



IPS Forum on Religious Harmony

By Leonard Lim

The government as a secular civil society has a moral responsibility to prevent people from engaging in acts that threaten public order. What also needs to be cultivated are the morals of civic virtue and a commitment to build a common future, which is especially important in view of the various interpretations of religious beliefs from various parts of the world which have influenced Singapore.

- Richard Magnus, Retired Chief District Judge and Adjunct Professor, Singapore University of Social Sciences' School of Law

The Institute of Policy Studies organised a forum on Religious Harmony on 3 July 2018. The intent was to examine new demographic and societal trends that may have an impact on the maintenance of religious harmony, a key factor for multi-ethnic and multi-religious Singapore's long-term stability and success.

Dr Mathew Mathews, Senior Research Fellow at IPS, began by presenting findings from the [2013 IPS Survey on Race, Religion and Language](#) that showed the level of religious harmony in Singapore. Despite living in the most religiously diverse country in the world, few in Singapore experienced religious insults or tension. Sixty per cent *never* experienced someone insulting their religious beliefs, and 22 per cent said they *rarely* had such experiences.

However, recent incidents showed that maintaining religious harmony is always a work in progress, said Dr Mathews. For instance, in the past year or so, a foreign imam and a foreign? Christian preacher both apologised for making statements that had hurt the feelings of those of other religious faiths.

Dr Mathews then chaired the first panel discussion on the role of religious leaders in upholding religious harmony. The panellists represented five major faiths in Singapore. They were Reverend Dr Robert Solomon, Bishop Emeritus of the Methodist Church in Singapore; Reverend Monsignor Philip Heng, Vicar General for Finance and Administration in the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Singapore; Dr Nazirudin Mohd Nasir, Senior Director for Religious Policy and Development in MUIS (Islamic Religious Council of Singapore); S. Ramesh, Secretary of the Hindu Advisory Board; and Venerable Shi You Wei, Chairman of the Education Committee at the Singapore Buddhist Federation.

Religious Leaders as Role Models

Many of the panellists agreed that religious leaders play an important role especially in being role models through how they interact and connect with people of other faiths. Dr Nazirudin highlighted the differences around us and the need to find the core that binds all people together.

During the question-and-answer session, several panellists also said their respective communities should take the lead in keeping foreign religious influences at bay, instead of relying on the government to intervene. This will send a stronger message that they also take such issues seriously. There were also calls for a stronger partnership between local religious leaders and the government to prevent foreign religious speakers with deviant views from entering Singapore.

Rev. Msgr. Heng stressed that local religious leaders have the primary responsibility to screen foreign preachers invited to speak or attend events. Nevertheless, the government may also consult religious leaders if a potential “problem preacher” is planning to come to Singapore and obtain their agreement, suggested Dr Solomon.

Panellists cited increasing immigration as one of the challenges to religious harmony. New citizens and foreigners may not be familiar with living in a multi-cultural and multi-religious environment. They may also have different interpretations of religious texts, and this may have an impact in how they conduct themselves in Singapore.



A participant asked how ready religious leaders were to rebuild social cohesion if a religiously motivated terror attack took place. Dr Nazirudin (second from left) said the key is to emphasise that such attacks are being carried out by those who do not subscribe to the main tenets of a particular faith.

The second panel, chaired by IPS Deputy Director (Research) Dr Gillian Koh, addressed the role of the state in maintaining religious harmony. The speakers were retired Chief District Judge and Adjunct Professor at the Singapore University of Social Sciences' School of Law

Richard Magnus; Singapore Management University Provost and Lee Kong Chian Chair Professor of Social Sciences Lily Kong; and Ambassador Mohammad Alami Musa, MUIS Council President and Head of Studies in Inter-Religious Relations at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies' Plural Societies programme.

Mr Magnus explained how the government fosters religious freedom in a safe environment, and is sensitive to the multi-religious and multi-racial society, and good citizenship.

"The government as a secular civil society has a moral responsibility to prevent people from engaging in acts that threaten public order," he said. What also needs to be cultivated, he said, are the morals of civic virtue and a commitment to build a common future, which is especially important in view of the various interpretations of religious beliefs from various parts of the world which have influenced Singapore.



Ambassador Alami pointed to the role of the Sedition Act, Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act, and Public Order Act in promoting social stability.

The Religious Rehabilitation Group and Presidential Council for Religious Harmony are examples of other structures and groups established with the same aims, he said. He added that the government must be secular and cannot be defined by any divine or ecclesiastical authority in upholding the Constitution.

Tackling Segregationist Tendencies

Mr Magnus cited the emerging threat of increasingly segregationist tendencies, as a result of increasing religiosity. This relates to followers of a particular faith believing that people should be separated based on their religious beliefs. Examples include not sharing the same table for meals and not shaking the hands of those of another faith, he said.

Prof Kong highlighted the state's role in allocating land use for religious buildings, so that each religion will have access to religious spaces in every housing estate based on the proportion of dwellers in that neighbourhood who subscribe to that faith.

Ambassador Alami Musa suggested that the current legal framework for handling religious issues be broadened to cover intra-religious relations too. He also advocated an entrenchment of secularism within the Singapore system to safeguard religious harmony.

During the question-and-answer session, panellists suggested that public education to ensure that Singaporeans understood the practices of other religions was important. Mr Magnus also suggested that there could be a review and refinement of the 2008 National Steering Committee on Racial and Religious Harmony guidelines—which provides a framework for living, working and interacting with people from other religions.

The event's final session was a dialogue with former Deputy Prime Minister and former Minister for Home Affairs Wong Kan Seng. It was moderated by the immediate past president of the Inter-Religious Organisation of Singapore, K. Kesavapany.



Mr Wong Kan Seng speaking at the IPS Forum.

Mr Wong acknowledged that having new immigrants to Singapore was a challenge to religious harmony, and ways must be found to integrate them in society. Singaporeans have to understand that religious and racial harmony is fundamental to the country.

He said that when it came to managing inter-religious interactions, the state did not have to intervene unless there was a problem that needed to be “nipped in the bud”. Its role is to ensure that we have an environment for people to live their lives, but we cannot leave it to the religious leaders to self-regulate, he said. There should also be laws and institutions for maintaining religious harmony. If there is a problem, the government must be in a position to act quickly, said Mr Wong.

A participant asked if legislation was appropriate in dealing with the issue of segregationist tendencies that had been raised several times during the course of the forum. Mr Wong replied that laws were definitely needed, but whether they were exercised was another issue. If there were no legislation and the government depended on moral suasion, the government would be a “lame duck”, he observed.

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