

Reason pastor not arrested

Leong Wee Keat

TODAY, 10 February 2010

SINGAPORE - The three youth who posted racist comments on Facebook were arrested by the Police. Pastor Rony Tan, who insulted the beliefs of Buddhists and Taoists, was called up by the Internal Security Department (ISD). Why the different treatment, some are wondering.

In reply to media queries, Deputy Prime Minister and Home Affairs Minister Wong Kan Seng said the bottom-line in such cases is to ensure that the out-of-bound markers are "clear and that transgressions are dealt with in a balanced and professional manner".

"Our agencies must be allowed to exercise their professional judgement on how best to achieve this outcome," he said.

Although Pastor Tan was not "arrested", Mr Wong stressed that it did not mean the incident was being treated any less seriously.

"It is a very serious matter if anyone were to be hauled up and investigated by ISD," Mr Wong said. "It is not less serious than getting investigated by the Police. I assure you that it is not."

Regarding the Facebook case, a complaint was made to the Police, who then launched investigations and established the identity of the suspects. All three youths were arrested and are now out on bail.

It is understood that the arrest was essentially a standard procedure to facilitate a Police probe into the matter.

Police investigations are ongoing and the matter will be referred to the Attorney-General's Chambers, who in turn will "determine the appropriate conclusion to the matter", said Mr Wong, "We should let this police investigation take place without interference or prejudging or speculating what that outcome will be or should be," he added.

Political observers whom MediaCorp spoke to generally thought that different circumstances call for different approaches.

Contacted last night, political analyst Eugene Tan felt that the Government had calibrated its responses to the perceived dangers, in both the short term and slightly longer term, in both cases. "This latest case dealt with a threat to religious harmony and ISD has the necessary expertise to deal with this," he said. "Here was a religious leader, over-zealous in preaching and making remarks he shouldn't have... Here was also a situation that was catching fire rapidly in cyberspace, I think that prompted the ISD to act quickly."

Other observers also noted that the ISD tends to "operate discreetly behind closed doors", but this time it issued a strongly worded public statement, stating explicitly that the department had called up the pastor and putting on public record that his comments were "unacceptable".

Despite this, Mr Tan Tarn How, a senior research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies, believes that an opinion leader such as Pastor Tan should be dealt with more severely, compared to an ordinary individual. "An opinion leader has more influence. I think the pastor was let off too lightly," said Mr Tan.

While the initial response by the authorities was different, Member of Parliament Alvin Yeo, who chairs the Government Parliamentary Committee for Home Affairs, thinks "it is still early" to judge what will be the outcome of the cases.

Generally, political analysts agreed that the Government had to move quickly, as the videos of Pastor Tan's comments had spread virally online.

The incident showed how information could easily "spin out of control through rapid dissemination and replication in the Digital Age", observed National University of Singapore new media lecturer Gui Kai Chong.

Another observation, arising from both this case and that of the three youths on Facebook, was that netizens and Singaporeans exercised a moderating voice in response to the comments.

In Pastor Tan's case, the initial trickle of comments became an outpouring of condemnation.

Analysts agreed that condemnation by opinion leaders - on and offline - do serve an "important role" in surfacing the issue and responding with immediate counter-arguments, before tensions escalate. Such community policing serves as "the natural first line of defence", said S Rajaratnam School of International Studies associate research fellow Yolanda Chin, before the law enforcement agencies assess the impact of the comments on the social fabric and act accordingly.