# RELIGIOUS HARMONY: 20 years of keeping the peace

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***The Strait Times,*** 24 July 2009

In 1989, the Government published a White Paper on the Maintenance of Religious Harmony, ahead of a new law prompted by concerns that overzealous religious leaders could blind followers to the realities of Singapore's multi-religious society. Insight looks at the underlying concerns behind this move and whether it still matters today.

A PRIME minister promised his country's majority Buddhists that he would make Buddhism the state religion and Sinhalese the official language if he won the election.

**BE A CITIZEN FIRST**

'Churchmen, lay preachers, priests, monks, Muslim theologians, all those who claim divine sanction or holy insights, take off your clerical robes before you take on anything economic or political.'

**Then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, on the role of religion in politics**

**VITAL BOUNDARIE**

'The concerns that MRHA sought to address have since grown with a strong resurgence in numerous religious movements worldwide, complicated by globalisation and readily accessible information and views on the Internet.'

**Institute of Policy Studies research fellow Azhar Ghani, on how the MRHA remains relevant today**

He did, with the support of Buddhist monks. But two years later, religious leaders were not satisfied.

One monk shot him dead.

This was what happened in Ceylon, now Sri Lanka, in the 1950s.

As Buddhism and Sinhalese nationalism became political forces, the Hindus who spoke Tamil felt excluded. They gradually fought back. Civil war erupted - and continued to plague the country for decades after.

In the 1940s, Ceylon had been a paragon of peace and harmony after gaining independence from Britain. Religion became divisive when it joined forces with politics and blinded monks and politicians alike into making decisions that led eventually to civil strife.

Although far away, the tensions in Sri Lanka had repercussions in Singapore.

Likewise, so did developments in other countries.
When the Islamic Revolution broke out in Iran in 1979, a handful of Singapore Muslims wanted to implement a similar Islamic state here.

When then Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was assassinated by two Sikh extremists in 1984, the Hindu-Sikh riots that erupted in India led to Hindu-Sikh tensions here.

Further afield, the influence of American charismatic Pentecostal evangelicals has been and continues to be felt in Singapore. Protestant Christian groups which were overzealous in their proselytisation efforts upset other religious groups, which then made efforts to fight back in order to retain their followers.

On the Catholic front, inspired by developments in Latin America and elsewhere, a handful of Catholic priests took to making political statements and criticising government policy from the pulpit and in church publications.

Watching these developments in the 1980s, the Government concluded that religious revivalism was a worldwide trend with real repercussions on religious harmony here.

It also concluded that the entry of religion into politics had to be stopped - nipped in the bud, in fact. It could not be allowed for a country like Singapore, which has to maintain a precarious balance among many religious groups.

In his 1987 National Day Rally, then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew dwelt at length on these issues.

Not mincing his words, Mr Lee said: 'Churchmen, lay preachers, priests, monks, Muslim theologians, all those who claim divine sanction or holy insights, take off your clerical robes before you take on anything economic or political.

'Take it off. Come out as a citizen or join our political party and it is your right to belabour the Government.

'But if you use a church or a religion and your pulpit for these purposes, there will be serious repercussions.'

The rally speech was the start of several years of vigorous public debate, leading to a carefully-crafted White Paper on Religious Harmony in 1989 and the passage of the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act (MRHA) in 1990.

**Studying the trends**

FOLLOWING the 1987 rally, the Ministry of Community Development, as it was then known, commissioned a study of religious trends here.

The study confirmed that religious fervour was indeed on the rise.

In their report, Religion and Religious Revivalism in Singapore, National University of Singapore (NUS) academics Eddie Kuo, Jon Quah and Tong Chee Kiong found that 'followers from some religions have also become more fervent in their religious interest and activities'.

This was true not only of Christians, but also of Buddhists and Muslims.

The Government feared this trend might lead to a clash between religions.

In a December 1988 speech at a Buddhist event, Mr Lee noted that 'at a time when Islam is resurgent and thrusting, Christians, especially charismatics, were in a dynamic, evangelising phase that has sometimes led to friction'.

The Buddhists and traditional Chinese religionists had also become active, and were revising and updating their rituals and explanations 'so that young Chinese Singaporeans will accept them as rational and reasonable'.

'No religious leadership can be tolerant and passive when its following is being eroded by other religions,' he said.

In a speech at the opening of Parliament in January 1989, then President Wee Kim Wee stressed the need for religious tolerance and moderation, and for religion to 'be kept rigorously separate from politics'.

