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Three Youths and a Pastor: A Deconstruction of the Current Debate

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Racial and religious stability are pillars of Singaporean society. A threat to either should be dealt with swiftly, with a clear appreciation of the public perception and potential consequences involved.

TWO RECENTS incidents in Singapore brought to the forefront the island nation's strict monitoring of potential threats to its delicate racial and religious balance. The first involved postings on the popular social networking site Facebook. On 31 January, three youths were arrested under the Sedition Act for allegedly posting racist comments against Indians. The second incident involved a religious figure. Pastor Rony Tan of the Lighthouse Evangelism Church was featured in several clips on YouTube deriding the Buddhist and Taoist faith. He was called up and questioned by the Internal Security Department (ISD) after which he posted an apology on his website and apologised in person to Buddhists and Taoists leaders.

While the three youths were arrested under existing criminal legislation by the police, Pastor Tan received nothing more than a reprimand from the ISD. According to press reports, this has led to questions being raised from certain quarters regarding the severity of the official response faced by the three youths compared to Pastor Tan. While both cases have since been resolved by the authorities, the perception that Pastor Tan has gotten off lightly compared to the youths is potentially damaging to the government's ongoing efforts in heightening awareness of the country's religious and racial sensibilities. In dealing with this, there is a need to appreciate the balance between managing perceptions and potential consequences.

A "Tendentious Contest"

Both incidents were viewed seriously by the government for their potential to disrupt the country's otherwise stable race and religious relations. An editorial published on 11 February in The Straits Times drove home the point that public calm and cohesiveness could potentially be undermined "if

religion were turned into a tendentious contest”. However, the official response to both incidents had the unintended consequence of creating another “tendentious contest”: public opinion is now divided over whether the official reaction to Pastor Tan’s transgressions was severe enough compared with the treatment meted out to the three youths.

The rumblings were strong enough to elicit a response from Deputy Prime Minister and Home Affairs Minister Wong Kan Seng. In his response, DPM Wong pointed to the fact that being hauled up by the ISD is no less serious than being investigated by the police. He noted that “the bottom line in such cases is that we must ensure that the OB (out-of-bounds) markers are clear and that transgressions are dealt with in a balanced and professional manner”.

One explanation for the difference in approach was that a complaint was made to the police regarding the Facebook incident which warranted an investigation under existing criminal laws. The result was that the youths were investigated under the Sedition Act which was recently invoked for offences with the potential to cause racial and religious unrest. In 2005, two bloggers were convicted and given jail sentences for posting anti-Malay and anti-Muslim comments while a third was given a probationary sentence of 24 months.

The Sedition Act was again used in 2009 against a Christian couple for possessing and distributing seditious publications with the potential of affecting racial and religious harmony. The fact that there is legislative strength behind the investigation on the three youths, which carries with it a potential jail sentence, cannot but underscore the seriousness of the official response to their actions.

In contrast, the ISD appeared to have dealt with Pastor Tan directly, stopping at the issuance of a reprimand against him. The distinction however is now superfluous given the fact that the youths will now not be charged. The youth who started the Facebook group was placed under the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports’ Guidance Programme while the other two were cautioned by the police.

It is however the pastor’s status as head of a church which seems to have garnered comments that he should be made more accountable for his actions. A Straits Times article dated 10 February noted that many on and offline have argued that the pastor “reaches more hearts and minds than the three teenagers who posted their comments on Facebook”.

Perception versus Pragmatism

Perception does matter when it involves racial and religious issues. Both are long seen as keys to maintaining a cohesive society. So far, in dealing with both incidents, the government’s stated objective of setting “out-of-bound” markers has been achieved. There is no doubt that the public has been made aware of what the transgressions are and the fact that the authorities would not tolerate such misbehaviour.

While the objective might have been met, the perception still lingers that the seriousness of the pastor’s actions has not been matched with the official response taken given his position as head of a church. Is this important? Yes, if this in any way affects or influences public perception of the government’s efforts in maintain religious harmony.

However, at the same time the government needs to take into account the consequences of proceeding with further action against the pastor. If the matter were to be pursued by, for example, arresting and filing charges against the pastor and bringing the matter to court, the ensuing publicity may be sensational. The fact that the pastor is an influential figure would be a disadvantage in this scenario. Can the country afford this type of publicity? Given present-day sensitivities, the answer is rather obvious: allowing the issue to ferment in a court of law may cause more damage than just allowing

time to dispel the details.

Thus, the trick is in striking a balance between managing perceptions and potential consequences. Ultimately however, a choice has to be made as to which is more important in maintaining religious harmony and social cohesion in the country.

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