Seeing Red Over The Colour Pink

Tham Yuen-c And Rachel Au-yong
The Straits Times, 28 June 2014

In the past, race and religion were hot issues that posed a threat to social cohesion. Now, clashes over values, culture and ideology rear their head, particularly in tensions over lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) rights that will play out today in Hong Lim Park, churches and mosques, where those for and against will stand up for the values they believe in by wearing pink or white. Insight looks at whether this marks the advent of culture wars here, and why the LGBT issue is such a lightning rod.

THE Pink Dot mass picnic started out in 2009 as a small group of people from the gay community celebrating the "freedom to love", as they put it, regardless of sexual orientation.

Over the years, organisers adopted a non-confrontational approach to gay rights. Pink badges - the movement's symbol - sprouted and the event has become Singapore's biggest civil-society gathering. About 21,000 turned up last year.

But this evening's picnic marks a turning point, one that raises the question of whether Singapore is seeing the advent of culture wars, where issues of ideology and behaviour become polarising forces in society, as in the US.

That is because this year, religious groups have come out directly to protest against the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) event. They are against homosexuality and see the mass event as undermining traditional family values.

Islamic religious teacher Noor Deros has launched a "Wear White" campaign, calling for Muslims to don the colour of "purity" at mosques today, the eve of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan.

And in what is possibly the first inter-faith cooperation of its kind against the LGBT issue, some Christian groups have come on board.

Outspoken pastor Lawrence Khong has pledged the support of his Faith Community Baptist Church and the LoveSingapore network of churches, asking members to wear white today and tomorrow at church.

Why Are Gay Rights A Hot Issue?

The LGBT issue single-handedly exposes multiple fault-lines within Singapore society.

There is the division between religious and secular groups (and even within that, between religious conservatives and religious liberals), and it also highlights the gap between Singapore's generally silent, conservative majority, and liberal minority.

It also shows up those who find homosexuality morally repugnant, and those who believe universal human rights trump that.

The most obvious faultline is how religious and secular groups view homosexuality.

Anecdotal evidence from the debate surrounding the Pink Dot event has seen the conservative camp mainly represented by religious groups, and the liberal camp represented by those with a secular view.

Christian organisations - LoveSingapore, National Council of Churches of Singapore (NCCS) and the Catholic Church - and the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (Muis) consistently reiterate that homosexuality is a sin.

The response from LGBT supporters is often that gay people are "born that way", a stand which former prime ministers Lee Kuan Yew and Goh Chok Tong have subscribed to in interviews.

By extension, gays cannot be judged for what is innate.

But even among religious groups, the response can be varied.

Christian pastor Lawrence Khong is unapologetically strident in his efforts. In his most recent open letter, he challenges the Government to "put a stop to the public promotion of the Pink Dot movement" and let multinational companies know they "have no business in supporting" it.

Meanwhile, the NCCS and the Catholic Church say that while homosexuality is a sin, they do not condemn those struggling with their gender identity and sexual orientation.

Conservatives, meanwhile, may now be anxious over whether their voice will hold sway with the Government, given the vociferous nature of some minority groups.

Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) senior research fellow Mathew Mathews notes: "Conservatives are generally passive when the LGBT segment doesn't push for gay rights, but when they do, conservatives too push for the space which they want to protect and keep."

Conservatives do not just include the religious. In a recent IPS survey led by Dr Mathew, close to seven in 10 who had no religion said gay sex was wrong.

This is not far off from the views of the relatively quiet Taoists, Buddhists and Hindus (78 per cent, 74 per cent and 78 per cent respectively). Nine in 10 Muslims and more than eight in 10 Protestants said gay sex was wrong.

Although official numbers have never been calculated here, surveys in the US and UK estimate gay citizens make up between 2 per cent and 10 per cent of the populace.

Finally, while some find homosexuality morally repugnant, others argue that no one should be denied - on the grounds of sexual persuasion, anyway - what they deem as basic human rights.

In Singapore, there are two obstacles that gays must overcome, says the latter group.

First, there is Section 377A of the Penal Code which criminalises sex between men. This regulates morality through criminal law - something a secular state should avoid, they say.

MP Charles Chong spoke out in support of repealing 377A during the 2007 parliamentary debate on it, arguing that if experts were correct that some people are born with a different sexual orientation, then "it would be quite wrong of us to criminalise and to persecute those that are born different from us regardless of how conservative a society we claim to be".

Second, gays cannot have their partnerships recognised under the law, nor are they allowed to adopt children. As those who are in long-term relationships are not recognised as a legitimately married couple, they are not entitled to subsidised public housing.

The first thing is to recognise that 377A is already obsolete, declares president of human rights group Maruah Braema Mathi.

"But we should already be moving to the next level - having an anti-discrimination law that covers many aspects of gender, ethnicity and lifestyle choices," she says.

