

Proposed workplace fairness legislation signals ethnic, religious discrimination unacceptable: Shanmugam

The Law and Home Affairs Minister said the new law, to be introduced in parliament later this year, will require employers not to discriminate against employees based on a set of protected characteristics.

Fabian Koh

CNA, 1 Jul 2024

SINGAPORE: The upcoming introduction of workplace fairness legislation in parliament signals that employment discrimination along ethnic or religious lines is unacceptable, said Law and Home Affairs Minister K Shanmugam on Monday (Jul 1).

“It requires employers not to discriminate against employees based on a set of protected characteristics, which include race, religion, and language, and we plan to introduce this in parliament later this year,” he said.

The minister was speaking at the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS)-Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) Forum on Non-Violent Ethnic Hostilities.

The proposed legislation was first mentioned by then-Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong in the 2021 National Day Rally.

Calling it “an important piece of legislation”, Mr Shanmugam warned that there will be consequences for employers who breach it.

He emphasised that Singapore has a tough set of laws against the incitement of racial and religious hatred, including a strict approach towards hate speech.

One such law is the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act, which was enacted in 1990 and amended in 2019.

The responsibility of the government to care for the interest of racial minorities is enshrined in the Constitution, with everyone entitled to equal protection under the law, noted Mr Shanmugam.

The Presidential Council for Minority Rights also looks at Bills passed by parliament, ensuring they do not discriminate against any racial or religious community.

Apart from its laws, Singapore also has a socio-economic approach towards race and religion, said Mr Shanmugam.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC APPROACH

Mr Shanmugam emphasised the importance of equal opportunity, regardless of race, language or religion.

“If people believe that they are being kept out of the system because of their skin colour or their religion, eventually you will have trouble,” he said

This applies to housing, education, healthcare, public policies and services, he noted.

He said the Singapore government has intervened "heavily" to ensure social cohesion - in ways which "would be unacceptable in many other countries with a more laissez-faire approach".

"While we are committed to equality ... we are not race blind," he added.

Mr Shanmugam cited the example of the Ethnic Integration Policy in public housing estates, noting that Singapore is "probably the only government in the world" which has a policy to ensure there are no ethnic enclaves.

"Suppose the government had left it to market forces, even in public housing. What would you see?"

"You would see places like Ang Mo Kio, Bishan, the more expensive flats - it would be 90 per cent or 95 per cent Chinese.

"And then you would see Malays congregating in some areas, Indians congregating in some areas. And they would only be able to sell to other Indians, and only be able to sell to other Malays," said the minister.

ANOMALY IN THE WORLD

He noted that Singapore is a "complete anomaly" in ethnic relations and has been able to avoid the problems seen in other places.

Over the past five years, 199 cases relating to race and religion have been reported to the police, which comes up to about 40 cases a year.

He urged Singaporeans not to be dismissive towards the experience of countries where violence has resulted from ethnic tensions.

Mr Shanmugam cited the example of Myanmar, where tensions from ethnic and religious differences have caused the Rohingya crisis.

"More than 1 million Rohingya Muslims have been forcibly displaced. These are large numbers," he said.

Tensions within the Buddhist and Muslim communities in the Rakhine State escalated after the Rohingya militants attacked military and police outposts in 2017, resulting in a severe military response and widespread violence against the Rohingya Muslims, added Mr Shanmugam.

"Radical Buddhist monks have also incited the violence. They claim to be defending Buddhist Myanmar against Islamisation," he added.

"Myanmar continues to struggle with governing its multi-ethnic society. There is an ongoing civil war within the military junta and the anti-junta resistance, which includes several ethnic armed groups."

He noted that in the US, the Supreme Court has said that inflammatory speech, even those advocating violence by the Ku Klux Klan, can be protected, unless the speech is directed at inciting or producing imminent lawless action.

The US is also dealing with the problem of far-right extremism involving white supremacist beliefs, he said.

“President Biden has called white supremacy ‘the most dangerous terrorist threat’ in the US,” added Mr Shanmugam, adding that the racial divide in the US is deep and manifests itself in many ways.

HOW SINGAPOREANS RESPOND

Mr Shanmugam said that external events may pose a challenge to Singapore’s approach to the issue of racial and religious relations at home.

In the Russia-Ukraine conflict, while “the facts are clear” that the invader is Russia and the victim is Ukraine, there remain people around the world and in Singapore who think otherwise.

“An MCI (Ministry of Communications and Information) poll found that there was a clear, sustained difference in how older - but actually higher educated - Chinese view the conflict, compared to other demographic groups,” said Mr Shanmugam.

They were more likely to think that Russia’s aggression is justified, more likely to blame the West for the conflict, and think that China’s support for Russia is acceptable, he said.

The Israel-Hamas conflict is another event which may draw different reactions along ethnic lines, as it is a “deeply emotive issue for many”, said Mr Shanmugam.

“The Malay-Muslim community has been especially moved by the conflict, and they have views which are much more impacted compared with the rest of Singapore,” he said.

“And I have no doubt if there is some issue involving India in the future, the Indian community in Singapore, Singapore citizens, would take a view that is quite distinct from the rest of society.

“These are facts of life, this will never go away, and it’s always more adult-like to accept that these exist and then deal with them.”

Technology and social media allow hate speech to travel faster and gain wider audiences than before, along with wide disinformation, said the minister.

“We are a highly open, digitally literate society. Technology permeates our lives. Many young Singaporeans spend more time online on social media than they do interacting with their communities and neighbours. It’s a phenomenon all over the world,” he said.