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Religious groups oppose Pink Dot rally by LGBTs, which last year saw record attendance, and have called on city state's government to stop it

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BY SATISH CHENEY IN SINGAPORE



Last year's Pink Dot rally in support of gay rights in Singapore. Photo: AP

Tension between religious groups and the gay community in Singapore is escalating ahead of an annual gay-rights rally today - the eve of the Islamic holy month of Ramadan - which is expected to draw thousands of people.

The Pink Dot rally saw a record turnout of more than 20,000 last year and made international headlines. The event brings together supporters of rights for lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgendered people (LGBT), who come dressed in pink and champion the "freedom to love", organisers said.

The movement has grown stronger over the years with local celebrities' endorsement and major corporations like Google and Barclays sponsoring it.

20,000

Turnout for last year's Pink Dot rally, which set a record and made international headlines

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While previous rallies resulted in grumbles from some Christian conservatives, opposing voices have grown louder this year. Online debate has grown so heated that Christian and Islamic authorities as well as politicians have called for restraint. Pink Dot organisers, for the first time, are also hiring security personnel.

In response, one Islamic religious teacher has urged Muslims to wear white clothing today as a sign of protest.

Lawrence Khong, the influential pastor of the roughly 10,000-member Faith Community Baptist Church, supports the Muslim Wear White campaign. In a Facebook post, he said it provided Christians with the unique opportunity to "stand in solidarity with the Muslim community on this social cause".



Lawrence Khong

Khong criticised the government for allowing the Pink Dot rally to take place.

"We must let our government know that, in allowing the Pink Dot event to continue without restraint, they are more than tolerating the gay agenda," Khong said. "They are bordering on endorsing and emboldening the LGBT claim to gay rights."

The strong rhetoric has caused concern among activists, who penned a statement calling for more public education on homosexuality.

"Lately, a worrying trend has emerged on social media with voices calling for gays and lesbians to be targeted for public shaming and harassment," the statement read.

A Pink Dot spokesman said events showed discrimination was alive in certain segments of Singapore but expressed confidence it would be overcome. "If the growing number of participants attending our annual event is any indication, Singaporeans are slowly but surely coming to accept and recognise the LGBT community as integral to the Singapore fabric," he said.

Eugene Tan, a lawmaker and associate professor of law at the Singapore Management University, said neither camp represented broad swathes of the population, and observed that the government had stayed neutral.

"What will be a problem is if the government is perceived to be partial in the contestation, and there is no doubting that both sides seek to have the government and the middle ground on their

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side," Tan said. "So the government has to tread the tight-rope delicately and assure the conflicting groups that their values and interests are secure."

Gay sex is nominally illegal in Singapore but the law is rarely enforced. The island, which has a small but thriving gay club scene, is generally considered safe for the LGBT community.

"My transsexual friends can walk around without people calling them names or pointing at them," said a gay Muslim man who did not want to be named. "Some of my gay male friends walk around holding hands and no one bats an eyelid."