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Please keep religion out of partisan politics

Singapore must remember the discipline that has kept its multi-religious compact intact.

Mathew Mathews and Melvin Tay

Singapore's success in managing the complexities of a multi-religious society rests on a clear commitment: the secular state protects freedom of religion, while keeping partisan politics free of sectarian mobilisation.

This commitment is not abstract. It is a practical guardrail that prevents political competition from becoming a religious or ethnic tug-of-war. It also warrants reaffirming, especially after the recent general election where questions of religious identity surfaced and reminded us why the secular foundations of our politics must remain firm.

A recent parliamentary debate reaffirmed a longstanding tenet of Singapore's governance: political actors should not mix religion or race with electioneering. Parties should not campaign on religious grounds, appoint faith champions, or draw on clerical authority for partisan gain. Race, too, should not be drafted into political contests.

Foreign influence that plays on these identities should be rejected, and coded appeals that stoke communal sentiment, even while professing multiracial ideals, have no place in responsible politics.

ESCHEWING THE MIX OF RELIGION AND POLITICS

To see why these boundaries matter, it helps to recall how the separation of faith and state first took shape.

The modern distinction between religion and politics took shape in the 17th century, when governance was redefined as a non-religious domain, and religion was separated from state power.

This separation was forged in the trauma of Europe's protracted wars of religion. Hard experience taught that lasting peace between rival religious persuasions and genuine freedom of belief required keeping institutions of faith and state distinct.

In recent decades, however, political and religious actors in many places have not heeded that wisdom. We have seen movements in which the fusion of political ambition and religious authority produced social tension and sometimes bloodshed.

In Egypt, the turmoil around the Arab Spring, which saw the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood and the subsequent Rabaa massacre over 2011 to 2013, showed how religiously charged politics can split a society and end in tragedy.

Even established democracies have not been immune: in the US, Christian nationalist motifs surfaced during the 2021 Capitol riots, revealing how religious identity can be mobilised in partisan confrontation.

Examples closer to home further accentuate the explosive mix of religion and politics.

In Indonesia's 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial race, sectarian mobilisation against then Governor Basuki "Ahok" Tjahaja Purnama reshaped politics and culminated in a blasphemy conviction that many observers read as a triumph of street pressure over pluralist norms.

The episode left lasting scars on minority confidence and raised the political premium on religious identity.

Monk-led ultranationalism in Myanmar also normalised anti-Rohingya rhetoric and preceded mass violence in Rakhine. Networks such as Ma Ba Tha and the 969 movement blurred religious authority with nationalist politics, shaping street mobilisation and giving cover to exclusionary policies.

These patterns endure because race and religion function as powerful shortcuts in political communication. They speak to our identities, promise moral clarity in a noisy marketplace of competing ideas, simplify choices, and energise supporters.

While post-independence Singapore has not seen the same levels of sectarian tension as encountered by other societies, we would be naive to think we are immune.

A recent Institute of Policy Studies report on religious identity and practice shows religion edging up in importance as a marker of identity over time. In 2024, 74 per cent of Singapore residents with religious affiliations indicated that religion was important or very important to their sense of identity; up from 69 per cent in 2013.

This is a strength when channelled toward service and solidarity. But it can also be activated for division if political incentives reward so.

Another IPS study on religion in the public and private spheres posed a scenario where a law was passed which conflicted with individuals' religious principles and teachings.

Forty-eight per cent indicated that they would probably or definitely follow the law. However, among monotheistic religions, six in 10 or more respondents indicated that they would probably or definitely follow their religious principles, as opposed to the law.

To be clear, these findings do not imply hostility to law per se, but reflect how sacred commitments anchor personal identity. Alongside cautionary tales from abroad, they illustrate precisely why parties and candidates should resist instrumentalising religion in electoral competition.

Around the world, identity cues are used because they are potent and combustible. Singapore is not exempt from those pressures; hence the need for norms and rules that keep our arena competitive yet cohesive.

THE ROLE OF FAITH IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE

While it is important to differentiate religion from politics, religion should not be excluded from the public sphere. As sociologist Jose Casanova argues, separation does not require banishing faith from public life, but entails ensuring that religious authority will not morph into state power or partisan leverage.

Faith has a legitimate public voice which should be upheld. Communities of belief contribute to the common good when they speak in civil society, advocate moral visions, and serve social needs while accepting open debate.

It is appropriate for religious groups to submit views on legislation, to partner on social programmes, and to educate members on civic duty. But it is not appropriate to anoint candidates, threaten spiritual sanction for voting choices, or import foreign religious agendas into local politics.

Religious organisations build social capital in practical ways in Singapore. They support families in distress, mentor youth, and mobilise volunteers through third-sector services such as counselling, education, and efforts that uplift the under-privileged.

Faith can also enrich public reasoning. The practice of religion in the public sphere earns standing when particular convictions are framed in ways and means that all citizens, regardless of their religion, can relate to and evaluate. This enables citizens to disagree civilly, while still understanding the reasons proffered for a particular policy position.

However, practical lines must be drawn vis-a-vis the role religions play in the public sphere. It is appropriate for religious groups to submit views on legislation, to partner on social programmes, and to educate members on civic duty.

But it is not appropriate to anoint candidates, threaten spiritual sanction for voting choices, or import foreign religious agendas into local politics.

Finally, the tone matters as much as the positions of religious institutions. Convictions can be brought to the public square, but they must also be open to contestation and respect the constitutional order.

This is how faith stays active where it most helps society and how politics can remain free from sectarian mobilisation.

We have done this before: during the 2022 repeal of Section 377A, broad consultations and a Parliament-anchored settlement demonstrated that principled compromise can respect religious convictions, advance minority rights, and keep politics secular.

Surveys also show that most Singaporeans are satisfied with how race and religious relations are managed by the Government. This hard-won trust is worth guarding.

Our cohesion has benefited from a governing party with a legislative supermajority and consequently, the political weight to eschew trading short-term advantage for sectarian gain.

But as politics becomes more contested, the temptation to mobilise race or religion will grow. This makes shared guardrails, applied even-handedly, and swift, unequivocal repudiation of breaches essential for any party that seeks to lead Singapore.

Singapore can choose this path, by continuing to compete hard on ideas while refusing appeals that turn neighbours into strangers. We should strive to continue keeping politics secular and society generous.

That is how a secular state in a religious society stays cohesive, and how we keep faith in one another.

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