Most In S'pore Feel There Is Religious Harmony: Study
Majority Of Respondents Satisfied With The Rights Religious Groups Have

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SINGAPORE — Two in three people here feel that there is religious harmony, and the majority are satisfied with the rights that religious groups have, a study published yesterday by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) has found.

Still, the survey of 3,128 people here — which was conducted between December 2012 and April last year — threw up the notion that the religious harmony that the Republic enjoys is State-managed, after the authors of the study observed that government measures, such as legislation and setting up community networks, have worked well even at times of heightened religiosity in some circles.

While almost four in 10 of the respondents felt that increasing religiosity could harm religious harmony here, many others were ambivalent or did not agree with this proposition.

The working paper on religiosity and management of religious harmony is the third release of findings from a large-scale survey on race, religion and language by the IPS. It was authored by the institute's senior research fellow Mathew Mathews, research assistant Mohd Khamsya Khidzer and research intern Teo Kay Key.

The study noted that the Government uses "a combination of hard and soft measures" to maintain religious harmony, such as through the Sedition Act and Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act, as well as the establishment of Inter-racial and Religious Confidence Circles.

Lead author Dr Mathew said: "I don't think we can underestimate the role that legislation has in terms of … informing people what is normative and what could be necessary for maintaining a religiously harmonious society."

People could come to accept over time that the State's approach is "actually more productive", he said. "After a while, people also kind of accept the fact that this probably is a better way … rather than (being confrontational), it's better to do good things to people and over time, people will be more open to your faith."

Asked if religious groups should be given more rights, 23.7 per cent of the respondents agreed. While the authorities should be aware of this segment, Dr Mathew said people are fairly content with the status quo. "If people are cognizant and they weigh some of the issues, they'll be careful about wanting to push for further rights," he said. "When everybody pushes for rights, some rights will impinge on others."

The majority of respondents also looked to the State to deal with acts that threaten religious harmony. More than six in 10 said they would report to the authorities if someone poked fun at racial or religious groups on the Internet or when a religious leader put down another group.

The study found that while people here were comfortable having bosses, colleagues and neighbours of other religions and being close friends with people from other religions, they were less comfortable when it came to close relatives such as spouses and in-laws.

About one-third of respondents attend religious services at least once a month and over two in three believe in God — including 21 per cent of those who profess to have no religion. One-quarter have attended a religious meeting or been to a religious place that is not of their faith. Dr Mathew said people may be more hesitant when it comes to learning about others' religions due to concerns that "then, I might move from my faith to your faith". Intercultural understanding is important and it needs to be robust, taking into account diversity even within one religion, he said.

Commenting on the findings, literary and cultural critic Nazry Bahrawi, of the Singapore University of Technology and Design, believes Singapore has to embrace studies about religion and belief systems in a bigger way. He suggested that a module on ethics could be introduced in secondary schools, while religious studies departments could be set up in universities, for instance.

Another way is to allow more open discussion about religion in the media, said Dr Nazry. "A society that has a deeper understanding of its belief systems is one that can be harmonious."