

Most Feel S'pore Has Religious Harmony They Are Confident Rising Religiosity Won't Impact Situation: IPS Study

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A MAJORITY of people in Singapore feel there is a high level of religious harmony here, and are confident that will not be affected by a trend of rising religiosity, a study by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) has found.

Most are also comfortable having friends and neighbours of another faith.

These results, the third set of findings from a large-scale survey on race, religion and language by the think-tank, point to a "healthy level of religious harmony" here, said lead researcher Mathew Mathews.

In the study which polled about 3,000 people and measured self-reported perceptions on religion, six out of 10 people agreed that those of different religions live in harmony here.

Many also said they trust, and indeed want, the Government to play a central role in maintaining this peace.

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.

Dr Mathew sees this as an indication of people's commitment towards maintaining religious harmony, since they themselves are "policing the scene" by reporting incidents.

It also indicates policies on religious harmony put in place over the years have worked, he said. Among them are hard measures such as laws like the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act that deals with those who attempt to cause ill will between different religious groups, and also soft measures, such as encouraging understanding through groups like the Inter-racial and Religious Confidence Circles.

"We cannot underestimate the role of legislation in informing people about what is acceptable. The rules help people to frame it and over time, it becomes a norm," Dr Mathew said.

For example, while religion plays an important role in a person's life - 57 per cent of respondents said religion is important to their overall sense of identity - most respondents in the survey were satisfied with the status quo in terms of religious rights.

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

That shows many people accept that concessions have to be made in a multi-religious society for all to get along, said Dr Mathew.

More than tolerance, there is also a "strong spirit of cooperation and friendship" between the different religious communities here, said Inter-Religious Organisation president Noor Mohamed Marican.

He cited an example of the Singapore Buddhist Lodge donating \$69,000 and 20 tonnes of rice to mosques to help in preparations for the upcoming holy month of Ramadan.

Even so, events in the past 12 months have led to worries about rising religiosity.

Earlier this year, a controversy erupted over a Health Promotion Board sexuality advisory that Christian and Muslim groups said normalised same-sex relationships. Last year, there was also unhappiness in some segments over Muslim women in certain jobs requiring uniforms not being allowed to wear the headscarf.

Increasing religiosity, though, is not yet a big bugbear for most of the survey respondents. Only slightly more than a third believed it could harm religious harmony.

In the survey, Protestant Christians and Muslims also exhibited a "stronger sense of religious orientation" compared to other groups, noted Dr Mathew. But he said this did not translate into social exclusivity.

As an example, some nine in 10 respondents across all religious groups, including the two faiths, reported being comfortable with having a colleague or neighbour of a different faith.

These numbers fell, though, when it came to ties in the private sphere. Only about two in 10 Protestant Christians said they were 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 encourage marriage with those of like faith - than intolerance.

"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," he said.