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Muslim community must work with Govt to keep Singapore safe: Religious leaders, academics

Monitoring foreign religious speakers and keeping stronger tabs on social media are some of the measures mooted to counter the growing threat of religious extremism in Singapore as highlighted by Home Affairs Minister K Shanmugam.

By Justin Ong
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SINGAPORE: The local Muslim community needs to work within itself, and hand-in-hand with the Government, to safeguard Singapore against the growing threat of religious extremism in the region, said religious leaders and academics on Tuesday (Jan 19).

This was in response to a speech by Minister for Home Affairs and Law K Shanmugam at the SRP Distinguished Lecture and Symposium organised by the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS).

Mr Shanmugam had said that the Government would implement measures over the year to maintain Singapore's racial and religious harmony, and to keep the country safe in the face of increasing religious extremism in Southeast Asia.

"It is an evolving threat, so the response from the Muslim community and the Government will need to be an evolving one as well," said Dr Mohamed Nawab, coordinator of the Malaysia programme at RSIS. "From the Government's side, we see that they put a lot of effort into intelligence-gathering and preventive measures; but within the Muslim community, I think we are playing catch-up to newer threats - like how powerful social media has become for groups like ISIS."

"In terms of our response, we don't have one as effective," he noted. "That's perhaps one area the Muslim community will have to think

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about and respond accordingly.”

Dr Nawab's RSIS colleague, associate research fellow Saleena Begum Saleem, agreed. “There should be intra-religious dialogue within the Muslim community to prevent external influences that can cause the community to isolate themselves,” she said.

“From the Government's perspective, there's already vigilance. They take note of foreign speakers that come in and that's a good thing,” she added. “And Islamophobia amongst non-Muslim communities is hardly talked about in an Asian context, but I think it is present and this is something we as researchers should be working on.”

The issue of foreign speakers in Singapore was also a major concern for priest Chung Kwang Tong, secretary-general of the Taoist Federation Youth Group.

“No matter what faith, when foreign speakers come in, the Government must make sure they preach a ‘correct’ form of religion and not their own distorted views,” said Mr Chung, who is also known as Master Wei Yi. “We don't have to stop all of them from coming, but at least we should go through local religious bodies to make sure it's a respected person versed in the doctrine. There should be some form of control and monitoring.”

“Most importantly, religious and community leaders and the Government must come together to ensure peace and security in Singapore,” he stated. “Especially when it's things we see on the ground, from our followers - any feedback we get, if we find anything suspicious, we have to work hand-in-hand with the Government.”

Meanwhile, Mr Malminderjit Singh, secretary of the Sikh Advisory Board, said: “I expect to see a slew of measures from the Government - making the national narrative more apparent so that every Singaporean understands and internalises it. That could be a powerful deterrent.”

He added: “I also expect the authorities to take a more targeted approach in keeping former extremists arrested in check. This includes a more developed rehab programme and also stronger penalties for repeat suspects.”



COMMUNITY “SADDENED” OVER RADICALS

Muslim community leaders Channel NewsAsia spoke to said they were “saddened” to hear of some Muslims in Singapore being radicalised or distancing themselves from the rest of society - points raised by Mr Shanmugam in his speech.

Long-serving community leader Ameerali Abdeali, president of the Muslim Kidney Association, had some advice for young Muslims. “They should look at how our Muslim leaders behave. Our mufti, former mufti, and highly respected Imam of Ba'alwie Mosque Habib

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Hassan are also believers in inter-religious interaction. They do not distance themselves, in fact they are always accepting invitations from religious groups to participate in their activities, and during our religious festivities like Hari Raya, we invite our non-Muslim friends to participate and they are happy to come," he said.

"Young Muslims, don't fear or be shy of interacting with non-Muslim friends. There is so much to learn about their rich beliefs, traditions and customs. You will find there is so much common ground, while staying true to your religion," said Mr Ameerali. "You don't have to leave yours."

President of the Nanyang Technological University Muslim Society (NTUMS), Mohd Hamzah Mohd Abdul Kadir said he believes parents have a role to play in "showing the way" to their children when young.

"Our youth have to be exposed to mosques in Singapore where there are proper and correct teachings of Islam," he said, adding that the NTUMS regularly invites "credible" speakers recognised by the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore to give lectures to ensure their members "receive proper knowledge".



"A QUESTION OF WHEN AND NOT IF"

In his speech, Mr Shanmugam had listed various threats that Singapore faces as extremist ideology spreads in the region, saying Southeast Asia has become "fertile ground" for terrorism. However Dr Nawab said his mention of further risks, beyond that from direct attacks stood out for him. "Non-violent extremism, which is divisive for a multi-racial and multi-religious society like Singapore, and also Islamophobia - something which is rarely discussed, but a reality that is probably going to affect Singapore at some point. We have seen it happening in various instances around the world, especially Europe, and we are likely to see similar occurrences in Singapore as well," he said.

Mr Malminderjit said the most pressing threat to him was the spectre of a terrorist attack on Singapore. "As Minister reiterated, it's a question of when and not if," he explained. "To me, Islamophobia is something that is more of a longer-term threat. Fortunately we still have the advantage of several decades of goodwill among Singaporeans to still rely on, but of course that can erode easily."

"One cannot doubt the seriousness of the situation," said Mr Foo Check Woo, president of Inter Religious Organisation Singapore. "Everyone in Singapore can and must contribute to foster multi-religious harmony."

- CNA/jo

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