

Singapore

A-G cautions against human rights becoming a 'religion' with fanatics

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AMID a new push by the legal community to raise awareness about human rights, Singapore's Attorney-General has warned against 'fanatics' who seize on the cause to further their own political agendas.

Human rights has become a 'religion' that breeds devotees who border on the fanatic, Professor Walter Woon said on Thursday.

It would be 'hypocrisy' for such people to decide what is acceptable for the rest of society, he said.

Prof Woon made the comments to over 100 lawyers and embassy officials at a Law Society gathering on Thursday. The event marked the launch of the professional body's Public and International Law Committee headed by Dr Thio Su Mien, founding partner of TSMP Law Corporation. The committee is designed to raise awareness about topics like public law, a field that deals with human rights and constitutional issues.

'We have to be careful when we are talking about public law and not to confuse it with politics,' said Prof Woon.

He also warned against a no-holds-barred society. In some places, he said, religions were targets for insults and advocates for same-sex marriage were allowed to frame their cause under the banner of human rights.

'But is this what we want?... Is this a question of human rights?' he asked.

He and Professor Thio Li-ann of the National University of Singapore were speakers at the launch of the Law Society committee on Thursday.

Prof Thio said foreigners have criticised Singapore's civil rights record, including the state of freedom of expression.

But such rights must be balanced against a responsibility towards the public at large, she said, citing the example of a racist blogger who was jailed in 2005 on fears his rants could split society.

Human rights issues are wider than just a right to the freedom of expression, Prof Thio said. They also include things like the right to work and the right to clean water.

'(In Singapore) the idea is that economics must come first. No point having free speech if your rice bowl is empty. But I disagree, because if my rice bowl is empty, I would like to say that I am hungry,' she said.

The president of the Law Society, Senior Counsel Michael Hwang, said lawyers have to be 'alive' to the legal avenues they can use to challenge decisions by the authorities.

Despite the fact that it's one of the first courses lawyers take, the practice of public law has slipped, said Mr Hwang.

He blamed public ignorance and the reluctance of clients to challenge authorities like statutory boards, Government agencies and tribunals.

Lawyer Raymond Chan, the former president of the Singapore Institute of Arbitrators, agreed, adding that Singapore's public law is not as developed as other legal sectors, like criminal law.

In the latest issue of the Law Gazette, the society's official magazine, Mr Hwang said there were several areas where citizens could question decisions made by authorities. The list includes rulings from licensing centres and statutory boards.

'In an age where commercial activities are increasingly becoming regulated by statutory authorities, it is important for lawyers to be able to advise whether (they) are exercising the regulatory powers (properly),' he said.