

Loud noise in common areas, burning of religious items could lead to tensions among neighbours: IPS-OnePeople.sg survey

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SINGAPORE - A study of racial and religious harmony in Singapore has found that neighbourhoods could be a potential setting for some types of tensions to rise.

This could be over issues such as loud events at void decks or neighbours cooking ethnic food, for instance.

In the latest Institute of Policy Studies-OnePeople.sg survey, at least four in 10 Singaporeans indicated that they sometimes, or more often, encountered and were upset by the burning of religious items in their estate.

This was the highest proportion among several items causing grief in neighbourhoods.

Top peeves included loud events at void decks or common areas, religious chanting or praying, and neighbours cooking ethnic food.

Only a quarter of Malay and Indian respondents had at some level encountered and were upset with the burning of incense, joss sticks or other religious items in their estate.

But when broken down by race, the study found that 67.4 per cent of Malays, 57.6 per cent of Indians and 35.7 per cent of Chinese were at least "sometimes" upset with the burning of items.

"This indicates the need for management of these issues to reduce the possibility of ill will between communities," said the researchers behind the study.

Chair of the Kreta Ayer-Kim Seng Inter-Racial and Religious Confidence Circle (IRCC) Alvin Tan said that deliberate and sustained efforts are critical to minimise interracial and religious tensions.

"Because people come from very different backgrounds and have different beliefs and practices, (the IRCC has) to carry out activities on the ground very deliberately," he said.

This means organising monthly events and festive celebrations with a good mix of residents from different races and religions.

"We have community ambassadors present to help explain the practices, and encourage everyone to dress in one another's traditional costumes. We also visit different places of worship around Chinatown to help our members get a feel for the place and culture."

The IRCC also helps arbitrate the use of common spaces, such as when religious organisations like mosques or temples need to use them. One example would be a firewalking festival at a Hindu temple next to a business or community space.

"We've seen how these little inconveniences can spark tensions in other societies. So we come in very early in the process and find ways to minimise disruption to residents and businesses."

Mr Tan hopes younger Singaporeans will join IRCCs. "We hope to see young Singaporeans make time to attend these events, to understand, feel and gain a sense of appreciation for other cultures," he said.

National University of Singapore sociologist Tan Ern Ser agreed, adding that limits can be placed on the sound volume and time period of events.

The burning of joss papers should also be confined to authorised receptacles or spaces, he added.

On the proportion of racial minorities upset with the burning of incense, he said it could be due to the nature of certain religious practices, which result in a higher frequency and volume of sound and smoke produced.

"It could also simply be demographics in the sense that minorities are more likely to encounter the majority, and less so in the case of the majority encountering minorities."

Ultimately, he said, it is important for people to proactively mingle with one another.

"Community organisations and leaders could bring residents together, while residents could take the initiative to greet their neighbours and, better still, get to know them.

"Once residents interact with one another or even do things together, they would tend to be more understanding and considerate."