

Keeping Little India safe

Police officers may get more powers in Little India for up to one year, according to new legislation proposed in Parliament on Monday.



Under the proposed law, police officers can:

- Ban people from entering the area if their presence is likely to threaten public order.
- Search and interview anyone within the area for prohibited items – such as weapons or explosives – and alcohol.
- Search and enter premises in the area without a warrant if they reasonably suspect that alcohol has been drunk, prohibited items are being kept or a banned person is being harboured on the premises. Police officers investigating arrestable offences can already conduct searches without a warrant under certain conditions under the Criminal Procedure Code.
- Quickly cancel or suspend business licences – whether for hotels, restaurants or entertainment outlets – if the licensees are suspected to have flouted the new law.

Source: MHA, ST GRAPHICS

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BAD IMAGE

Even innocent people will not be very comfortable about coming to Little India.

– Little India Shopkeepers and Heritage Association vice-chairman Gohulabalan Sundaresan, on how the new Bill may affect businesses

STEREOTYPING OF WORKERS

The new powers... could be seen as being directed at... Indian foreign workers... It is important to guard against this.

– Tampines GRC MP Irene Ng, on implementation of the Bill

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Opinion divided over Little India Bill

Some worry extra steps could lead to stereotyping and hurt businesses in area

By FENG ZENGKUN

A BILL tabled in Parliament on Monday to give the police extra, temporary powers in Little India to keep it safe after the Dec 8 riot has drawn divided opinions.

Some noted that the new temporary law was necessary to maintain security, especially since a high-level Committee of Inquiry convened to look into the causes of riot has not completed its work.

But others wondered whether such provisions are still necessary, given that measures such as a ban on drinking alcohol in public places on weekends seem to have established order in the area.

Others also worry that the law may unfairly penalise foreign workers who gather in the area on weekends, lead to stereotyping of the workers and further erode business there.

The proposed law – expected to last for up to a year until longer-term measures are enacted – allows the police to ban people from Little India for up to 30 days and quickly suspend the business licences of those suspected of flouting the law.

While police officers investigating “arrestable offences” can already conduct searches without warrants under the Criminal Procedure Code, the new law specifies that they can also do so in Little India under certain conditions.

It enables the police to search and enter premises in Little India if they suspect alcohol has been consumed, prohibited items kept or banned people harboured. They can also strip-search and interview people there for alcohol and prohibited items such as weapons and explosives.

“However harsh the enforcement powers and measures in the new Bill may seem at first glance, they are not new,” said Singapore Management University (SMU) associate professor of law S. Chandra Mohan. This is because the Public Order (Preservation) Act (POPA) has already been invoked in the Little India area, which gives the Government very wide powers. “The POPA contains a lot more extensive enforcement powers and measures, such as the ability to impose a curfew in the area.”

As Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean explained, the proposed law tabled in Parliament now restricts these wide powers by “scoping them more tightly”.

But others have noted that even these restricted powers may not be necessary.

“The measures we have used since Dec 8 have maintained law and order relatively well by most accounts, and the Government has also said that, by and large, the foreign workers here are law-abiding,” said Nominated MP Eugene Tan, who is also an SMU law academic.

Little India Shopkeepers and Heritage Association vice-chairman S Gohulabalan said shopkeepers in the area were “very fearful” that the proposed law would keep people away from the area, hurting businesses.

He said the search powers were more appropriate for gambling areas and vice dens. “Even innocent people will not be very comfortable about coming to Little India.”

Tampines GRC MP Irene Ng added that since the proposed law is limited to Little India, “the new powers for interrogating, searching and banning people from Little India could be seen as being directed at... Indian foreign workers”, only some of whom were involved in the riot.

“It is important to guard against this, and I am assured by DPM Teo’s reply that (the law’s) implementation would be fair.”

But she added that the new law would also allow the police to enforce temporary precautionary measures, particularly the restrictions on alcohol sale, until the Committee of Inquiry into the riot makes its recommendations.

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