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PRESS RELEASE

Religiosity and the Management of Religious Harmony: Responses from the IPS Survey on Race, Religion and Language

The **Institute of Policy Studies (IPS)** today released a Working Paper titled *Religiosity and the Management of Religious Harmony: Responses from the IPS Survey on Race, Religion and Language*.

The report contains the third tranche of findings from the nationally-representative IPS Survey on Race, Religion and Language. It documents the Singapore population's religious beliefs, and how these relate to life orientation, moral beliefs and inter-religious relations. More specifically, the report provides data on the religious affiliations, level of religiosity and religious beliefs, participation in religious activities, and views on inter-religious relations and morality of Singapore residents.

Details of the survey methodology can be found in Annex A. IPS aims in this Working Paper to emphasise the importance of appreciating the attitudes and beliefs of Singaporeans on religious matters, and why we should take these into account in considering the future of inter-religious relations in Singapore.

Said the lead author of the paper, IPS Senior Research Fellow Mathew Mathews: "In light of global developments, identifying possible sites of tension within the population is crucial for better policymaking, so as to safeguard social cohesion, and preserve the secular political space in Singapore."

Key highlights of the paper are as follows:

1. Singapore has done well in promoting religious harmony. There is widespread tolerance and acceptance of religious diversity in the public sphere.

Adherents of all religious traditions in Singapore displayed a near-universal openness to having relationships with those of other religious faiths in the public sphere. The majority of all survey respondents agreed that there is religious harmony here, though particular religious beliefs and practices are highly salient to those of certain faiths. At least nine in 10 respondents across all religious faiths said they would be comfortable with someone of a different faith as their colleague and next-door neighbour.

2. **The state is trusted to play a role in managing the peaceful coexistence of different faiths**.

Consistent state policy and action over the decades has ensured that Singaporeans of different faiths live in peaceful coexistence. The survey found strong support for the state to deal firmly with religious bigotry and to check

insensitive comments levelled against any religion. Six in 10 respondents said it would be important for a responsible person to report to the authorities any infractions that threatened religious and racial harmony. Less than three in 10 respondents believed religious groups should be accorded more rights than they currently have.

3. **Religion is important to many — especially those from monotheistic religious traditions. Interactions of a religious nature contribute to the building of a strong identity among co-religionists.**

More Muslims, Protestant Christians, Roman Catholics, Hindus, and those from several smaller religions ranked religion as important or very important to their identity compared to Buddhists and Taoists. Even among those who declared they had no religion, more than one in 10 said that religion was important to their lives. More Muslims and Protestant Christians than those of other faiths felt that their philosophies in life were largely shaped by their ideas of religion and spirituality, and that religious teachers play a significant role in influencing how they live their lives.

Nearly three in 10 survey respondents said they participate in some form of religious activity weekly, with Protestant Christians and Roman Catholics registering the highest number attending religious services at least once a month. About a quarter of survey respondents said they had encountered religious services in a setting different from their own in the last two years with nearly two in 10 having gone for a meeting to learn about other religions.

4. **There is substantial diversity in the personal beliefs of religious adherents, and religious labels may not necessarily reflect the religious beliefs that people have.**

Only three in 10 Hindus and half of Buddhists said they believe in the idea of reincarnation although this is a concept present in the authoritative formulations of both these religions. Belief in the existence of hell and heaven was not universal among Muslims and Christians. Among those who said that they are not affiliated to any religion, two in 10 said they believe that God exists.

5. **Personal preferences, and customary traditions and practices prescribed by various religions continue to shape relationships in the private sphere.**

While inter-religious interactions and relationships were widely accepted in the public sphere, survey respondents were comparatively less comfortable with inter-religious relationships in the private sphere (for example, having someone of a different religion as a close relative, or spouse). While the state has adopted a firm approach to preventing social exclusivism in settings ranging from public schools to neighbourhoods, it has not attempted to influence how the religious population interpret and practice their faith in a private or family setting. For religious adherents, personal preferences and religious customs continue to influence their approach to relationships in the private sphere, for example, in the choice of marriage partners.

Conclusion

The survey findings point to the positive state of religious harmony in Singapore, in particular, the tolerance and acceptance of diversity in the common public space. There is an insistence that religious harmony should not be jeopardised and the belief that the state should step in when necessary. Many religious people accept the need to make concessions as part of life in a multi-religious society and there is little demand for more rights for particular religious groups.