A draft White Paper spelling out the Government's stand on the importance of religious harmony and how religious groups should conduct themselves within the context of Singapore society was also drawn up. This was modified after widespread consultations with religious groups, and eventually published in December 1989.

The Government's fear, then Deputy Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong told Parliament in 1990, was that a collision between religions or between religion and the state would affect harmony here.

This was why it moved to enact the MRHA.

In passing the final version of the law, then Home Affairs Minister S. Jayakumar stressed that it was preventive.

It aimed to nip in the bud problems that were often caused by just a few irresponsible individuals. 'These few people must not be allowed to endanger the precious racial and religious harmony that we have,' he said.

The MRHA came into effect in 1992.

It empowers the Home Affairs Minister to issue restraining orders against preachers who engage in harmful conduct - whether causing ill-will among religious groups, promoting a political cause, or exciting disaffection against the Government.

Those who breach such an order can be fined and jailed.

'If there's no harmony, there will be no peaceful, prosperous Singapore - as simple as that,' said Mr Goh.

**A special law**

MR GOH explained to Parliament in 1990: 'We wanted a law that could deal with the problem in a very fine way instead of having to resort to the Internal Security Act or the Sedition Act, or to use court prosecution.'

MPs and observers felt other existing laws could be used to discipline those who crossed the line in propagating their religion.

But Mr Goh said the proposed MRHA was intended to be 'a finer way of dealing with the problem'.

'It is like trying to use a scalpel to make a precise incision to deal with problem cells, instead of having to use a chopper to amputate,' he said.

Other than Turkey, which has provisions in its Constitution to ensure religious harmony, no other country had a law along the lines the Government envisaged.

No restraining orders have been issued under the MRHA since it came into effect.
However, the Government came close to invoking it on a number of occasions to stop religious leaders from mixing politics with religion and putting down other faiths, Mr Wong Kan Seng, the Home Affairs Minister at the time, said in 2001.

The religious leaders stopped their activities after they were summoned and warned by the police and Internal Security Department officers, he said.

Had they persisted, the law would have been used against them.

Singapore Management University (SMU) law academic Eugene Tan says the MRHA 'reminds us how religion can be a source of friction, conflict and violence, and how important it is to 'render unto Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God' - to keep religion and politics separate as far as possible'.

He finds it 'a vital cog in the panoply of measures that the authorities can use to deal with faith-inspired threats to social cohesion and harmony'.

One clear advantage, observers feel, is that the MRHA is a pre-emptive law that does not require a clear and present danger to exist before a restraining order is issued. A warning 'operates like a circuit breaker' and enables the authorities to 'remind and caution any person who may unwittingly be stirring religious anxieties,' he says.

For some cases, it can be a wiser alternative than prosecuting individuals in court. If errant preachers are dealt with in an open court, the hearings can themselves become a source of tension, notes Mr Tan.

**Continued relevance**

INSTITUTE of Policy Studies research fellow Azhar Ghani tells Insight that if the MRHA was relevant 20 years ago, 'it is even more relevant now'.

'In 1989, the world was a different place. The concerns that MRHA sought to address have since grown with a strong resurgence in numerous religious movements worldwide, complicated by globalisation and readily accessible information and views on the Internet,' he says.

'The fact that it has not been invoked means that the Act's desired effect in bringing about self-imposed restraints within the different religious groups have worked,' he adds.
But this is an evolving situation, observers note.

Professor Eddie Kuo, now a professorial fellow at the Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information, Nanyang Technological University, notes that religious groups are now more globally connected than before.

'What happens outside Singapore has a greater impact here, for better or worse,' he notes.
This is why issues that prompted the MRHA - aggressive and insensitive proselytisation and inter-religious tensions - 'continue to be relevant and important'.

Another reason why the MRHA continues to have a place, he feels, is that Singapore remains an immigrant society.

'There continues to be a large number of new members into our society from various sources, and religion is one of the factors that if we are not careful, could potentially lead to tensions,' he says.

This is why laws like the MRHA 'help make sure the population pays attention to religious harmony'.

**Setting the parameters**

NUS sociologist Alexius Pereira says the MRHA's single largest impact has been to draw 'out of bounds markers' on the issue of public religion.

'It serves to specify what is acceptable and what is not acceptable. This way, it serves to assure the 'potentially vulnerable' groups that they will be protected,' he tells Insight.

He notes that some religious groups might attempt to 'expand their market share' because they believe their religion is the correct one, and therefore, as good followers, they must inform others who do not know about it.

He feels that aggressive proselytisation, especially when other religions are criticised, is the most severe threat to religious harmony here.

