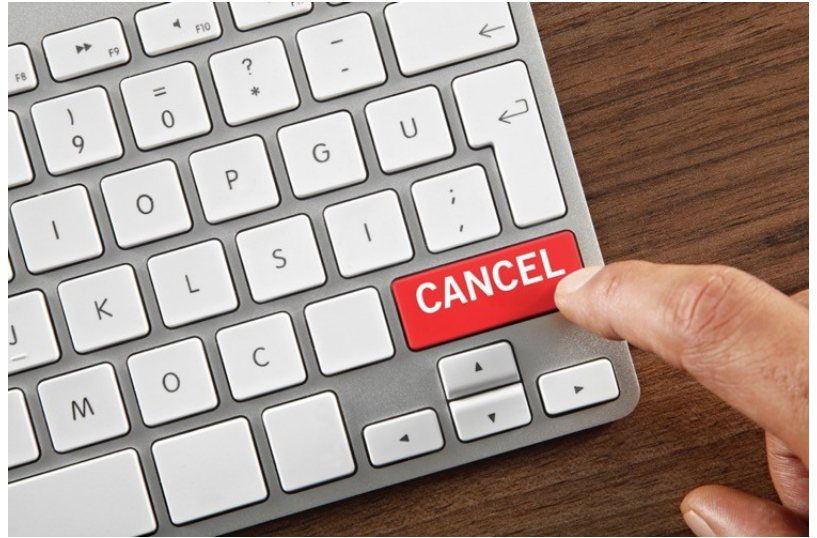




Singapore May Consider Law to Tackle “Cancel Culture” Amid LGBTQ+ Activism

SINGAPORE — A law that stops people from restricting others’ free speech through vitriolic online attacks could be enforced, provided the “right solutions” are found, Singapore’s Law and Home Affairs Minister K Shanmugam announced in an interview broadcast September 15.

The minister elaborated that “cancel culture” rules may be incorporated into legislation in the near future as the Singaporean government looks to shield residents against online pressure over their views on controversial topics, such as LGBTQ+ issues.



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This idea of a law restricting “cancel culture” comes as the government is about to [repeal Section 377A, Singapore’s sodomy law](#) that outlaws sex between men, sparking aggressive reactions online on both sides.

Shanmugam was replying to a question posed by Haslinda Amin, Bloomberg Television’s chief international correspondent for Southeast Asia, on whether Singapore would introduce legislation to combat “cancel culture.”

Amin’s question came amid concerns expressed by religious groups that they could be “canceled” for their views on LGBTQ issues, especially because of Singapore’s impending decriminalization of homosexual acts between men.

In August, religious groups and conservatives sounded the alarm that repealing the sodomy law in Singapore could result in leftist intolerance toward differing views, particularly the stances of conservatives who do not advocate for the repeal.

Consequently, Shanmugam tried to allay such concerns by assuring that the government would explore ways to ensure that no one will be “canceled” for stating their stances. He said, “We should not allow a culture where people of religion are ostracised, attacked, for espousing their views or their disagreements with lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender viewpoints. And vice versa.”

Elaborating, Shanmugam declared, “We should be encouraging people to be able to express their viewpoints on all sides as long as it’s not offensive and doesn’t descend to hate speech.”

Moreover, Shanmugam stressed that the government has to ensure that people would not be attacked for stating their views, and find the right balance between a person’s right to free speech and attacks on other people’s views by restricting their free speech.

“If we find the right solutions, yes, that should be something that we could see in legislation in the near future.”

Shanmugam explained that the phenomenon of “cancel culture” entails a broad range of issues, and not



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just matters pertaining to the repeal of the sodomy law.

“[When] the people’s freedom to express their views is curtailed in real life, in the physical world, we won’t allow five people to gang up and beat you up. That’s against the law,” Shanmugam said. However, such attacks do happen online, he added.

Admitting that it is challenging to envision a time frame on when this proposed law could materialize, Shanmugam stated that the government has been garnering viewpoints from both religious and LGBT groups who feel threatened for stating their views.

“Religious groups, in particular, feel very put upon, because they feel that whenever they express their views, they are attacked as homophobes,” Shanmugam emphasized.

“So, there is a line between expressing your view on religion and becoming homophobic, or engaging in hate speech against LGBT groups. We’ve got to agree on, you know, these sorts of lines.”

Background of “Cancel Culture”

Associate Professor Daniel P S Goh, who teaches sociology at the National University of Singapore (NUS), explained that the term “cancel culture” hails from the United States, where the “culture war between Christian nationalists and liberal progressives [is] fought out across the public sphere and social media”.

In the Singaporean context though, “canceling” usually implies that someone is being called out on social media, said Dr. Natalie Pang, a senior lecturer at the Communications and New Media Department of the National University of Singapore (NUS).

“Calling out, however, does not always lead to ‘cancellation’ — while many others may join in by liking, commenting or sharing the post, the actual effects of calling out can vary, and may not always result in ‘cancellation’ with the target’s reputation or livelihood being affected,” she said.

While there is currently no law protecting people from “cancellation” per se in Singapore, there are other laws in place to shield people in similar situations.

Lawyer Nithya Devi from Kalidass Law Corporation said, “To say that you’re not supporting somebody is not against the law.... But in the process of canceling somebody, if words that were threatening, insulting or abusive language were used, that can amount to harassment.”

Under Singapore’s Protection from Harassment Act (Poha), which was enacted in 2014, anyone who resorts to any threatening, abusive, or derogatory words or actions with the intent to cause harassment, alarm, or distress to another person can be imprisoned for up to six months or fined up to S\$5,000.

A “canceled” person could also possibly have recourse to legal action under the Defamation Act if false claims are made against him or her.

“But you will have to prove that it was a false statement and it led to your reputation being damaged and you suffer these losses. If it is not false, then it will be hard for you to even fall under the realm of a defamation claim,” Devi elaborated.

Alluding to Singapore’s sodomy law, the director of law firm Characterist LLC, Adrian Wee, highlighted that there are existing laws that deter people from making remarks that “denigrate a race or religion.”

For instance, Singapore’s Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act, which was initially implemented in 1990, promotes tolerance among various religious groups, as well as keeping religion and politics



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separate. Those who incite ill feelings between different religious groups could face a restraining order under this law.

Hence, Wee said that a pejorative remark against a particular religion during debates about the sodomy law “could potentially be a race or religious based comment that could be illegal.”

Nonetheless, regarding the aforementioned laws such as Poha and the Defamation Act, Wee acknowledged, “These rules don’t have specific applications to people being canceled and are just rules that regulate what you can or cannot say to other people.”



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