

Singapore society still largely conservative but becoming more liberal on gay rights: IPS survey

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SINGAPORE - People in Singapore are now more liberal in their views on gay rights, even as society remains largely conservative.

A survey by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) on perceptions and attitudes towards social and moral issues found that there is greater acceptance of gay sex, gay marriage and adoption by gay couples now than five years ago when the same survey was done.

Overall, slightly more than 20 per cent of those polled between August 2018 and January 2019 said sexual relations between adults of the same sex were not wrong at all or not wrong most of the time, up from about 10 per cent of those polled in 2013.

About 27 per cent felt the same way about gay marriage, up from 15 per cent in 2013, and 30 per cent felt the same way about gay couples adopting a child, up from 24 per cent in 2013.

Released by IPS on Thursday (May 2), the findings are part of a wider IPS survey on race, language and religion, and come at a time of greater scrutiny on the conservative-liberal divide on moral, social and political issues.

More than 4,000 Singapore residents were asked to indicate how they feel on a range of issues by choosing whether it is "not wrong at all", "not wrong most of the time", "only wrong sometimes", "almost always wrong" or "always wrong". A similar number of people were polled in 2013.

In general, people have become less conservative on moral issues in Singapore, with fewer who are opposed to not just gay rights, but also pre-marital sex and cohabitation, said the authors of the survey, IPS senior research fellow Mathew Mathews, research associate Leonard Lim, and research assistant Shanthini Selvarajan.

The changes were most stark on homosexual rights, though, mirroring international trends in countries such as the United States where there is now less resistance in this area amid greater advocacy by lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender and queer (LGBTQ) groups.

Comparing the results from 2018 to those from 2013, the shift in attitude on the issue was more pronounced among the young.

For instance, about half of those between the ages of 18 and 25 did not frown upon sex between adults of the same sex in the latest survey. In comparison, about 20 per cent in the same age group felt the same way in the earlier survey.

Among people aged 65 and above, only about 10 per cent said gay sex was not wrong in 2018, though this was already up from about 3 per cent in 2013.

This divergence between the young and old was also reflected among Christians and Muslims polled, with younger Christians and Muslims less conservative than their older counterparts.

The survey also found that younger respondents were more likely to become more liberal in their views over time, compared to older respondents.

In 2013, about 18 per cent of respondents aged 20 to 24 felt that gay sex was not wrong. Five years on, over 40 per cent of the cohort, now aged 25 to 28, felt the same way.

In comparison, this shift to a more liberal attitude was much less among older respondents.

For instance, in 2013, 11 per cent of respondents aged 55 to 59 said gay marriage was not wrong. In 2018, about 15 per cent of the cohort, now aged 60 to 64, said the same thing.

Over time, if these trends continue, the young will pull further away from the old, with society becoming more polarised on moral issues along age lines, said the authors.

These developments could be a result of growing activism among millennials in the area of gay rights, said the researchers. Young people are also more likely to know someone who identifies as gay, and have come across the theme of homosexuality in sitcoms and movies, they added.

They said if the trends continue, there could be greater acceptance of gay rights in Singapore in future, and certain social policies might have to be re-looked or re-evaluated.

The survey also found that Christians and Muslims were more conservative on gay rights, compared to those from other religions, as were those who are married, more financially frugal and who see governments as leaders of societal change.

Those who support free speech and were more accommodating of people of different backgrounds were more liberal.

Commenting on the link between religion and conservatism, the study's authors said: "Support for moral positions in the coming years may be increasingly religiously based. If not managed well, this can be divisive with different religious groups uniting over moral positions, forming blocs and together opposing those of other religions who may differ on these moral positions."

The link between attitudes towards socio-political matters and gay rights also has the potential to aggravate already existing tensions between pro- and anti-LGBTQ camps, they added.

Despite the greater acceptance of gay rights, though, society continues to be largely conservative, the researchers said, citing people's views on gambling and infidelity.

Views in these areas had not changed much over the years, even among the young people polled. For instance in 2013, about 13 per cent of those aged 20 to 24 felt infidelity was not wrong, and by 2018, among the same cohort, now aged 25 to 29, about 12 per cent felt the same way.

Besides asking about issues to do with sex and the family, the survey also sought to determine how conservative or liberal respondents were in political, fiscal and social matters, by asking people to indicate if they identified more with position A or B, or were neutral on various issues.

Respondents were neutral on many of the issues, but tended to agree more with the position emphasised by the Government in general, which was considered more conservative.

On freedom of speech, around four in 10 respondents agreed that people should be careful when speaking about sensitive topics, compared to three in 10 who agreed that people should be allowed to speak freely on any topic.

On who should lead societal change, around four in 10 respondents felt it should be the Government, while about two in 10 felt it should be citizens.

Delving deeper into the results, researchers also found that those who were conservative on moral issues were more likely to also be conservative on socio-political issues.

"These findings affirm the general conservatism of Singaporeans when it comes to many moral issues including pregnancy outside marriage, gay marriage and homosexual sex. Simultaneously, the results point to the slow thawing of attitudes towards these very issues over time, as seen in the shift towards more liberal attitudes over the span of five years from 2013 to 2018," the report's authors say.