Dr Lai Ah Eng, senior research fellow at the Asia Research Institute, notes that from anecdotal evidence, some preachers make derogatory and even blasphemous comments about other religions from their pulpits.

An official warning is 'rightly the best first step' for these preachers, she notes.

She says it is best that leaders and followers of any religion 'mature over time, and develop an awareness that Singapore is a multi-religious and diverse society that requires sensitive and ethical approaches to proselytisation, interfaith relations and the practising of religious beliefs'.
But tensions are ever present.

Anecdotal examples show how aggressive actions can result in outcomes that religious leaders themselves find hard to contain.

Just this month, the Buddhist Fellowship posted a note on its website and sent out an e-mail noting that, over the years, it had been told about incidents where family members who convert to another religion were encouraged by their new faith leaders to damage or destroy Buddhist and Taoist artefacts at home.

'Such acts have caused disharmony in families and much distress to other family members and the community,' it said.

Citing the MRHA, the e-mail asked people to write in with the names of those leaders and other details about instances of unwarranted proselytisation, so that the Fellowship can inform the relevant authorities 'in the interest of social and religious harmony'.

Ms Angie Monksfield, president of the Buddhist Fellowship, told Insight that the notice was put up 'in response to members' complaints'.

'We've received complaints for years; we finally decided to do something about it,' she said.
In another incident impinging on religious harmony, a Christian couple was sentenced to eight weeks' jail last month for distributing anti-Muslim and anti- Catholic publications over several years. (See the timeline below.)

In this case, the government decided to use the Sedition Act rather than the MRHA, probably to underline the severity with which it viewed the offence, said Mr Tan.

In passing sentence, District Judge Roy Neighbour said the couple could not claim to be ignorant of the sensitivity of race and religion in Singapore's multi-racial, multi-religious society.

'Common sense dictates that religious fervour to spread the faith, in our society, must be constrained by sensitivity, tolerance and mutual respect for another's faith and religious beliefs,' he said.

**Pushing the line**

ANOTHER key reason for the continued relevance of the MRHA is the assertiveness of religious individuals and groups attempting to impose their religious views on society.
Observers cite the recent episode where a group of conservative Christians mounted a leadership takeover at the Association of Women for Action and Research (Aware) because it felt Aware had been promoting a pro-gay agenda.

Pushing back, the more liberal segments of civil society mobilised themselves and, at an extraordinary general meeting called a few weeks later, succeeded in reversing the takeover.
Mr Tan says the saga 'brought home the urgency of Singaporeans needing to accept that unanimity on normative positions cannot be expected or demanded in a plural society like ours'.
'To insist that one's stand is morally superior is to invite conflict,' he says.

The Government, which had kept silent throughout much of the saga, made its stand known two weeks later in response to queries from this newspaper.

It acknowledged the important contributions made by those who hold deep religious beliefs but, at the same time, stressed the importance of keeping the political arena secular.

Speaking for the Government, Deputy Prime Minister Wong Kan Seng said: 'We are a secular Singapore, in which Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus and others all have to live in peace with one another... Keeping religion and politics separate is a key rule of political engagement.'
But while the principle is clear, knowing where the line lies in practice can be difficult.

SMU's Mr Tan notes that religion and politics are not hermetically sealed spheres of human endeavour and experience. However, in a heterogeneous society like Singapore's, 'that distinction must be drawn as sensitively and in as nuanced a manner as possible if we are not to have religious tensions'.

When is the line crossed? Mr Tan says it is when a religious leader seeks to mobilise his or her followers to action in the secular realm.

'Here, the pulpit is used as a staging post in which believers are urged to act in the name of God,' he explains.

This could happen, he says, when a congregation is told which candidate to vote for in an election, or when a leader condemns a politician as immoral or praises him for being moral.
Such calls cannot be ruled out, as incidents over the years suggest.

During the Aware saga itself, the pulpit was used by senior pastor Derek Hong of the Anglican Church of Our Saviour to mobilise support for one camp in the leadership tussle.

In a sermon, he urged the women in his flock to 'be engaged' and support the new team at Aware, saying: 'It's not a crusade against the people, but there's a line that God has drawn for us, and we don't want our nation crossing that line.'

The National Council of Churches of Singapore swiftly issued a statement to say it did not condone churches getting involved in the matter, or pulpits being used for that purpose.
Pastor Hong subsequently expressed regret.

What certainty is there other similar incidents will not recur?

In an open society that is highly susceptible to wider global trends, the MRHA remains a strong earthly reminder that whatever the religious say and do must be grounded in the multi-religious realities of Singapore society.