

# Shanmugam warns 'serious consequences can follow' when countries are lax about hate speech

*Lianne Chia*

*Channel NewsAsia*, 1 April 2019

SINGAPORE: Singapore must continue to consider hate speech unacceptable, and should continue to prohibit it, dealing with it firmly in the same way it has done before, Home Affairs Minister K Shanmugam said on Monday (Apr 1).

Delivering a ministerial statement in Parliament on restricting hate speech to maintain racial and religious harmony, Mr Shanmugam brought up examples of other countries, as well as Singapore, to highlight the serious consequences that can follow when countries are lax about hate speech, which he described as all forms of expression which spread, incite, promote or justify racial hatred, xenophobia or other forms of hatred based on intolerance.

“When you are clear, have firm laws prohibiting hate speech, deal fairly with all communities, then you can start building a multi-racial, multi-religious harmonious society,” he said.

Mr Shanmugam noted that since the 1950s, race and religion contained fault lines and involved gut issues, which could be “very emotive”. He pointed to examples from the Singapore experience, such as the Maria Hertogh riots in 1950, as well as the impact of Malaysian race riots in 1969 on Singapore.

The Singapore Government, he said, has an unwavering commitment in pursuing multi-racial policies, and was firm in taking action against chauvinist agitators.

As a result, all the races have lived together in peace and harmony since 1969. But citing a speech made by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong in 1987, he said that the most straightforward way to destabilise Singapore is to foment racial and religious discord.

“In race we come up against deep, atavistic human instincts which will take generations to overcome,” he said, referring to the speech. “They can be whipped up, and once blood has been shed, the years of nation building we have done will come to naught.”

Highlighting a 2016 survey by CNA and the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), Mr Shanmugam noted that in Singapore, race and religion still plays a large role in personal decisions, and that racism is still a problem.

“If people feel their race or religion is under attack, the potential for violence increases,” he said.

He also stressed that restrictions on offensive speech are needed – even when it is not strictly hate speech.

## THE CONSEQUENCES OF HATE SPEECH IN OTHER COUNTRIES

Mr Shanmugam noted that Singapore has been told regularly that it should be “more like the US and UK”, which he also described as “the gold standard for free speech”.

But their experiences suggest, he said, that serious consequences can follow when countries are lax about hate speech.

For example, in the UK, it is a crime to incite hatred on the grounds of religion.

“But you can, in the UK, ridicule, insult, abuse any religion, beliefs, practices and followers,” he said, adding that more than a quarter of Britons – more than 12 million people - witnessed hate speech in 2018.

The majority of these cases were on social media involving anti-immigrant or anti-refugee language, racist abuse or anti-Muslim comments.

“The UK now finds itself fighting on two fronts: Right-wing extremists, as well as Islamic extremists,” he said.

“Britain has an admirable, long tradition of debate,” he added. “You debate different positions, you can get clarity.

But hate speech targeting ethnic, religious communities does not appeal to logic, and is not capable of being rebutted by logic.”

Britain’s “lax approach”, he said, attracted many people like Abu Hamza, who he described as Britain’s “most high-profile hate preacher” at one point. London, he said, became a haven for many of these “hate mongers”.

## **HATE SPEECH LEADS TO DEEP SOCIAL DIVIDES**

In his speech, Mr Shanmugam outlined how hate speech can denigrate and dehumanise the “out-group”, making the out-group the source of the problems for the in-group, and making violence against them justified.

Hate speech, he said, leads to deep social divides.

Repeated exposure of hate speech, he added, increases people’s prejudices, feelings of being threatened and propensity to violence. It can also desensitise individuals, and normalise behavior which is usually socially condemned.

“It becomes socially acceptable to discriminate and oppress when hate speech is systematically developed,” he said, stressing the importance of early intervention to prevent hate speech from being normalised.

He cited examples from around the world of the real-world consequences of hate speech, such as the Holocaust, Rwandan genocide in 1994 and the hate speech directed towards the Muslim Rohingyas in Myanmar.

Songs, he added, can also be used to spread hate, pointing to studies which have shown that music can create powerful emotions in the listener. For example, “hate music” is used to label, devalue, persecute and scapegoat particular groups of people, often minorities.

In Malaysia, he said, the Malay Power movement believes that Malaysia should be an exclusively Malay nation, immigration should end and non-Malays should be expelled.

Recently, a music fest featuring Malay Power nationalists was cancelled in Malaysia.

“So it is all around us,” he said. “There is nothing special about us that these things can’t happen here.”

## **SINGAPORE’S APPROACH IN PRACTICE**

In his speech, Mr Shanmugam outlined Singapore's approach towards hate and offensive speech.

He said that first, it considers how offensive the words are in themselves to a particular race or religion. A second factor is the likely impact – such as who says it, as well as the context in which it was said.

