

Eight in 10 say it's not acceptable for faith leaders to sway voters

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When it comes to religion and politics, Singaporeans mostly agree that religious leaders should not influence voting at elections.

But they are divided on other issues such as whether religious leaders should have close ties with politicians, and what individuals should do in the hypothetical situation of a new law contradicting their religious teachings.

These were among the key findings in a new report by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) on religious beliefs and the role of religion in the private and public spheres.

The findings were based on a survey of 1,800 Singapore residents, and are part of a larger study of religion involving multiple countries.

The IPS paper said 81.9 per cent of people agreed that religious leaders should not influence voting behaviour, with 86.9 per cent saying it is not acceptable for such leaders to remark on politicians' characters.

It was more difficult for them to come to a consensus on other issues.

When asked if it was acceptable for religious leaders to have close ties to government officials, 55 per cent disagreed, while 44.9 per cent felt that this was fine.

If a new law contradicted their religious teachings, about 48 per cent said that they would definitely follow it, or would at least be likely to do so. Meanwhile, just over a third said they would most likely adhere to their religious teachings.

Three groups - Christians, Muslims and Catholics - had a larger proportion of people who said that they would follow their religious principles instead of the law.

Six in 10 agreed that the Government should not interfere with attempts by a religion to spread its faith, although those with no religion tended to oppose this view.

When asked about moral issues like abortion, infidelity and homosexual sex, researchers also found that a person's religious views tended to shape their answers.

Better educated and younger respondents, as well as those with no religion, tended to have more liberal attitudes towards these issues.

A total of 82.4 per cent believed that infidelity was always wrong, but only 67.9 per cent felt the same way about homosexual sex.

Just 38.3 per cent said that abortion was always wrong, even if the family has a very low income.

Muslims tended to have the most conservative attitudes towards homosexual sex, with nearly 85 per cent believing that it was always wrong. Nearly 80 per cent of Hindus and Christians, however, held the same view.

In comparison, only half the respondents with no religion said that homosexual sex was always wrong.

But researchers noted that even among Christians and Muslims, younger members of these groups were less likely to see homosexual sex as always wrong.

Similar trends were seen for abortion, although the researchers noted that education made a significant difference.

When it came to abortion, about 66 per cent of Muslims and nearly 60 per cent of Christians with no more than a secondary school level of education felt it was always wrong.

But among those with at least a bachelor's degree, these figures dropped to around 40 per cent for both Muslims and Christians.