Racial harmony in Singapore – it's more fragile than you think

Noah Tan
The Pride, 8th November 2017

They were recently banned by Singapore's Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) from entering the country as they were deemed to be preaching "divisive" teachings.

But while the ban on the two foreign preachers – Ismail Menk, better known as Mufti Menk, and Malaysian Haslin Baharim – was endorsed by the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (Muis), reaction to the news by the Muslim community here has been mixed, to say the least.

A scroll through the comments section of Mufti Menk's Facebook post in response to the ban throws up a number of Singaporean Muslims continuing to express their support for the religious leader from Zimbabwe.

"I'm from Singapore and I stand with Mufti Menk!" Facebook user Yan Yan commented. Another Facebook user, Muhd Irfan, wrote: "I am from Singapore (and) almost every day I listen to your lectures and talks, and it (is) really unfortunate (to) get to know this kind of decision. I will always continue to support you!"

Others however, have proven to be more understanding of MHA's decision to ban the two preachers.

Digital content producer Ahmad Dinie told The Pride that while he personally did not think Mufti Menk's teachings were 'divisive', the multi-religious, multicultural and multiracial nature of Singapore's society means the authorities will have to adopt a much stricter approach to sensitive subjects like religion.

"From my understanding, the things that Mufti Menk says usually promote cohesiveness, rather than serve to be divisive," the 28-year-old said. "However, I also know that in a country like Singapore – a melting pot of cultures and religions – the subject of religion has to be handled very carefully lest people from other religions get offended.

"So it is no surprise that the authorities are extra cautious, and will ban anything they deem could potentially cause division, even if the intention isn't there."

According to a study done by the Pew Research Center in 2014, Singapore was found to be the most religiously diverse nation in the world.

And in a country as geographically small as Singapore, harmony between the different religions plays an important role in the effective and smooth functioning of society.

 This issue of religious harmony is something that MUIS places great emphasis on, as evidenced by the code of ethics that all Asatizah (religious teachers), both local and foreign, will have to follow before being allowed to preach here.

"The foundation of respect, sensitivity and tolerance towards other religions is something we should always strive to uphold and embrace," a MUIS spokesperson explained to The Pride.

"This is in line with the Asatizah Code of Ethics where all Asatizah shall remain committed to preserve the well-being and harmony of the society at all times.

"This also includes avoiding concepts, terms and descriptions that may erode social harmony and threaten the social fabric of Singapore."

The bans on Mufti Menk and Haslin Baharim come just over a month after the MHA rejected the applications of two foreign Christian preachers from speaking in Singapore after deeming that they had made "denigrating and inflammatory comments of other religions".

The National Council of Churches (NCCS) president Right Reverend Rennis Ponniah subsequently penned on their website a reminder note to their member churches to "exercise due diligence and careful discernment when inviting foreign preachers to address their congregations".

He added: "Religious polarisation can so easily be exacerbated by sweeping and insensitive statements, more so by leaders and preachers who are not familiar with or appreciative of the fabric of inter-faith relations we have built up in Singapore over the years."

The note went on to call on Christians to "foster trust and mutual respect across different faiths".

With the social climate all over the world currently centred on buzzwords such as "terrorism", "extremism" and "radicalisation", Dr Mathew Mathews of the National University of Singapore's (NUS) Institute of Policy Studies says it is necessary for Singapore to continue to keep a strict check on the messages being preached by religious teachers here.

"(MHA's actions) can appear strict to some, but these are (the) realities of living in a multi-religious society – one of them being that the space for religious expression is negotiated," he explained. "If the foreign religious preachers encourage their followers to practise a form of religion which leads to rampant misunderstanding between communities, this won't be good for nurturing a harmonious Singapore.

"This (discernment) is very important especially in a world which is swiftly polarising. If we want to build a strong community, we have to decide that some messages may sow substantial unhappiness and so be wary of those messages."

However, while the MHA can ban "divisive" religious figures from coming to Singapore, many of these preachers' messages can still be accessed online, which calls into question the effectiveness of such bans.

NUS adjunct senior fellow Dr Lai Ah Eng, a social anthropologist, believes such bans are "not enough", and that "there needs to be other mechanisms and forces operating".

She added: "The argument that any two persons can come out of a sermon with different views is in theory true, and assumes people can be independent thinkers.

"But there is a reality out there of a strongly conservative, even anti-social wave of religious conservatism, that had been sweeping across Muslim populations for some time, resulting in groupthink and mass psychological behaviour."

What then, can the long-term solution to this prickly issue be?

There is no clear-cut answer as yet, but Dr Mathews thinks it could boil down to how the individual consumes the message.

"Ultimately, long-lasting solutions involve Singaporeans being well aware of the value of respect and tolerance," said Dr Mathews. "Many are already convinced of this, but might need to be better informed of how some messages might seek to undermine such respect, tolerance and sensitivity."

In a recent speech, the Mufti of Singapore, Dr Mohamed Fatris Bakaram, also advised individuals to practise careful discernment when listening to religious messages.

"Unfortunately, the ideas and teachings of such speakers can still be accessed through other means, either online or abroad, when Singaporeans travel for study, work or on leisure," said Dr Fatris. "I wish to reiterate that Singaporean Muslims need to exercise caution and have a critical and enquiring mind.

"As local Asatizah and IECPs (Islamic Education Centres and Providers), it is our collective duty to build the resilience of the Muslim community to protect them from easily getting influenced by such unfounded and irrelevant ideas, however charismatic the preacher(s) may be."

For Ahmad Dinie, the foundation of respect for other religions that he was brought up on is what helps keep him from falling prey to potentially divisive messages.

"For many of us who have grown up in Singapore, we know the value of acceptance for all religions and their practices," he explained. "Personally, I believe in inclusivity and respect for all, and that shapes my outlook in how I discern what messages are considered 'divisive' or not."

Thankfully, multiculturalism, multiracialism, and harmony among religions remains a core tenet of Singapore society today.

But make no mistake, it still requires everyone to do their part to ensure this will continue. This can be done simply by being respectful and sensitive to the beliefs of others – in conversations, remarks and even in posts and comments made on social media.

And that perhaps, is a message that all Singaporeans can preach.