

Pandemics can foster intolerance, threaten social fabric: Expert

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Disinformation, state-sponsored interventions, fake news, climate change and, now, pandemics.

As these are slow-burning threats which can gnaw away at and debilitate society, think tanks, academics and the government should also look into them, alongside other threats such as terrorism, said RSIS' head of the Centre of Excellence for National Security Shashi Jayakumar on Tuesday (25 February).

Speaking at an Institute of Policy Studies' (IPS) forum on Singapore's response to COVID-19, held via Facebook Live, Dr Jayakumar said that the outbreak of the new virus has prompted xenophobic sentiments globally. "Some of the China bashing is really quite crude, it's quite xenophobic," he said.

"We're small, plural, cosmopolitan and tolerant - that's the foundation of our society," he added.

While the government's response to the viral outbreak from the epidemiological or infectious diseases perspective has been "rather well", Dr Jayakumar added, "but from the whole of society response, what are the areas which need to be looked a little bit more closely at?"

"Some of what is going on in terms of the COVID-19 rumours are also about intolerance and about this exclusivist sentiment, this narrowing - a kind of a tunnel vision - because we have these social media chambers and filter bubbles."

Noting that this is not exclusive to Singapore, Dr Jayakumar said that should the virus outbreak be prolonged, intolerance "might start to become a serious issue in Singapore society and elsewhere as well."

Besides the SGSecure movement and Inter-Racial and Religious Confidence Circles (IRCCs), civil society and NGOs also have a role to play in fostering dialogues, he added.

The IPS forum was hosted at the Singapore Facebook studio and moderated by IPS' deputy director for research Gillian Koh. Also on the panel was Associate Professor Vernon Lee, director of the Health Ministry's communicable diseases division; Barnabas Gan, an economist from United Overseas Bank; and Dr Carol Soon, a senior research fellow with IPS.