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Singapore PM warns religion threatens stability

By Alex Kennedy

AP (16.08.2009) / HRWF Int. (17.08.2009) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> – Singapore's prime minister warned Sunday in his National Day speech that "aggressive preaching" by religious groups and attempts to convert others threaten the tiny city-state's stability.

Lee Hsien Loong, a Buddhist by birth, said his education at the island's Catholic High School was an example of how different religions can coexist peacefully.

"The most visceral and dangerous fault line (in Singapore) is race and religion," Lee said.

Singapore's majority Buddhist Chinese, Malay Muslims and Indian Hindus have largely avoided conflict since race riots between Chinese and Malays left about 40 dead in the 1960s.

"Christians can't expect this to be a Christian society," he said. "Muslims can't expect this to be a Muslim society, ditto with the Buddhists, the Hindus and the other groups."

In the most recent census in 2000, 43 percent of Singaporeans said they were Buddhist, 15 percent Muslim, 15 percent Christian, 8.5 percent Taoist and 4 percent Hindu.

Lee cited the case of a Christian couple who were jailed earlier this year for distributing religious pamphlets deemed offensive to adherents to other faiths, and he condemned those who try to convert ailing hospital patients "who don't want to be converted."

"You push your religion on others, you cause nuisance and offense," he said.

He also singled out a group from an evangelical Christian church who briefly took control of a women's association in April and said they opposed what they claimed was the association's advocacy of homosexuality. They were voted out soon after.

"This was an attempt by a religiously motivated group to enter civil space, take over an NGO they don't approve of and impose their agenda," Lee said. "This risked a broader spillover into relations between different religions."

He said the government must remain secular because Singapore's authority and laws "don't come from a sacred book." Lee's People's Action Party has ruled Singapore since independence 50 years ago.

"We have to keep religion separate from politics," he said.

Lee said Singapore's prosperity depends on people respecting the beliefs of others.

"We all have to adopt 'Live and let live' as our principle."
