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## Singapore's Protection of Minorities: Religious Freedom and State Management

*By Paul Hedges*

### SYNOPSIS

*At a time of heightened Islamophobia and antisemitism in many parts of the world resulting from the Israeli-Hamas war, Minister for Home Affairs and Law, Mr K. Shanmugam, recently stated Singapore's determination to protect all minorities, especially the Jewish and Muslim communities. This stance is hardly surprising considering Singapore's no-nonsense and unashamedly tough approach to managing racial and religious harmony among the diverse communities.*

### COMMENTARY

The current Israeli-Hamas war in Gaza has heightened both [Islamophobia and antisemitism](#) in many parts of the globe. Hamas' 7 October terror attack drew broad public sympathy for Israel, but the extremity of the Netanyahu government's [response](#), which has drawn fears of [genocide](#) and [war crimes](#) over the unprecedented number of [civilian deaths and casualties](#), has seen global public [sympathy](#) move firmly behind the Palestinian people.

Regrettably, but predictably, this sympathy for one party has often turned to hatred for the other party, which within the wide frame of both [Islamophobic and antisemitic prejudice](#) has sometimes meant violence against innocent and uninvolved Jews and Muslims in other parts of the world.

In this context, Minister Shanmugam's [recent words](#), at a Passover celebration with the Jewish and interfaith community present, are important to reiterate Singapore's resistance to these global trends.

## Prejudice

It has been said before but bears reiteration, that prejudice occurs when somebody, or a group of people, identified as belonging to a particular group is targeted with hatred, discrimination, or violence because of their association with that group. Such prejudice [hurts all of us](#).

One example is the Islamophobic mindset that acts of terror committed in the name of Islam must mean that [all Muslims are potential terrorists](#), who should therefore be treated with suspicion, assuming the [good-Muslim-bad-Muslim trope](#), and its corollary that unless a Muslim denounces every act of terror, they must support it; a test not attributed to Buddhists, Christians, or Hindus, for instance, when people commit acts of terror in the name of these religions.

On the Jewish side, a form of antisemitism that is often termed [anti-Zionism](#) attributes to all Jews guilt for the activities of the Israeli government. Or some may ask Jews to [denounce the right of Israel to exist](#), to be anti-Zionist, to show that they do not support the actions of a particular government or militant Zionist settlers. To them, even assuming a moderate Zionism, or voicing the Jewish people's right to a state, means support for the most extreme interpretations of Zionism.

## Freedom to Manifest Religion

Freedom of religion and belief, as generally glossed, is a fundamental right under the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights ([Article 18](#)). This means that people have the right to believe in their religion, or lack thereof, and to manifest that belief in practice. The latter is only limited for good reasons of public safety and morality.

One aspect of this is the need for not just legal rights and protections, but their [legislative and social implementation](#). This entails the question of whether it is safe for Jews and Muslims, amongst others, to practice and exercise their religion and to go about their lives bearing the markers of their faith within the law.

At the launch of my book, *[Religious Hatred: Prejudice, Islamophobia and Antisemitism in Global Context](#)*, on 4 April 2021, Singapore's Chief Rabbi, [Mordechai Abergel](#), stated that in his nineteen years in Singapore, he had safely walked its streets without one antisemitic incident, a far cry from what he had known growing up in Belgium.

Coming from the UK, I was shocked or surprised, in a good way, that Muslims in Singapore could find informal places for their prayers in such places as stairwells or in corners of car parks. There, they could safely leave their prayer mats and come back to them as needed. This would be unthinkable in many Western contexts.

Of course, Singapore is no paradise, and in recent years its security services have caught mainly lone wolf actors intent to attack [Jews](#) and [Muslims](#) in their places of worship. [Occasional incidents of prejudice](#) do occur in the streets, and undoubtedly some ill will is harboured in people's hearts or is spoken when people feel they can do so in select gatherings.

Both [antisemitism](#) and [Islamophobia](#) exist in the region and in Singapore. Compared

to its regional neighbours, or many Western countries, the [lived coexistence of Singapore](#), and the seeming [tolerance and harmony](#) fostered among its people is nonetheless remarkable.

### **Singapore's Hand: Heavy or Protecting?**

In many speeches, both Minister Shanmugam and other Singapore political office holders have reiterated time and again that the harmony in the city state is not natural but is the result of [hard and intentional work](#). Aware of its [precarity as a small state](#), Singapore knows that what may be a seemingly minor and localised incident in another country could envelop that whole nation if not well managed.

Singapore's approach is certainly top-down, and it has been accused of heavy-handed, if not authoritarian, management, even if [soft authoritarianism](#) is felt by some to be more apt. The frequent reiteration of the dangers, if touchy issues revolving around faith and traditions of the respective communities go unmanaged, has led to Singapore's being characterised as marked by "[precarious toleration](#)", in that it has toleration, but one accompanied by constant government warnings that all will go astray if not properly managed.c

Ironically, Singapore often ranks lowly in global league tables on [freedom of religion](#). One narrative is that heavy-handed management, backed by potentially draconian [legislative tools](#), means that Singaporeans stay in line because they fear the consequences.

Yet such a picture would be partial at best. While managed, surveys have shown that living side-by-side in public housing blocks, most Singaporeans are [accepting and tolerant](#) of the racial and religious diversity around them. My daughter, in a local school, has described her friendship group as a mini-United Nations given its diverse religio-racial nature, something which is entirely natural and normal in the local context.

Also, as we have noted, people can genuinely feel safe in Singapore to practice and manifest their religion, including Jews and Muslims. This is remarkable not just in the region, but also globally. As the Muslim honorary secretary of the Interreligious Organisation of Singapore (IRO), Mr Ameerali Abdeali put it to [The Straits Times](#): "Whatever is happening in other parts of the world, we in Singapore have, over the decades, built our friendship... and we want to remain together and to help and protect each other".

This sentiment, widely shared among the different communities, is partly at least due to the [government's active promotion](#) of platforms like the Racial and Religious [Harmony Circles](#) for grassroots coexistence and events like the International Conference on Cohesive Societies ([ICCS](#)) organised by the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS). They have brought people together for learning in ways that may be considered managed but [arguably do genuine work](#) for dialogue and cohesion.

It is a truism that our research methods or questions will, to some degree at least,

influence our research findings. As such, depending upon the emphasis, Singapore's approach may be overbearing or truly valued for the safety it affords.

Whatever the case, it is clear that Singapore takes this safety seriously as a matter of its existential survival besides the protection it affords those here. As [Minister Shanmugam put it](#): "There is a reason why a Cabinet minister is here, speaking with you – to send a message to everyone that every community in Singapore is equal and will be protected".

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