

Singaporeans do not want religion influencing politics: Report

Report: People also find it unacceptable for religious leaders to incite hate

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Most Singaporeans are religious but still frown on religious behaviour that could influence politics or disrupt social harmony, a new report by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) has found.

Singaporeans also feel that having different religious views is no barrier to getting along when living in close proximity.

The researchers noted that a sizeable proportion of people have no qualms about letting religious extremists publish their views online or hold public meetings to talk about them.

When surveyed, one in four people said putting such views online is acceptable as long as they do not instigate harm on others, and younger respondents were even more likely to think so - possibly because of more liberal attitudes towards free speech among the young, the researchers said.

But the overwhelming consensus across all age groups is that it is unacceptable for religious leaders to incite hatred or violence against other religions.

The working paper's authors, however, noted there is a fine line between espousing extremist views that consider other faiths as enemies and making hate speech.

"How the government navigates the desire by this significant segment of the population for freedom of speech pertaining to extremist views in future will be of interest," they added.

The findings on people's attitudes towards religion were part of an international study involving multiple nations.

It was written by IPS senior research fellow Mathew Mathews, research associate Leonard Lim and research assistant Shanthini Selvarajan.

"Religion is an influential and powerful force and seeps into multiple domains of public and private life," the authors said.

"Tracking the expansive reach and influence of religion is thus crucial in maintaining inter-religious harmony and surveying public sentiment in public policy."

A total of 1,800 Singapore residents aged 18 and older were surveyed for the local component of the international study.

Face-to-face interviews were carried out between August and December last year by market research company ML Research Consultants. Participants were asked about their religious beliefs and how these influence their views on issues such as public policy, religious harmony and infidelity.

Although 80 per cent have religious beliefs, only 40 per cent said they would consider themselves to be a "spiritual person".

Buddhists, Taoists and Hindus were more likely to have religious beliefs but not identify as spiritual.

On religious harmony, seven in 10 people said they feel people from different religious backgrounds can get along when living close together.

Even so, around 15 per cent of them said they found Muslims at least somewhat threatening. This was higher than for any other religious group.

Those living in private housing estates or landed property were more likely to see Muslims as threats.

Muslims were viewed most positively by Buddhists and Hindus, but about one in five Catholics, Christians and those with no religion said they were very or somewhat threatening.

"There is little question that global terror and how these have often been associated with Muslims has fed into the minds of a small group of Singaporeans who thus feel that Muslims are threatening," Dr Mathews told The Straits Times.

"The lack of exposure and opportunities for learning about Muslims might have left some of their fears unchallenged."

Most agreed religious leaders should not try to influence voting at elections or make remarks about politicians' characters.

When asked about moral issues such as abortion, infidelity and homosexual sex, researchers also found a person's religious views tended to shape their answers.

Better educated and younger respondents, as well as those with no religion, tended to have more liberal attitudes towards these issues.

A total of 82.4 per cent believed that infidelity was always wrong, but only 67.9 per cent felt the same way about homosexual sex.