

ISD investigation not less serious than being arrested: DPM

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NEWS of Pastor Rony Tan's day at the Internal Security Department (ISD) left many comparing his treatment with that of three teenagers accused of making racist remarks over the social networking site Facebook.

Online and offline, people asked why the teenagers ended up arrested by the police, whereas the pastor was not.

Posed this question yesterday, Deputy Prime Minister and Home Affairs Minister Wong Kan Seng said: 'It is a very serious matter if anyone were to be hauled up and investigated by ISD. 'It is not less serious than getting investigated by the police. I assure you that it is not.'

Three Chinese youths, aged between 17 and 18, were arrested under the Sedition Act on Jan 31 after another Facebook user reported them to the police for making racist comments against Indians on the networking site.

They are out on bail and have not been charged.

Mr Wong said that in that case, 'a complaint was made to the police of an offence'.

'The police are investigating it and will refer it to Attorney-General's Chambers, who in turn will determine the appropriate conclusion to the matter,' said Mr Wong.

'We should let this police investigation take place without interfering or prejudging or speculating what that outcome will be or should be.'

In the case of Pastor Tan, who was featured in three short videos posted online making disparaging remarks about Buddhism and Taoism, the ISD hauled him up on Monday and warned him of the inappropriateness of his remarks.

It is understood that he was questioned for several hours.

On Monday night, he posted an apology on his church website and yesterday, he met Buddhist and Taoist leaders to apologise in person.

He has also appealed to netizens to stop circulating his offending videos.

Many people have wondered, both online and offline, if Pastor Tan should have been dealt with more severely. They argue that from his pulpit, he reaches more hearts and minds than the three teenagers who posted their comments on Facebook.

Pastor Tan leads the independent Lighthouse Evangelism 'megachurch', which boasts 12,000 members.

But DPM Wong disputed the notion that the pastor got off lightly, given the seriousness of being called up by the ISD.

'The bottom line in such cases is that we must ensure that the OB (out-of-bounds) markers are clear and that transgressions are dealt with in a balanced and professional manner,' he said.

'Our agencies must be allowed to exercise their professional judgment on how best to achieve this outcome.'

Commenting on the issue, research fellow Azhar Ghani of the Institute of Policy Studies noted that the publicising of an ISD warning is rare.

As the incident has already been contained - with leaders of Buddhist and Taoist groups urging restraint - he felt that prosecuting Pastor Tan would lead only to trepidation on the part of religious groups.