The Big Read: Open to extremist views, youth want diverse voices and honest talk — but at what cost?

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SINGAPORE — A recent paper on religion in the Republic by researchers from the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) threw up a finding that was both surprising and disconcerting: Almost half of young Singaporeans said they were open to religious extremists posting their views online.

The paper, released about a month ago, showed that nearly 46 per cent of the respondents aged 18 to 25 would allow extremist views that deem all other religions as enemies to be published on the Internet or social media.

Even so, almost all of this group (97.2 per cent), in responding to another question, said it was unacceptable for religious leaders to incite violence or hatred against other religions.

Still, the fact that young adults here are more open to religious extremist views online is a cause for concern since it could lead to undesirable consequences and may even have an impact on national security, some experts said.

“Given the rise of self-radicalisation in terrorist incidents, hate speech, and Islamophobia both globally and in Singapore, it is comforting that the majority of Singaporeans would not allow religious extremists to post their views online. But the significant quarter of the population, as well as higher proportions among the young, who would permit such freedoms is worrying,” said the paper’s authors Dr Mathew Mathews, Mr Leonard Lim and Ms Shanthini Selvarajan of the IPS, a Singapore-based think-tank.

Singapore Management University (SMU) law don Eugene Tan, who writes on race, religious and terrorism issues, said that being receptive to such ideology means people are potentially at risk of being on the “conveyor belt” to violent extremism.

Mr Mohamed Imran Mohamed Taib, the director of the Centre for Interfaith Understanding, noted that younger generations — especially in a “deeply plural society” like Singapore — need to know that non-violent extremism can have negative consequences too. Such form of extremism refers to extremist views or behaviour lacking the element of incitement or calling for violence.

“(Non-violent extremism) can seed prejudices, breed distrust, cause segregation and lead to hostility. It will not take much to spark violence when the general population is rife with prejudices, distrust and hostile perceptions and attitudes towards an out-group,” he said.

Something of interest to national security would be how this openness shapes the social and political attitudes of young Singaporeans, said Mr Muhammad Faizal Abdul Rahman, a research fellow at the S Rajaratnam School of International Studies’ (RSIS) Centre of Excellence for National Security.

“Extremist content promotes the belief that humanity is in a perpetual state of conflict. Would this realisation make young Singaporeans appreciate better the necessity for emergency preparedness and safeguarding religious or racial harmony?” he questioned.

WHAT YOUTHS SAY

Many youths whom TODAY spoke to agreed that they are indeed more open to extremist views online, but said they have faith in the ability of themselves and their peers to draw a line at views that incite hatred or violence.

They attributed their openness to their exposure to ideals of freedom of speech and expression — something that the IPS researchers also cited as an "important societal value", especially to millennials.

Others felt that youths here have been "desensitised" to such views, precisely of the freedoms they have enjoyed on the Internet and social media.

Mr Jiang Haolie, 23, coordinator at student-led group Community for Advocacy and Political Education based in Yale-NUS College, said that just because many youths do not believe in the censoring of religious extremist views online, it "does not necessarily mean that they endorse such views".

"I think it points to a more mature view of younger Singaporeans — that censoring offensive or uncomfortable views do not actually nip hate speech or extremist views in the bud," the Yale-NUS College undergraduate added.

Mr Matthew Soo, a law undergraduate at SMU, argued that most people his age would be able to recognise "clear" instances of religious or racial extremism, given the "constant emphasis on racial and religious harmony" here.

On why he and his peers are more open to these views, the 21-year-old pointed to the current social media culture, which has perpetuated a "social justice warrior" generation where pockets of young people use the Internet as a platform for change in social issues. Conversely, there are many who also "really cannot care less".

"This may be a case of apathy, desensitisation and a slight sense of complacency. Youths today may not feel that there may be serious repercussions arising out of this kind of religious extremism online," Mr Chun Win Ee, a psychology undergraduate at Nanyang Technological University (NTU), said.

The 27-year-old noted that extremity has almost become a norm in people's online "double lives". As many have seen people posting intolerant comments about numerous issues with no repercussions, this has led to youths possibly thinking that religious extremist views are also the norm.

"I also think that such online religious extremist postings are underappreciated as a threat because it seems as innocuous as the typical hate speech that we see online on other issues. And that makes it so much more insidious," he added.

Ms Lo Hoi Ying, a 22-year-old NTU undergraduate in communication studies, spoke about being desensitised to such online views herself. But she said this is because she knows what the religious extremists are saying is "drastically different from what we have experienced while growing up in Singapore".

"I am open to such views, but I also know that if I see these posts on my Facebook, I will just scoff and scroll along because I am not interested in whatever they have to say," she added.

Ultimately, the youths interviewed generally believed that they are ready for open and honest conversations about race and religion. And to them, that is the best way to inoculate themselves against extremist views.

Mr Soo said: "If we cannot have open conversations about (issues of institutional racism), the efforts to promote greater racial and religious understanding run into a (brick wall), where we are simply preaching to the choir instead of addressing the genuine disaffection within or between groups."

