Why Singapore needs stronger safeguards against rise of religious and identity politics

Mathew Mathews and Melvin Tay
TODAY, 1 August 2019

At the recent Forum on Religion, Extremism and Identity Politics organised by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) and the Ministry of Home Affairs, much was said about the ills of identity politics where people organise along narrow ethnic and religious lines.

The rise of religious nationalism seeking to transcend governance systems around the world seems to suggest a resurgence of religious influence — especially on politics.

Singapore, being an open and highly-connected society, is by no means immune to foreign religious influences.

In recent times, we have seen high-profile cases where Christian preachers and Islamic clerics invited from abroad were censured for extremist commentary inimical to religious harmony.

A small group of Singaporeans have been brainwashed by extremist ideals too. The Internal Security Act is exercised occasionally for individuals involved in religion-motivated terror acts — most recently just last week.

So against this backdrop, how do we manage religion and its discontents?

Prioritising Harmony

It is important to remember that the insidious side of religion stems from abusing and misusing faith. On its own, religion has much to contribute to good society; it is an important conduit for morally virtuous pro-social behaviour.

Yet, in light of increasing religious fervour on one hand and a deepening disdain for religion on the other, ensuring that society continues to cohere and stay harmonious is a delicate task.

A 2019 IPS report showed that religion thrives amongst Singaporeans. A significant minority indicated higher trust in religious organisations compared to political leaders.

A substantial number would also adhere to religious principles rather than laws, if they felt the latter conflicted with the former.

These illustrate how religiosity may conflict with how citizens are to relate to the state as the final arbiter of law and order in the public space. The latter, however, is crucial in a highly diverse society like Singapore, with many different strands of religious and non-religious persuasions.

The discordant views that can arise out of such diversity, if left unmanaged, can manifest in conflict, polarisation and even violence. This is seen in many multi-religious societies today

where fervent religious adherents (or sceptics) seek to impose their beliefs on others in public discourse or politics.

If upholding one's faith or lack thereof entails encroaching upon another's personal space — a difficult prospect to avoid amid fervour and diversity, then we certainly need the neutral authority vested in the secular state. The state has to safeguard the "greater" good over and above the free practice of religion.

This "greater" good is harmony and a wide public space — something which does not occur organically in a laissez-faire environment.

Singapore is an example of how intervention via state instruments like the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act (MRHA) has delivered desired circumstances alongside a normative preservation of social harmony. When inter-religious peace is breached, religious groups reconcile by the seeking and giving of forgiveness.

But as our religious space continues to diversify with new movements sprouting within and outside established religious traditions, there is no telling whether the same commitments and norms will endure.

There might be demands for much less restrictions; be it the right to evangelise without constraint or convey insensitive or even demeaning views of other religions or practices.

This is exemplified by the reluctance of a few religious organisations to affirm the recent Commitment to Safeguard Religious Harmony made by more than 250 local religious organisations. Perhaps from their perspective adhering to their faith necessitates the rejection of and non-association with others.

Yet relinquishing specific freedoms, such as the ability to express untethered views or leverage faith in politics, is necessary to ensure a wide public space for the freedom of religion for the largest possible scope of groups — regardless of their size or volubility.

Redefining Legislation

In an era where a deficit of trust in government prevails, the state needs to constantly demonstrate its integrity in managing such sensitive affairs with even-handedness.

While MRHA's deterrent nature vis-à-vis religious leaders denigrating other faiths or delving into politics has thus far proven effective, evolving trends such as the rise of social media and religiosity need to be addressed promptly.

Updates to the MRHA announced by Minister for Home Affairs and Law K. Shanmugam last week will hopefully enable the state to retain robust legislative muscle to maintain harmony amid the following considerations.

First, in light of how information is now disseminated with unprecedented speed on online and social media platforms, the state needs to be equipped to deal rapidly and efficaciously with threats to religious peace.

Contents that may fall under the ambit of opinion and thus out of scope under the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act — but yet detrimental to religious harmony, must be checked and corrected before they "go viral".

Technology corporations wielding immense power from managing online platforms should be legally responsible for actively monitoring and removing dissonant content.

Second, the weight of religious leaders' pronouncements on their devotees amid growing religiosity should not be underestimated.

While the current MRHA legislation grants the state teeth to compel offending individuals to cease and desist communicating without heed for religious harmony, such individuals should also be made to issue corrective statements to their followers and the public.

Some may view such policing as "over the top" and only mitigating the initial harm done to some extent. But this clearly communicates to Singaporeans the need to be mindful of the country's multi-religious context and the "social contract" in place even as they pursue their faith with fervour.

Third, while nearly all religious groups at present uphold prevailing commitments to and norms facilitating religious harmony, the potential of change to this status quo due to the rise of new movements or more radical groups should not be underestimated.

Religious organisations affiliated with offending individuals, though not necessarily condoning their stances, should undertake swift remedial actions to censure such individuals or be legally obliged to do so.

Fourth, more attention needs to be paid to critical commentary on religion arising outside of the confines of religion.

In light of increasing disdain for specific religions and religion as an institution by non-believers, updates to the MRHA should also be supplemented. Currently, the MRHA only focuses on religious leaders and not for instance, on secular groups which may make pronouncements against religion.

Of course, the state cannot and should not steamroll its way unilaterally on religious issues in the name of maintaining harmony. Engagement with the widest range of voices must continue.

If we accept that harmony is critical for Singapore's survival and is core to our Singaporean identity, religious communities will need to do their part to prioritise mutual understanding and respect amongst their various commitments.

The appeal of unchecked freedoms of speech and expression may resonate with individuals of various persuasions. Yet, such freedoms come at a cost – the potential decay of harmony and drowning out of minority voices.

In Singapore, this is the compromise we have to accept to safeguard a cohesive future.

Mathew Mathews is Head of IPS Social Lab and Senior Research Fellow, and Melvin Tay is Research Associate at the Institute of Policy Studies, National University of Singapore. They organised the IPS-MHA Forum on Religion, Extremism and Identity Politics.