

Wong Kan Seng: Jemaah Islamiah arrests in 2001 could have led to riots

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SINGAPORE - When the Government uncovered the plot by 15 Jemaah Islamiah (JI) terrorists to bomb several targets here back in 2001, the threat of serious public disorder loomed.

Reflecting on what he called the "most alarming experience" in his time as home affairs minister, Mr Wong Kan Seng noted that the 15 arrested were all Malay-Muslims, adding that not getting the communication of this sensitive news right could have been disastrous.

"If not handled well, we were going to have a lot of unease, which may even cause disturbances leading to disorder, which can lead to riots," the former deputy prime minister said at a forum on religious harmony on Tuesday (July 3).

Mr Wong served as home affairs minister from 1994 to 2010 and deputy prime minister from 2005 to 2011. He retired from politics in 2015 and is now Chairman of United Overseas Bank and Ascendas-Singbridge.

Giving a behind-the-scenes account of what the Government did to pre-empt any tension in 2001, he said that prior to announcing the news publicly, his team engaged community leaders from different religions and races and from various segments of society.

This was important because the Government relied on these leaders to issue statements, very shortly after the news went public, that would calm Singaporeans, he said.

As Singaporeans gave weight to the words of these community leaders, it was helpful for defusing tensions if the public could see that they backed the Government's decision to detain the terrorists, Mr Wong added.

The trust between the Government and community leaders had to be built up over a long period, he noted.

The Government had the ears of community leaders in 2001 because it had been engaging them consistently over many years, with top political leaders, including prime ministers, making themselves accessible to community leaders from time to time, he said.

This was in contrast to the experience of many western countries, where political leaders have a hard time reaching out to such community leaders, he noted.

Organised by the Institute of Policy Studies, the one-day forum held at Furama RiverFront Hotel focused on the role of the state and of religious leaders in fostering religious harmony in Singapore.

Speakers outlined broad trends affecting religious relations here, including the rise in religiosity and continuous efforts to integrate immigrants who may not be familiar with the emphasis Singapore places on religious harmony.

Many religious leaders who spoke were worried about the rise of divisive foreign preachers who could influence Singaporeans and warned that while such preachers can be denied entry to Singapore, their teachings were still freely available online.

Former bishop of the Methodist Church in Singapore Robert Solomon called on religious leaders to use their deep knowledge of their faiths to correct any untruths or misguided teachings and to apply that knowledge in the context of multi-religious Singapore, as devotees look to them for guidance.

Turning to the role of state action and legislation, one speaker, Ambassador Alami Musa of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, suggested that the current legal framework for handling religious issues be broadened to cover intra-religious relations too, including relations between the Shia and Sunni communities within Islam.

He also advocated an entrenchment of secularism within the Singapore system, to better safeguard religious harmony for the long haul.

"Let's try to embed it in our national DNA. Meaning the constitution, meaning that no one, no political party or government can reject, or discard, the secular state ideology," he said.