While Ms Lo conceded that people can fall for views meant to incite anger and cause societal tensions despite adequate education and information, Mr Jiang felt that young Singaporeans are mature and educated enough to engage in a discourse about racial and religious issues, rather than "sweeping them under the carpet".

"Resilience is not nurtured by isolating ourselves from extremism, but by exposing ourselves to it, engaging with it, and repudiating it," Mr Jiang said.

A WORRYING ISSUE WHICH NEEDS EXAMINING

While the youths interviewed believe that their generation is well-placed to handle such issues, some experts pointed out that discerning what are religious extremist views may not always be so straightforward.

"Often, a person may overestimate his ability to be clear-headed or discerning about such materials that they come across or consciously seek," said SMU's Associate Professor Tan.

Dr Paul Hedges, an associate professor in interreligious studies at RSIS, added: "Extremist views are found online, and in many cases it is not too difficult to find them… As such, what needs to be done is for all people, not just young people, to be given the tools to critically analyse such views and see their deficiencies."

In June 2017, TODAY reported about how unsavoury characters can exploit technology to radicalise anyone, regardless of their backgrounds and where they come from. These people can also prey on youths' vulnerabilities such as their emotional needs. Young people are also particularly susceptible as they may be going through an identity crisis at that particular stage in life.

Mr Faizal from RSIS reiterated that it is "crucial" to examine the underlying factors as to why young Singaporeans are more open to online extremist views these days.

He said it could be down to youths feeling that the vastness of the online space renders blocking all extremist content impossible, or they could feel that Singapore's "social cohesion

and education have empowered them with the necessary mental firewalls to recognise and resist extremist content".

Ms Sun Xueling, Senior Parliamentary Secretary for Home Affairs and National Development, told TODAY that the paper's findings reflect youths' desires to view all types of information available, whether it is healthy and unbiased, or not.

"The belief is that everyone will be discerning, and will do the right thing regardless of the types of information he or she is exposed to… However, what we see on social media is that there are individuals who can be very biased when it comes to views on race and religion and who use the virality of social media to spread their biased and often hate-filled views," added Ms Sun, who is also a Member of Parliament (MP) for Pasir-Ris Punggol Group Representative Constituency (GRC).

She pointed to the recent massacre in Christchurch, New Zealand, where a gunman opened fire in mosques and killed 50 Muslims. Australian Brenton Tarrant, a suspected white supremacist, had acknowledged that his extremist views were based on what he read online.

Still, National University of Singapore (NUS) sociologist Tan Ern Ser argued that the majority of young people, if given the opportunity to be exposed to different perspectives and openly debate issues, "could be persuaded to see that perpetuating hatred and killing innocent people is not the way to address legitimate concerns and perceived social injustices".

Mr Imran, from the Centre for Interfaith Understanding, noted that the IPS paper's findings show that young Singaporeans in general may not have sufficient understanding on what constitutes religious extremism.

He does not think young Singaporeans are more accepting than their older counterparts of violent extremism, but there "might be a gap in perception" of what non-violent extremism is.

"This is worrying, but it also calls for deeper reflection why this is so. One possible reason is that there is some confusion on what constitutes extremism," he said.

Dr Mathews, senior research fellow from IPS who co-authored the paper, told TODAY that social media and the Internet have become powerful tools for people to express their thoughts rather freely.

"Some just don't want the Government to be increasingly regulating that space. Also, many millennials believe that they are able to counter extremist views and engage in debate with differing views, so why restrict what can actually be a useful platform to bring clarity?" he said.

In his commentary with Ms Shanthini, they urged people to understand the liberties of free speech in relation to the potential ramifications of extremist speech. Such speech "dehumanises and strips groups of dignity and self-respect", and its publication also "dilutes opportunities for productive discussion", they wrote.

"While the younger generation certainly appreciates the value of freedom of expression, they should also be cognisant that some discourse should not be accorded a platform, especially in multi-racial and multi-religious Singapore," they said.

"Nevertheless, millennials should certainly strengthen their ability to navigate social media and counter extremist discourse offline or online."

TABOO NO MORE BUT FAULT LINES REMAIN

Racial and religious issues have traditionally been taboo subjects in Singapore, especially after the racial riots that erupted here in the 1950s and 1960s.

One notable example was the Maria Hertogh riots in December 1950, triggered by a court's decision that a young girl who had been raised by Muslim adoptive parents should be returned to her Catholic biological parents.

The May 1969 racial riots, which spilled over to Singapore from Malaysia, leaving four dead, drove the point home further on the explosive nature of race relations.

More people have been openly discussing such issues in recent years, especially as social media becomes more pervasive. However, there is a concern in some quarters that many Singaporeans have become complacent about race and religion being potentially divisive issues.

Some youths acknowledged that while they know of the racial riots through what they were taught in school — such as via Social Studies lessons — they may not have enough appreciation of the fragility of racial and religious harmony in Singapore.

