Survey Finds Widespread Tolerance Of Religious Diversity Here

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Singapolitics, 17 June 2014

SINGAPORE - Amid a worldwide trend of rising religiosity, harmony between people of different religions here remains strong, with a majority of people here believing that those of different religions in Singapore get along well, a survey by the Institute of Policy Studies found.

Keys to maintaining this peaceful state are the Government's policies on religion, and its role as arbiter of disputes, said the survey's lead researcher Mathew Mathews.

This is the third release of findings from a large-scale survey on race, religion and language by the think tank.

In these latest results, which measured self-reported perceptions on religion, 66.6 per cent of about 3,000 people polled agreed that those of different religions live in harmony here. Another 29.1 per cent of respondents were neutral, and 4.3 per cent did not agree.

These results, said Dr Mathew, point to a "healthy level of religious harmony" here.

As an example, some nine in 10 respondents reported being comfortable with having a colleague or neighbour of a different faith.

These numbers, though, fell when it came to relationships in the private sphere. Only about two in 10 protestant Christians said they are comfortable with their child marrying a Muslim. It was the same case the other way around.

But Dr Mathew said this may have more to do with religious sanctions - Islam and Christianity encourages marriage with those of like faith - than intolerance.

And although religion plays an important role in a person's life - 57.1 per cent of respondents said religion is imporant to their overall sense of identity - most respondents were satisfied with the the status quo in terms of religious rights.

Only 23.7 per cent of respondents said they believed religious groups should be given more rights than they currently have.

"The fact that you can hold on to religious beliefs and yet live in a multi-religious setting speaks to the commitment people have towards religious harmony," said Dr Mathew.

He said this has to do with the success of policies put in place to ensure religious harmony, such as the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act, and other softer measures, such as encouraging religious understanding through the Inter-racial and Religious Confidence Circles.

Over time, these measures have helped to shape behaviour and what is considered "normative", he added.

Which is why the survey also found strong support for government intervention when it comes to religious disputes, said Dr Mathew.

More than 60 per cent of respondents said they believe they should report offensive actions, such as bigotry or insensitive comments made about a religion, to the authorities.

This also indicates people's commitment towards maintaining religious harmony, said Dr Mathew.

"People themeselves are policing the scene, reporting incidents of infractions to the authorities. There is still a very strong feeling that they want to keep incidents in check," he said.