

Muslims in Singapore Need To Accommodate too: Zulkifli

Jeanette Tan

Yahoo News, 11 September 2013

Muslims in Singapore need to make greater efforts to compromise and integrate themselves better when it comes to practicing their religious beliefs. They should not expect others to accommodate them all the time.

Former Nominated Member of Parliament Zulkifli Baharudin, who serves as Singapore's non-resident ambassador to Algeria and Uzbekistan, voiced this view in response to a question about discrimination against Muslims at the workplace from a participant at a forum on Wednesday morning.

He was one of four panellists invited there to speak on the findings of a recently-concluded IPS-OnePeople.sg study on race and religion in Singapore.

The participant who spoke up raised concerns about Muslim polytechnic students having to pray in dark stairwells and air-conditioner ledges during school, and questioned the prevailing hospital policy that does not allow the donning of tudungs for medical staff, in the interest of infection control.

"I personally don't see anything wrong if you're more religious and want to bring your religion to school or work," he said. "But on one condition: that Muslims — I'm talking about Muslims who have decided to leave their homes in Muslim-dominated countries to Europe (for instance) — must make more effort to integrate into the societies that they choose to go to.

"You cannot go to Europe and say, 'Look, you have to take me the way I am as I was back home'; you are in a way a guest in that country. And while you want them to receive you and respect your religion, which I clearly think they should, you must also make the effort to equally integrate.

"They (non-Muslims) are grappling with the issue of religiosity. So if we can accommodate without compromising our religious beliefs, I think we should. If we can't, then there are choices that we have to make."

A Process That Involves Negotiation And Compromise

Turning to the question of allowing tudungs to be worn in hospitals, Zulkifli said a day will probably come in the future where that "will happen", although the process leading to it has to be one that involves negotiation and compromise.

"There are very deep perceptions that we have to remove," he said. "It's not something you can legislate and say 'This matter is over'. It doesn't work that way."

Zulkifli elaborated further on his view later on, explaining that the strong religiosity of Muslims in Singapore has persisted despite years of progress, education and Westernisation, making most Singaporeans of other religions more secular and liberal in their attitudes.

"I think that's a fact of life. As a Muslim I see that; I accept that," he said. "But I'm persuading my fellow Muslims to also say that you've got to consider the other side, and how you compromise and negotiate towards what you want to achieve.

"It's not enough to say 'No, this is what I am, this is what I want and this is what it should be'... Even in Malaysia, they are majority Malays, (but) they can't do as they wish because any civilised society also has to take note of the minorities in the world," he added.

He shared an instance where the chairman of a board he sat on specially requested for his hotel room to have a prayer mat and a Quran during a company retreat, and he asked the chairman, who is Christian, why he did not call off a Sunday morning board meeting so he and the other members who were Christian could go to church.

"If we become so sieged by having to accommodate (the practices of Muslims), I don't see it as something I am happy about... even the minorities have to accommodate in this instance, otherwise we will have a lot more problems going forward," he said.

We Should Ask 'That Stupid Question': Viswa

To former Nominated Member of Parliament Viswa Sadasivan, another member of the four-man panel, the most important thing to do in the racial and religious dialogue is to speak up front to one another, and to clarify misconceptions about one another candidly.

"I feel that by not talking about this issue enough, you are actually not helping it to be demystified, and therefore a lot of conspiracy theories and preconceived ideas which are wrong are allowed to ferment," he said.

Calling for more occasions for open discussion of issues regarding race and religion, Viswa said we need to have the confidence to face one another squarely and expose our vulnerabilities in our perceptions of one another.

"You get a chance to correct your perceptions only when you are willing to expose your vulnerability and ask that stupid question, the inconvenient question, the question that's not 'kosher'," he said. "There needs to be a lot more opportunities in the personal dimension for people to just make friends, talk straight and get to know each other."

"And let's not keep being so cautious with each other," he added. "I think that's the real test of racial harmony."