

Former diplomat: Muslim youth should not depend on the Internet for their identities

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Singapore — What does it mean to be a Muslim for Gen Z youths and Millennials?

The Institute of Policy Studies in partnership with the Ministry of Home Affairs recently organised a forum on Religion, Extremism, and Identity Politics last July 24 at the Orchard Hotel.

One of the invited speakers was Farah Pandith, former American diplomat and expert on countering extremism. In her speech, she emphasised the growing Muslim population around the world, one billion of which were aged below 30 years.

Pandith argued that these Muslim youths are growing up in a post-9/11 world and are learning about themselves primarily through the Internet as compared to asking questions from their elders. This early and often misguided exposure to the Internet makes them more vulnerable to extremism.

According to Pandith, media coverage of Islam and Muslims “radically changed the feeling of what it means to be Muslim.”

More Muslim millennials and Gen Z youths are turning to the Internet to learn about themselves and find their identities. They can easily access information and opinions from loud voices on the Internet, many of which are extremists with emotional appeals.

She added that extremist groups can easily persuade young minds through “curat[ing] answers very specifically” and saying that the only proper way to be a Muslim is to join their group.

“They will tell you what to eat, what to wear, how to pray. They’ll tell you who you can talk to, who your friends are, what stations you can listen to on the radio, if anything, and where you need to go online,” Pandith said as quoted in a report by Today.

She urged the government to be proactive in crafting solutions and alternative narratives as to what extremists present. She added that it is also important to carefully curate messages for Muslim youth and consider that not everyone is the same.

“We have not deployed the same kind of sophistication in cultural listening and behavioural science that will help us deploy the countermeasures that are needed,” she said.

Tech companies are responsible as well. Because of the way the algorithm works, similar hateful and extremist content are being fed to young users. As such, she concluded that tech companies need to change the algorithm to reduce the spread of and access to such hateful and extremist content./TISG