

3 forces could challenge social cohesion in Singapore: Bilahari

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Three external forces could pose a challenge to social cohesion here as people around the world increasingly emphasise their cultural and religious identity, veteran diplomat Bilahari Kausikan said.

They are the arabisation of Islam, attempts by foreign countries to stress identity and the rise in evangelical Christianity, said Mr Bilahari, who chairs the National University of Singapore's Middle East Institute (MEI).

The first challenge is not peculiar to Singapore, he said, noting that traditional Islam in this region was very Sufist and syncretic.

"That is gone. And I don't think you can put it back together."

He shared how he sometimes asks Muslim women with headscarves what they are called.

"Half the time they say hijab. Now, you have got a good Malay word for this thing, it is called tudung. Why must you use the word in Arabic?"

"There is a certain lack of cultural confidence among Southeast Asian Muslims, probably globally," he added, noting how Middle Eastern influences are uncritically accepted as authentic.

The second threat, Mr Bilahari said, are attempts by states to use identity as a tool of state policy.

Singapore once had to expel an American diplomat for trying to impose a Western political identity in the Republic.

Mr Bilahari has recently written extensively about Chinese influence operations that try to impose a Chinese identity on multiracial Singapore, and the dangers are self-evident.

The third threat comes from certain strands of evangelical Christianity, which are having a profound influence on Christianity here, he added.

He said an MEI researcher recently received anonymous online threats from a member of an evangelical group, which did not like what he had written about the Middle East.

The matter is currently being investigated by the police, Mr Bilahari added.