral issues.

The annual Pink Dot event is the most visible of attempts to highlight gay concerns here. It has for a decade attracted large crowds with its tagline that celebrates individuals' freedom to love.

However, the vocal LGBT community and its advocates have also drawn out an equally conservative segment, led by religious groups who believe that liberalising laws on homosexuality is not good for society.

This wave of our study found that Christians and Muslims over the age of 55 chose stronger positions when compared to the 2013 wave, which also surveyed over 4,000 respondents. For instance, 84.6 per cent of Muslims in this age bracket felt homosexual sex was always or almost always wrong in 2018, compared to about 73 per cent in 2013.

## **Emerging divergence of views and the state's role**

It is clear that there is growing divergence in views on moral issues based on individuals' age, religious affiliations and backgrounds. Whether this will lead to a polarised, fragmented and feuding society is something we can guard against.

Singaporeans greatly value social cohesion and stability. That is why many have accepted intrusive government policies in areas such as race, religion and language which have been fault lines in our multi-cultural and diverse society. So this divergence, and how it is sometimes played out in public with petitions, can be disconcerting.

Recent examples in Singapore, many of which relate to homosexual rights, highlight this divide. They include dueling petitions when Adam Lambert was invited to headline a 2016 New Year's Eve concert in Marina Bay. Pink Dot has also attracted substantial concerns from conservatives.

LGBT advocates have also tried to silence religious conservatives who take a strong stance against homosexuality. These range from calls to ban church pastor Lawrence Khong from performing a magic show in Ikea in 2015, to condemning the European Union when it invited law professor Thio Li-ann to speak at a human rights seminar in Singapore in 2014.

In private (and sometimes this is vocalised in the public sphere), both LGBT rights advocates and religious conservatives would prefer that authorities manage the other side and persuade them to stop promoting their agenda or impose their views on others.

But society will not benefit if authorities prevent either side from using legitimate methods to discuss the strength of its opinion. These issues will remain important matters to one's identity, and it is to be expected that some will want to persuade others to see an issue from their point of view.

This, however, does not preclude us from trying to establish certain norms to preserve a common space so that we can continue to live peacefully despite our differences. We should also bear in mind that identity politics can be a zero-sum contest that has hardened faultlines and fractured other societies.

## **How citizens and others can preserve common spaces**

First, we should not allow either side to dominate the debate when it comes to issues of morality, which can be deeply emotional and difficult to back down from.

Importantly, we should also avoid having religious groups to form distinct blocs lobbying for or against policy moves, for instance in areas related to having a child out of wedlock, or gay rights.

Singapore is much more diverse religiously than other countries, and there are sizeable portions which may coalesce into blocs along religious lines.

Second, we must decide on rules of engagement. This involves articulating and acknowledging what is civil and mature behaviour in our context. There should be no place for disrespectful name-calling, knee-jerk tit-for-tat moves to prove how sizeable a certain camp may be, or disruptive campaigns that veer into strident activism.

Those in other societies, especially liberal democracies with a vastly different political culture, operate with a different set of norms. But using or adapting their antagonistic methods of engagement – which may include social mobilisation and concerted campaigns - might not guarantee the type of stability the vast majority of Singaporeans cherish and desire.

Finally, we should stress overriding goals that Singapore society holds dearly, and how some of the debates and considerations should seek to address those goals.

One goal must be that national unity is paramount, and that holding on to strongly held opinions should not translate into excluding others from our social circles or speaking to them disrespectfully.

Another goal has been the importance of family and the welfare of children. Unlike many developed societies, the great majority of the young in Singapore continue to aspire towards marriage and parenthood.

The years ahead will, if present trends continue, likely see increased contestation in the public sphere. But we are optimistic that the majority of citizens remain mindful that in Singapore, thumping hard on the door to advocate an issue is generally less productive than a more patient, non-confrontational approach.

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