

Singapore to update law on religious harmony to address spread of hate speech, identity politics

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SINGAPORE - Amid the prevalence of identity politics and hate speech on social media, Singapore will need to update a 30-year-old law that safeguards religious harmony, Minister for Home Affairs and Law K. Shanmugam said on Wednesday (July 24).

The amendments to the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act, enacted in 1990, will be made with the agreement of key stakeholders, including religious leaders and the people, he added.

Mr Shanmugam was speaking at a forum on religion, extremism and identity politics organised by the Institute of Policy Studies and the Ministry of Home Affairs, where he said the Government had discussed the matter extensively with various religious groups and their leaders.

"They are all in sync, they all agree, with broadly the direction we want to go," he added.

The Act was mooted in the late 1980s by first Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, who was concerned by the rising religious fervour and the mixing of religion and politics globally, and the harmful impact these trends could have on Singapore.

The law allows the Government to issue restraining orders against those sowing discord among faiths.

Since it went into effect in 1992, it has never been invoked, although the authorities have come close to doing so on a number of occasions.

On Wednesday, Mr Shanmugam said the law's very existence has set the parameters for social conduct and signalled the political will to act against those who cross the line.

"I am a believer in making sure the power is there. But I am also a believer in not exercising that power. You shouldn't have to exercise the power because if you did, society will not be what it is," he said.

The minister did not elaborate on the planned changes, but flagged two key aspects of the update: It will make the law effective against those who make derogatory remarks about religions in the new information age, and reaffirm Singapore's commitment to prevent religion from being exploited for any political or subversive purposes.

Noting that the Government took efforts 30 years ago to discuss the issue and make sure that the law was understood and accepted, Mr Shanmugam signalled that similar efforts would be made this time to engage religious groups and the public.

The issue will also be discussed in Parliament, he said.

But the minister emphasised that legislation was only one part of Singapore's approach to maintaining racial and religious harmony.

The Government actively ensures that people of different faiths come together, through its policies on housing and education, among others – an approach borne of Singapore’s experience with racial and religious riots in the 1950s and 1960s.

“We will not adopt a passive approach to securing religious harmony,” he said.

“That has never been the Singapore way, and...the fact that we have managed to achieve some degree of success in the path that we have taken should give us confidence to deal with the problem in unique ways if necessary,” he added.

Other speakers at the forum spoke on how religious identities were becoming a greater factor in politics globally, creating “us versus them” divides that played into the hands of extremists. They also noted that religion was playing a greater role in politics in the region.

S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies professor Rohan Gunaratna noted that Sri Lanka, where Buddhist extremists have been targeting Muslims, was in the process of introducing a Harmony Act modelled on Singapore’s Act.

Mr Shanmugam noted that all religions are capable of being exploited and have been, citing cases of errant Christian and Muslim preachers here as well as militant Buddhist ideologues in Myanmar and Sri Lanka.

Singapore, he said, must remain a place where all religions co-exist.

“We made a conscious determination to be multiracial, multi-religious, and that no one would be squatted upon on account of racial or religious beliefs,” he said. “That commitment to our people will not waver... We should not allow it to waver, and we must update our laws to make sure that we keep to that commitment.”