

Out-of-bounds marker on race, religion 'still necessary'

Rachel Chang

The Straits Times, 12 November 2013

Foreign and Law Minister K. Shanmugam said that the Government should not roll back its out-of-bounds marker on race and religion because discussions on these matters can still threaten the social fabric.

Replying to a question on whether it should step back to let citizens acquire the skills of civil debate, he said: "At a very philosophical level, you could say we should be able to talk about each other's racial and religious issues without having to really damage society.

"Often you will have a group of people who will debate it at that level, but then you will have probably a larger group, in any society, for whom this becomes very visceral and impacts on their perception of another race," he said.

Speaking at an Institute of Policy Studies conference on civil society, he added: "I'm not saying these are the only viewpoints. But in that context, I would advocate the Government to intervene, and say what the terms of those sorts of debates should be. That's been our position in the past and I don't see that changing in the context of the Internet, (which is) just a means of expression."

His comments came in the wake of a movement to overturn the ban on the wearing of the hijab or Muslim headscarf in certain uniformed public sector jobs.

Earlier, conference speaker Amrin Amin, a member of the Suara Musyawarah committee on Malay-Muslim issues, said that the hijab petition was an example of the type of messy, ground-up activism with no clear leadership that is emerging in a newly politicised and assertive Singapore.