It should be emphasised though that heterogeneity in the social landscape requires a deepening of inter-cultural understanding, so that different groups can learn to appreciate differences, and be sensitive to the needs of different religious groups.

While religion provides its adherents a framework to evaluate morality, this will need to be tempered with a respect for those who may not share similar religious values. What is needed is greater dialogue to achieve coherence between the various principles espoused by different religions, and a set of universal principles agreeable to all, including secularists.

The current positive state of religious harmony cannot be taken for granted, as several trends could pose challenges to religious harmony. Firstly, religious innovations and changes elsewhere could influence religious practices in Singapore. Some of these changes may be incompatible with a society that practises peaceful coexistence between different faiths. The role of able religious leadership in preserving peace is crucial.

Secondly, immigrant flows could lead to intra-religious conflicts as beliefs and practices in any religion can differ across cultures and nationalities. Efforts must be made to help new immigrants understand the realities of practising their faith in a multi-religious society.

Thirdly, religious authority is likely to be dispersed with more splinter groups insisting on their own interpretation of particular religions. Ideally, established religious structures should continue to be open so as to incorporate these groups and steer them away from tendencies that may destabilise religious harmony.

About the Institute of Policy Studies

The Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) was established in 1988 as an independent think-tank to study and generate public policy ideas in Singapore. Today, IPS is an autonomous research centre of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore. The Institute continues to advance its core mission: to analyse public policy; build bridges between thought leaders; and communicate research findings to a wide audience. IPS examines domestic policy challenges across a variety of fields and studies the attitudes of Singaporeans through surveys of public perception. It adopts a multi-disciplinary approach in its analysis and takes the long-term view in its strategic deliberation and research. For more information about IPS, visit www.lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/ips/

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Annex 1
About the IPS Survey on Race, Religion and Language

Data for this Working Paper report is derived from the IPS Survey on Race, Religion and Language. Data collection for this survey took place from December 2012 to April 2013 and was conducted by an established market research company. In total, 4,131 Singaporean residents aged 18 and over, most of whom were Singaporean citizens, participated in the study.

There were two portions to this sample: a representative sample and a booster sample. For the representative sample, interviewers visited 5,000 households whose addresses were randomly generated by the Department of Statistics. A total of 3,128 eligible residents from these households finally participated in this study. The booster sample of 1,003 minorities was obtained through selecting minority households living close to those identified in the main sample. For the purposes of this report, only responses from the representative sample are provided. However, results that reflect the views of those from minority religions in the representative sample have been compared with the booster sample to ensure that the figures are within acceptable levels of deviation.

Findings from this survey have been released in tranches since the third quarter of 2013. The survey findings on race and a limited number of items on religious relations were presented at the following events – the Forum on Indicators of Racial and Religious Harmony and Singapore Perspectives 2014

Author Bios
Dr Mathew Mathews (lead author)

Dr Mathew Mathews is a Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies where he leads the Society and Identity cluster. His research broadly examines issues surrounding societal cohesion. While his research projects over the years have been varied, covering issues related to race, immigration integration, family, ageing and social services, he has a produced a number of journal articles and book chapters on religion. Recent publications on religion include an analysis of religious freedom in Singapore, global religious resurgence and its impact on secular societies and articles examining religion and its relationship to the state. Mathew has also written on Christianity in Singapore.
Besides his academic interests, Mathew is actively involved in community service and sits on several boards including OnePeople.sg, a ground-up initiative championing race and religious relations.

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Mr Mohd Khamsya is a Research Assistant at the Institute of Policy Studies, NUS. He graduated with a Master's degree in Sociology from NUS in 2014. He obtained his Bachelor's degree in Sociology, with first-class honours, from NUS in 2011. Khamsya's research interests include social inequality,

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education, migration and critical theory. Khamsya has also worked on other research projects, such as the Jalan Kubor Documentation Project with the Malay Heritage Centre and a project on urban poverty jointly conducted by NUS and NTU. He also volunteers with NGO Transient Workers Count Too (TWC2).

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Ms Teo Kay Key is a Research Intern at the Institute of Policy Studies, NUS. Kay Key obtained a Bachelor of Social Sciences (Honours) at the Singapore Management University, majoring in political science and psychology. She received a Master's in Political Behaviour from the University of Essex in the United Kingdom. Kay Key's research interests are in political and social attitudes in Singapore. She has worked as a Planning Officer in the Singapore Police Force, doing policy work and strategic planning, and will begin her PhD in Political Science at NUS in August 2014.