"Even if we have an anti-discrimination law today, it doesn't mean everyone can get married tomorrow. We still need to negotiate on patterns of behaviour that is acceptable to family and society. All of these lifestyle actions need more dialogue, which we haven't started yet."

But conservatives see the repeal of 377A as a slippery slope to gays pushing for more rights.

Some, especially religious groups, fear that when gays are recognised as a minority and are given more rights, their own rights to practise the beliefs of their religion will be affected.

"For some religious groups, their biggest concern is that they are able to state what they believe is morally correct - there is sometimes fear, based on what some hear about other societies, that it might be difficult for religious groups in time to come to openly declare that certain things are not right," says Dr Mathew.

What Lies Ahead For Singapore

INDEED, observers see in the latest reactions to a hot-button issue the arrival of the culture wars in Singapore.

The phrase "culture wars" is derived from the German kulturkampf, which was coined to describe the clash between the government and the Catholic Church in Germany the 1800s.

But in recent times, it has been used in the United States to describe protracted fights between liberals and conservatives to seize the agenda on issues as diverse as abortion, euthanasia and gun control. Cultural commentator and humanities lecturer Nazry Bahrawi says: "It's not a war in the sense that it will lead to people taking up arms, but in terms of ideas and discourse."

With moral values evolving, and more groups agitating for change, Singapore can expect more such clashes, adds Dr Mathew.

Where the culture wars have strayed into the political realm, the democratic process has been rendered ineffective by political stalemates.

In the US, for example, religious leaders and their political champions have contributed to the delay of health-care reforms, protesting against the inclusion of birth control benefits in health insurance plans.

Some countries in Europe have also swung the other way, eschewing religious values for secular ones.

Earlier this year, French anti-immigration party National Front announced that it would ban schools from offering non-pork meals to Muslim and Jewish pupils in towns it rules, claiming that doing so would allow "religion to enter into the public sphere".

Such actions have put religious groups on the defensive, causing more cleavages in society.

Developments such as these have prompted Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong to warn against Singapore going down the same path.

In fact, culture wars here have taken on political overtones before.

In 1991 the Government introduced the film classification system with the Restricted or R rating that made it possible for films with scenes of nudity, love-making or violence to be screened in cinemas.

When the People's Action Party lost an unprecedented four seats in the general election shortly after, it was argued by social conservatives in the party and beyond that this stemmed from a rejection of measures to appeal to a younger, more liberal generation, through initiatives such as the censorship relaxation. The Government eventually dialled back by introducing the less liberal Restricted (Artistic) or R(A) rating.

Some groups had also warned that there would be electoral implications over introducing casinos.

In the majority of such debates, the Government has mostly moved on moral issues only when society has signalled it is ready.

This has worked well in some cases, such as on the debate over section 377A of the Penal Code, when the Government had managed a difficult compromise that "corresponded" with the preferences of the majority, a University of Hong Kong assistant professor of law, Mr Chen Jianlin, said in a paper published last year.

The Government had decided in 2007, after fierce debates in Parliament, not to repeal the law, citing that legislation should reflect the values of society that is still largely conservative. In the same breath, it had also reiterated that the law would not be proactively enforced on homosexuals in consensual relationships, acknowledging that the minority should be accommodated, said Mr Chen.

He added that the ruling People's Action Party's political dominance had helped it resist "capture" by minority interest groups, and by extension prevent them from setting the agenda for mainstream society.

On some issues, the Government has shown a propensity to move society along when there are pragmatic reasons to do so - for example, when deciding to go ahead with introducing casinos.

Former Nominated MP and political watcher Siew Kum Hong, though, does not agree that the Government should always be the one solving the difficult societal questions. As a result of this, society is ill-equipped to deal with such issues, he says.

"The Government can and should be a referee and enforce fair ground rules, but ultimately society must also come to a resolution or compromise or equilibrium.

"In today's world, a decision imposed by the Government top-down may lead to a path forward in the short term, but will not be sustainable in the long term," he says.

In the broader context of LGBT rights, and indeed other cultural clashes that may crop up over the years, striking a compromise may not be easy.

To Dr Nazry, this means a new way of thinking about social cohesion and harmony.

The way forward, he reckons, is for groups or individuals to be able to offer different interpretations of an issue, without going into "character assassination and ad hominem attacks", adding that this has always happened to those who challenge social norms.

"There is this big cake, and I'm just trying to point to this other side that you can have," he says of how people should look at different values.

And while diversity of views can give rise to division, they are not in themselves harmful to society.

Nanyang Technological University associate professor Benjamin Detenber says: "Having values and religious beliefs discussed ardently in public is something many people are unaccustomed to in Singapore, and it makes them uncomfortable."

But such debates are healthy for a multicultural society, as long as they are civil, he adds. In fact, public debates can help a rapidly changing and increasingly complex society find a new balance.