Riled Up Over Intolerance

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Cases of Singaporeans quick to take offence against others have sparked fears that such crusaders go too far to defend their values. Has this intolerance of intolerance gone too far? Insight takes a look.

A FEW days after former prime minister Lee Kuan Yew died in March, a bespectacled teenager sitting at home uploaded an eight-minute video ontoYouTube.

It had a title bound to raise eyebrows: Lee Kuan Yew Is Finally Dead! In it, 16-year-old Amos Yee ranted against Christianity, Singapore's founding father and the hundreds of thousands of Singaporeans lining up to pay their respects to him.

The video has received more than a million views. But people more than just looked - at least 20 individuals took the step of filing police reports against the youth.

Within a week of posting the video, Yee was charged, among other things, with attacking Christianity and transmitting an obscene image. His case is ongoing.

Weeks later, another controversy erupted: Furniture giant Ikea came under fire from lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) rights activists when its loyalty programme offered discounts to a show staged by anti-homosexuality pastor-magician Lawrence Khong.

LGBT activists mounted a pressure campaign on Ikea, which promotes itself as an advocate of diversity, to stop supporting the show and even encouraged people to boycott the store.

These incidents, and similar recent episodes, have prompted comments that Singaporeans are becoming oversensitive and too quick to anger.

While the actions they were reacting to were often questionable, the ferocity of the backlash was also surprising. In taking a hard line against what they see as offensive comments, people may be going too far to defend their beliefs and values, some say.

Observers warn that if taken to an extreme, this can entrench differences in society and hinder meaningful conversation between people with different opinions, ironically causing more social tension in the name of harmony.

Insight looks at what gets Singaporeans riled up and why, and what impact this might have on society here.

More taking offence

THERE is at least one measure by which it is clear that more Singaporeans have been taking offence in recent years.

Before 2005, the last case under the Sedition Act - which makes it an offence to promote feelings of ill-will and hostility between different races or classes of the population - was way back in 1966.

But over the past decade, there have been 12 cases involving 16 individuals either charged or investigated under laws designed to maintain harmony between races, religions and groups here.

Many of these cases shared similar traits: They involved younger people, making comments offensive to racial or national groups, on online channels. In most cases, the investigations were triggered by police reports from the public.

Indeed, the rise of the Internet, coupled with the coming of age of a generation unshadowed by Singapore's race-sensitive past, has made it easier both for people to be offensive and to take offence at said offensive comments.

"Before the advent of the Internet, a provocateur would have only his coffee-shop audience to agitate. With the Internet, anyone can insult the world with a simple mouse-click," says National University of Singapore (NUS) law professor Walter Woon, a former attorney-general.

Many younger Singaporeans are woefully ignorant about the country's violent past, he adds. This includes the danger of extreme racial tensions, as illustrated in the Maria Hertogh riots in 1950 and the race riots of July and September 1964.

But at the same time, enough people here are so sensitive to divisive comments, however offhand, that they have no qualms about taking the speakers to task.

"Increasingly, Singaporeans are comfortable speaking out when they see online posts which put down a racial, religious or nationality group," says Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) senior research fellow Mathew Mathews, who specialises in social cohesion issues.

He points to an IPS survey conducted in 2013, in which two-thirds of the 4,131 Singapore residents surveyed thought it was important to report any infractions that threatened religious or racial harmony.

These infractions include when someone posts a picture or commentary that pokes fun at racial or religious groups, insults these groups in a public setting, and when a racial or religious group leader puts down another group.

In some cases, taking offence has gone further: to official complaints and recourse to law.

Filing a police report is relatively convenient in Singapore and can be done at any of the nearly 100 police stations islandwide. A report can even be lodged online at the Electronic Police Centre website using a SingPass account.

But whether this encourages a culture of being too liberal with lodging police reports depends on how the state and its prosecutors act.

This sense of citizen empowerment is also being enhanced by the digital age and a move towards a more consultative, people-centred government.

Singaporeans are quick to take offence partly because they are still learning how to voice their opinions in the relatively unregulated terrain of the Internet, and partly because the authorities now seem more responsive to feedback.

"We're also only 50 years old this year. In terms of national identity, it takes time to find our place and voice. Sometimes it's manifested in ways that aren't nice," says Ms Jean Chong, co-founder of queer women's group Sayoni.

At the same time, global trends towards social diversity and inclusiveness have spurred more minority groups to speak up for their rights when they feel slighted.

In society's quest to be more all-encompassing, groups that are seen to exclude others are more likely to take some flak, points out NUS sociologist Tan Ern Ser.

Add to this an increasing awareness of one's rights, he adds, and people are less likely to back down if they believe their actions are justified.

Politics of confrontation

BUT when does being confrontational cross the line?

One way it might go too far is when people all but hound individuals or groups they see as bigoted.