"The events are so far behind us, and given the decent levels of racial harmony that we grew up with, we do not see racial tensions as a huge threat," said Ms Lo.

Mr Chun said the lack of actual exposure to racial conflict in Singapore has "caused us to take our harmony earned through blood for granted". "We don't appreciate how such (extremist) posts can affect our community's psyche. We are rather oblivious to them and take them lightly," he added.

Unlike most of her peers, Ms Low Wei Ling, 25, experienced firsthand what it was like to live under the spectre of a potential terrorist attack while studying in the United Kingdom.

In 2015, the research analyst was caught in the middle of a security lockdown in Brussels amid fears that the Belgian city would be the next to be hit in the wake of coordinated attacks by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in Paris.

She then got involved in her university's chaplaincy team, where staff of different religious groups came together to support students and hold events to bridge gaps between people of different faiths.

Ms Low, who returned to Singapore about a month ago, is now a youth ambassador at inter-faith group Roses of Peace.

The group started as a student-driven initiative by Nominated Member of Parliament (NMP) Abbas Ali Mohamed Irshad in 2012, when he was a student at SMU.

Ms Low said: "I wanted to do something to promote this understanding (among religions) and make people more proactive."

Dr Mathews noted that older Singaporeans who had lived through the racial riots would have seen firsthand how extremist speech could cause substantial chaos in society.

THE WAY FORWARD: ENGAGE THEM YOUNG

In light of the IPS survey findings, those interviewed suggested that more can be done to educate and engage young Singaporeans — perhaps even starting from primary school.

NUS' Dr Tan said that education on racial and religious issues should start "the sooner, the better". As children are already playing with others across ethnic and religious lines, he proposed that pre-primary and primary curricula reinforce messages of racial and religious harmony not only to children, but their parents too.

"In regard to extremist views, children could be taught to think about various scenarios that could threaten social harmony, and what they could do to unite as Singaporeans, to look out for one another, regardless of race and religion, and not to accept hateful things said about other races or religions in Singapore," he added.

Ms Joan Pereira, an MP for Tanjong Pagar GRC, said young Singaporeans need to be educated that "as a small nation, we have zero tolerance for individuals or publications which aim to incite hostility or violence among different religious groups".

Ms Pereira, who sits on the Government Parliamentary Committee for Culture, Community and Youth, added: "I do think we have come a long way in terms of racial and religious harmony… Education should therefore equip our young with the skills to be more discerning and understand the dangers posed by some of these extremist views."

Improving youths' media literacy is also important, said NMP Lim Sun Sun.

People need to be reminded of the biases that work against them, and resist adding fuel to the fire when they come across alarmist or extremist views, added Professor Lim, who is the head of humanities, arts and social sciences at the Singapore University of Technology and Design.

Assoc Prof Eugene Tan, Dr Tan Ern Ser and Mr Imran suggested organising more forums and events targeted at young people to discuss these issues. These can go beyond existing initiatives such as the Inter-Racial and Religious Confidence Circles, which are local-level inter-faith platforms formed in every constituency to promote racial and religious harmony.

Mr Imran added: "The (IPS paper) should not generate panic, but calls for introspection and should move us to do more to help shape a healthy narrative for social cohesion, while highlighting the dangers of religious extremism. This has to be done both online and offline."

Meanwhile, Mr Irshad, being the founder of Roses of Peace, has already organised numerous interfaith symposiums and forums over the past few years.

He pointed out that youths do not want to listen to lectures or talks about the theological aspects of religion or race.

Instead, the forums organised by Roses of Peace rely on a curated list of panelists or speakers — from religious leaders to fellow youths — who can discuss how their respective faiths drive them to do social good.

He seems to have found a successful formula, with more than 100 youths turning up for each session. He said that he settled on this format after noticing that forums discussing religious topics were usually attended mainly by older Singaporeans.

Moving forward, he has been invited to join a student advisory committee at a primary school in the western region of Singapore. Roses of Peace also plans to pilot a programme called Peace Education Through Altruism and Leadership, or Petal for short, in schools here.

He said the primary school's aim is "to have an inclusive environment" which "focuses on race and religious harmony". "Even at the primary school level, we're looking to have conversations — even primary school kids are very open these days, they know a lot of things," he added.

Well aware of Singaporean youths' desire to have open and honest discussions on race and religion, Ms Sun nevertheless noted the "difficult job" facing security agencies, which have to make judgment calls on issues that could harm racial and religious harmony, and whether they could potentially disturb public order.

"We need to strike a balance. On the one hand, we cannot have a free-for-all situation so that an individual can say anything he wants, step all over another and expect the other not to react or retaliate," she said.

"On the other hand, we also do not want a situation where civil and considered discourse on all matters related to religion, race, or a group's values or orientation be avoided or tiptoed around so as to avoid any possibility of causing offence."

She added: "While we aspire to greater freedoms, with the stability and prosperity our society affords us, I hope that we also (spare a thought) for those who may be impacted by our decisions, impacted by our words, and also those who toil to safeguard what we have."