Singapore also considers the nature of the event, as well as the reach of the words: Publicising it generally, as compared to saying it to 50 people in a private setting.

"The Government is neutral," he said. "We proactively accommodate different groups, recognising their different histories, traditions, and we make practical adjustments."

"And on that basis, we take a practical approach," he added.

Mr Shanmugam noted that Singapore's "pragmatic approach" can be "a bit messy", but has worked so far with relative success, with a bit of give and take.

There are two possibilities which will allow an absolute, objective approach, he said. The first: To ban everything that is deemed insulting and offensive by anyone, and the second, to allow everything that is insulting and offensive.

"I think Members will probably agree with me that the absolute approach is undesirable," he said. "That brings us back to the pragmatic approach the Government takes as the only tenable one for our society."

In practice, he said, the Government banned the Satanic Verses in 1989, even though it was considered a literary work by many. He pointed out that every Muslim country banned it, and Singapore's mainstream Muslim community had taken offence.

However, other books and films were allowed even when other religious communities were unhappy, he said. This was based on Singapore's assessment of security implications as well.

For example, he said, Western traditions accept wider contestation, and Singaporeans will agree that it would be unthinkable to ban a lot of Western literature and philosophy because some may find it objectionable.

As for Singapore's approach towards foreign preachers, Mr Shanmugam said Singapore may disallow them even if they may not say something offensive in Singapore.

Allowing them into Singapore would allow them to build up a following, Mr Shanmugam said.

"Eventually, this can become seriously divisive," he added.

"Sometimes, we won't know everything the preacher has said elsewhere, and sometimes we have to judge the degree to which what he has said elsewhere is offensive."

### **SHOULD SINGAPORE ADOPT THE SAME SECULAR APPROACH AS FRANCE?**

Some have argued, Mr Shanmugam noted, that Singapore should not be banning material that is offensive to Christians or any other religious group, given that Singapore is secular.

But in his speech, he pointed to the example of France, which has the ideology that the state will not intervene in religious matters as it is secular.

French secularity, he said, means that people can publish material that is offensive to all religions.

He said that ISIS had used the offensive cartoons published by Charlie Hebdo as an excuse to attack in the name of Islam.

“Should we adopt the same 'secular approach': Take a hands-off approach, allow cartoons and offensive material, ridicule, hate speech directed at any religion?” he asked.

“This secular Government is completely neutral, does not privilege any religious group, nor does it allow any religious group to be insulted and attacked,” he said.

“This secular Government guarantees freedom of religion, it protects all, including minorities from threats and violence,” he added, pointing out that the Government also works closely with Inter-Religious Organisations, Inter-Racial and Religious Confidence Circles and religious leaders, to ensure “common understanding” of what binds Singaporeans together.

“That is the fundamental assurance one gets in Singapore,” he said. “Doesn’t matter who you are, what religion you believe in, you are free to believe in any religion, including not to believe.”

This, he said, is the secularity Singapore should adopt, which is different from saying that the Government should take a hands-off approach in the name of secularity.

## **NEED TO DO MORE TO DEAL WITH SOCIAL MEDIA**

Social media, said Mr Shanmugam, has fundamentally changed the complexion of public discourse, with hate and offensive speech travelling much faster and gaining a wider audience than before.

But he noted that social media platforms have shown that they are unable and unwilling to deal with hate and offensive speech, and “have not taken real responsibility” for the content circulating on their platforms.

“They earn money by advertising,” he said. “The more eyeballs, the better.”

“Using algorithms, they can deliver news reports that are likely to elicit outrage and responses.”

Citing the example of the recent Christchurch shooting, Mr Shanmugam said that Facebook had failed to quickly shut down and remove the livestream video of the shooting from its platform.

New Zealand’s Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, he added, put it well when she called for social media companies to take responsibility for the content they published, pointing out that it cannot be a case of “all profit, no responsibility.”

Singapore will need to do more to deal with social media, he said. “The Bill that has been tabled on Deliberate Online Falsehoods is one step, and we will have to consider what else.”

In rounding up his speech, Mr Shanmugam noted that Singapore is in the “positive part” of the spectrum of race and religious relations, as a result of the way the legal and social framework is structured, and the things Singapore has done to maintain racial and religious harmony.

But he stressed that the current racial and religious harmony did not “fall ready-made” from the sky.

“There is nothing natural about it,” he said. “We engineered this over many decades.”

“People accuse us of social engineering. So what?” he added, pointing to examples such as how ethnic quotas were imposed in housing to prevent racial enclaves in housing estates, and GRCs to ensure minority representation in Parliament.

“We have the current harmony because we did all this,” he said. “Not despite, but because.”

“What we have in Singapore is precious, hard-fought,” he added.

“But we are only 54 years old, a multi-racial meritocracy. Unique, but the values are not yet so deeply embedded to be unassailable.”