Singaporeans' reactions - some say, overreaction - to inflammatory comments include the backlash against British expatriate Anton Casey's mocking of local public transport commuters last year, and former NTUC employee Amy Cheong's diatribe against Malay weddings held at void decks in 2012.

Both ended up relocating to Australia after they were fired from their jobs and castigated online.

Mr Casey said he received death threats. Amos Yee, too, was threatened online with bodily harm by a netizen - and was even slapped by a stranger outside the State Courts last week.

And when civil society members staged a silent protest against law professor and former Nominated MP Thio Li-ann's invitation to speak at a human rights seminar last December, they were criticised for targeting her at a forum not directly relevant to LGBT rights.

Her statements - perceived by some to be homophobic - were made in 2007, went the criticism; how was it fair to "persecute" her seven years later in her professional capacity?

Similarly, critics charged that Mr Khong's magic show had nothing to do with his views on homosexuality, and that pulling Ikea into the fray needlessly polarised the situation.

In their eyes, the activists should be more tolerant and respect differences of opinion.

But some groups which find themselves in a minority often challenge the idea that all views should be treated with equal tolerance.

"Why should we be tolerant of views which stigmatise and marginalise the (LGBT) community?" wrote executive director for migrant workers group Humanitarian Organisation for Migration Economics (Home) Jolovan Wham on Facebook during the Ikea saga.

Another way to identify when people might be becoming too confrontational is when they are reluctant to engage the other side's views.

"Contending groups will dig in further on their entrenched positions. It's their badge of honour," says Singapore Management University law don Eugene Tan.

But he sees little meaningful engagement between some groups, such as LGBT activists and religious groups: "I fear that there is little conversation, although groups try to be as assertive as they can be diplomatically.

"If these sporadic skirmishes take on the texture of existential contests in which one must triumph over the other, then social cohesion will come under threat," he says.

But some confrontation is necessary for change, argue activists.

Home's Mr Wham says: "Social change does not happen as a result of back-room conversations alone."

Other times, the line is crossed when action is taken for a personal agenda.

By now, most Singaporeans know what the limits are with regard to race, religion and nationality, says National University of Singapore sociologist Tan Ern Ser.

"The ones who go a step further (beyond being critical of the remarks) are either those who feel personally offended, or those who want to score points against people they don't like for whatever reasons," Assoc Prof Tan adds.

Some actions - like filing police reports - are widely seen as more aggressive than others. In such a situation, asking the state to intervene in something one is unhappy about is akin to "acting like children", says Sayoni's Ms Chong.

Prof Woon observes: "Making a police report is often a political move rather than a genuine attempt to obtain satisfaction."

This was how some saw the police report film-maker Martyn See filed against Sengkang West MP Lam Pin Min for making allegedly racially seditious comments on Facebook in February.

Dr Lam had linked to a blog post about three Singaporean men arrested at Thaipusam celebrations on Feb 3 for disorderly conduct and voluntarily causing hurt to a police officer, and commented: "An example of how alcohol intoxication can cause rowdiness and public nuisance."

Some incidents are legitimately offensive, and others should not be, and it takes discernment to tell the difference, say activists.

Ms Chong says: "Singapore is a high-pressure society, sometimes people feel crowded out and not heard. Other times, there is genuine frustration that we have not seen the change we had been campaigning for."

A balancing act

WHETHER angst-driven or crusade-motivated, how do we keep this intolerance of intolerance from going too far?

What it boils down to is drawing a line between giving people enough space to air their views, and taking action to prevent those views from creating deep and irreparable social divides.

Much responsibility lies with Singaporeans themselves, who in many of the above cases could have been more careful about what they said, or could have decided to be more thick-skinned after hearing something they didn't like.

NUS adjunct law professor Kevin Tan argues that people should have a higher threshold of tolerance for comments made on the Internet, which is often an unmoderated space, than comments made face to face or in traditional media.

But the state also cannot turn a blind eye to factions in society contesting issues in increasingly more divisive ways.

It must wield power carefully, knowing that every action it takes - choosing to prosecute, for example - is closely watched in the public domain.

Some observers say that one obvious example of much-needed government intervention occurs when interracial and inter-religious hostilities, such as those provoked by the radical group Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, occur.

Such tensions highlight the need for legislation to manage inter-group relations, in the interest of the state.

In a commentary published in The Straits Times last week, Ambassador-at-Large Bilahari Kausikan wrote: "The essential problem... as regards freedom of belief arises when the state is too weak to hold the balance between competing belief systems or too timid to be willing to resist political pressures to privilege one belief system over another."

Apart from legislation, other measures can be taken to defuse social tensions and rising misunderstandings between different groups in society.

As Prof Tan Ern Ser suggests, focusing on promoting goodwill, understanding and integration could help both state and society figure out the balance: "Our objective is not so much to police and punish wrongdoings, but to promote social cohesion, which will in turn produce desirable behaviour."