

## Survey's definition of 'extremism' should be examined carefully

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*TODAY*, 3 April 2019

I read with much interest the results of a survey conducted by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) stating that a significant segment of the Singapore population (26.8 per cent) would be open to "religious extremists" posting their views online.

This is even as more than 97 per cent of all respondents said that it would be unacceptable or very unacceptable for religious leaders to incite violence or hatred against other religions.

However, the definition of "extremism" in the survey should be examined carefully in light of the apparent contradiction between the findings.

In the IPS report (page 88), the survey question was prefaced as follows: "There are some people whose views are considered extreme by the majority. Consider religious extremists, that is, people who believe that their religion is the only true faith and all other religions should be considered as enemies."

Apart from prescribing a normative judgement, this definition of "extremism" could have been better clarified as to whether the subjects being regarded as "enemies" are other religious beliefs or the religious groups that profess those beliefs.

On one hand, it is permissible for religious groups to teach that their religious beliefs are correct and others are in error.

In a 1989 Maintenance of Religious Harmony White Paper, the Government accepted that "each religious group, in instructing its own followers, will naturally need to point out where its doctrines differ from other religions, and indeed from other branches of the same religion, and why it regards the others as being mistaken".

On the other hand, calling other religious groups "enemies" may amount to inciting hatred against these groups.

Around the world, tribalism and identity politics have threatened to polarise and divide societies.

Being a small country that is highly connected with the international community, events elsewhere may potentially affect relations among different groups in Singapore.

Therefore, our ability to thrive and flourish as a society in the future will depend on how we navigate our differences in an ongoing dialogue about our common national destiny.