Singapore's religious harmony law to be updated: Shanmugam

Kevin Kwang
Channel NewsAsia, 24 July 2019

SINGAPORE: Singapore's Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act (MRHA) will be updated to deal with new threats arising from the ubiquity of the Internet, said Home Affairs and Law Minister K Shanmugam on Wednesday (Jul 24).

Mr Shanmugam, who was speaking at a forum on religion, extremism and identity politics, said that the MRHA, which was passed in Parliament in 1990 and came into force in 1992, needs to be refreshed.

"The world has become a very different place, we now have Facebook, Twitter, Google. Hate can go viral in seconds," he said at the forum organised by the Institute of Policy Studies and the Ministry of Home Affairs.

"We are going to need to relook the MRHA, (and) need a more robust set of tools to make sure we can stop the spreading of hate and discord."

He added that the update needs to be done with the agreement of various stakeholders and the Government has been in discussions with different religious leaders and groups.

"They are all in sync, they all agree with broadly the direction we want to go. So yes, we will need to update the MRHA, but we have to do it with the agreement of the stakeholders at different levels," Mr Shanmugam said.

He did not disclose the timeline for the review of the Act.

"COARSENESS" IN PUBLIC DISCOURSE

The impending update would be "pretty essential" for the legislation to "keep up with the times", he added.

Among the trends Mr Shanmugam brought up was the widespread use of the Internet, leading to the democratisation of one's means of expression.

"All the things in the past that you felt you could not publicly express in polite company - xenophobia, hate, gravitating towards what appeals to you, breaking down of the social compact - today, it's possible because you can hide, you can put out your viewpoints, you can be as nasty as you want," he said.

The result, he said, is a "coarseness" in public discourse and much greater discussion on identity in many countries. State leaders, as well, are adopting such language, ignoring convention and saying things that were "unthinkable a generation ago", he added.

"(The leaders) then draw power from and accentuate the deep divisions within society, making it difficult to get consensus," Mr Shanmugam said.

He said that Internet companies are profiting from this because the "more people go on the Internet, the more money they make".

"(These companies) use the mantra of free Internet, free speech. Meanwhile, societies are getting damaged and broken," the minister pointed out.

"SHEIKH GOOGLE"

Another speaker at the forum, Ms Farah Pandith, spoke on how young Muslims have turned to the Internet to answer their questions on religion.

The former US diplomat, who was the first Special Representative to Muslim Communities serving under both Secretary of States Hillary Clinton and John Kerry, said that youths turn to "Sheikh Google" for answers on how to be a Muslim, replacing their elders who are the traditional source for such information.

"For them, they're getting answers from a pure, friendly component with a swish of their finger; they are seeing what it means to be Muslim on their screens," Ms Farah said.

"So even if their grandfather or their grandmother say, 'That's not the way we've been doing this all these years, this is not our culture and our history', what they see on their screens is authentic to them."

She suggested offering alternative narratives for those Muslim millenials who may be searching for answers on how to be a better Muslim.

"You're a young kid, you want to know how do I go to Syria (to join ISIS)," Ms Farah said. "That is an opportunity for that kid to speak to somebody on the other end of the screen who is a former extremist, and can say, guess what, I've been there and done that."

When asked by a dialogue attendee if there was an "antidote" to Sheikh Google and its ilk, Mr Shanmugam said it is not just about writing laws.

The minister said the religious authorities in Singapore must be a credible source of information for those searching for answers about the religion.

They also need an online presence, and he cited the example of the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS) who have roped in their Muslim scholars to answer tough questions about the faith.

"Whether it's a church or a mosque or a temple, young people ought to feel that there's a credible place where they can go to and ask questions. And they won't be told, 'Well this is the answer, don't ask the reasons why'," Mr Shanmugam said.

"The answer to people's doubts is not to shut off avenues, unless they incite violence, but to offer credible alternatives and then encourage people to use those alternatives."