

## **Public debate must be secular, in public interest**

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Public debate must be based on secular considerations of public interest, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said at the National Day Rally last night.

This, however, does not mean that religious groups cannot have views on national issues, or that religious individuals cannot participate in politics.

Speaking before a 1,600-strong crowd, including key religious leaders, at the University Cultural Centre, he emphasised the need for public debate to remain secular.

'The public debate cannot be on whose religion is right and whose religion is wrong. It has to be on secular, rational considerations of public interest - what makes sense for Singapore,' he said. He noted that unlike in the United States, where a population which is overwhelmingly Christian allows religion to play a key role in politics, Singapore's multi-religious composition means its government must remain secular, and neutral among the different religions.

But this does not mean religious groups cannot participate in civil society.

'Religious groups are free to propagate their teachings on social and moral issues, and they have done so,' said PM Lee.

He highlighted three examples: the debate over whether Singapore should build casinos, the inclusion of Muslims in the Human Organ Transplant Act (Hota), and the debate over whether Section 377A of the Penal Code, which criminalises sex between men, should be repealed.

During the casino debate in 2004, leaders from all four major religious groups - Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and Christianity - stepped forward to voice their opposition to the idea.

In 2007, Muslim religious leaders' support for Hota paved the way for the Muslim community to come under the same organ donation law as other Singaporeans.

The same year, when a petition for the abolition of Section 377A of the Penal Code was filed by then-Nominated MP Siew Kum Hong, it prompted a heated debate. Christians and Muslims were among those vociferous in voicing objection to the petition.

PM Lee acknowledged that religious persons who take part in politics will hold views that may be influenced by their religious beliefs. They must, however, accept and respect that other groups may have different views, informed by different beliefs.

Giving her response to PM Lee's point, Dr Gillian Koh, senior research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies, felt that faith-based groups will 'have to learn to make their cases based on moral reasoning that is accessible to people of all the other faiths'.

Prof Thio Li-ann, a law lecturer who is a staunch Christian and advocate of religious views having a place in public debate, said: 'Anyone engaged in debate or political debate should always expect to be challenged, and to forge better arguments to try and persuade others as to

the merits of one's own views - who has the better argument, the better solution which best serves the common good? That is the essential question.'

Mr Masagos Zulkifli Masagos Mohamad, MP for Tampines GRC, appreciates the common ground that a secular government offers.

'With our government, we will always ensure the good of society is promoted, not a particular religious need or particular religion.'