

SPEECH BY DR YAACOB IBRAHIM, MINISTER-IN-CHARGE OF MUSLIM AFFAIRS, AT THE ADDRESS OF THANKS FOLLOWING THE PRESIDENT'S SPEECH AT THE OPENING OF THE FIRST SESSION OF THE 12TH PARLIAMENT, ON 20 OCTOBER 2011

Mr Speaker Sir

Please allow me now to move on to speak as Minister-in-charge of Muslim Affairs.

1 Singapore is at a turning point that we are all trying to grasp. Because of our open economy, events beyond our borders constantly impact us. Digital media is transforming the way we relate to one another, while immigration has changed the face of our society. Singapore remains a home with exciting opportunities for all. But the changes also create a sense of uncertainty and anxiety among many Singaporeans. We have heard MPs reflect these concerns in the House.

2 All these concerns are also shared by Singapore's Malay/Muslims. As a community, how should we respond? There have been many discussions both in this House and outside. Many ideas have been suggested. And as we start this process of finding solutions with the opening of the 12th Parliament, allow me to take a look at the wider picture. When we build, it is important that our community gets our foundations right.

3 Although some of the challenges seem new, we should not forget that, collectively, we have been here before. Our community is not unused to dislocations and stresses, and even challenges to our identity. Fortunately, such experiences, I believe, have been mainly positive, because they have strengthened us. They have

given us greater resilience, a stronger identity, and better problem-solving skills. So, our community can draw on the wisdom we have gained from the past in order to seize the opportunities of the future with confidence.

4 For the Malay/Muslim community, the last 46 years of nation-building has brought about profound changes to our lifestyle including our religious life. The need to adapt to nation-building policies has left lasting imprints on the psyche of the community. It is a story that has been narrated by both local and foreign commentators, including many who are not from the community.

5 We have always seen ourselves as part of the Singaporean family. Every year, without fail, we will see many Malay/Muslim families attending the National Day Parade, many with national flags painted on to their cheeks. Yet these very same families have a love for Malay language and are comforted practising their religion here in Singapore. We have the same hopes and dreams. We want to see our children do well in school, our workers excel in the workplace and our families living in happiness and harmony. This is the Singapore dream of unity, peace and progress. At the same time we treasure our religious and ethnic identity as Muslims and Malays. Islam is central to our lives. It defines our place in this universe. It gives us the impetus to put in effort, the confidence to embrace change with a progressive outlook, and the values of tolerance and respect. At the same time, our Malay language and cultural heritage is an anchor. We are proud of our language and want it to remain vibrant. As the proverb goes "*bahasa jiwa bangsa*" or the language is the soul of the race. All our identities define who we are. Yet our religious affiliation and cultural and linguistic heritages connect us to the wider world and the region. These

are important bridges that our community can tap to the benefit of our nation. Our haj pilgrims have often been praised for being well-organised and orderly, reflecting positively our experience as Singaporeans. Therefore, being Malay/Muslim Singaporeans means we are in some ways the same as other Singaporeans, and in some ways different. The exact balance is something we have to answer for ourselves. What do we want to share, and how do we wish to remain unique? This is the central challenge that has always been with us, and will never go away. Our plus point is that we have always been an open community.

6 Achieving the right balance has been harder than some people think. Some, mainly outside Singapore, dismissed us for staying put in Singapore. They failed to recognise the rational and responsible decisions our parents' generation made to keep our status and standing in a new nation. We neither sold out nor abandoned ship. These critics did not think that it is possible to achieve any balance between being Singaporean and being Malay/Muslim much less being both a good Singaporean and good Malay/Muslim. On the other hand, there are some observers at the other extreme, who think we have never even tried to integrate and that we remain separate. Again, only those who do not know our community can hold such perceptions. We have not only adapted to public housing policies, but we also attend national schools, mingle and interact freely and more recently engage in serious and open dialogue about our respective faiths. The exact balance that we strive for is something that is circumstantially dynamic. But for us at the philosophical level it is a settled thing. This is our home and we are not going anywhere else.

7 Over the years, when the welfare of our community, our way of life and identity appeared at risk of being compromised because of national policies, we have found constructive solutions. Each time, we have been guided by the same imperative, to be good Malay/Muslims and to be good Singaporeans. We have stayed true to our community identity and at the same time embraced and contributed to the Singapore project, keeping faith with this beloved nation of ours.

8 As our young nation developed, one of the first challenges we confronted was adapting to living in high rise HDB flats where the sense of a community in a village life could not be easily replicated. With the move to modern housing estates came the anxiety of seeing our places of worship having to make way for development. But in a creative move not seen in any other country where Muslims are minorities, the government together with community leaders proposed and implemented the highly successful Mosque Building Fund (MBF). Since then, the MBF has funded the construction of 23 new generation mosques. Every working Malay/Muslim adult, from the humble road sweeper to the corporate executive, have a hand in this as we all donate to this fund.

National Archives of Singapore

9 In another ingenious move, the government together with the community created a unique legal framework for the religious life of the community. The Administration of Muslim Law Act (AMLA) of 1968 paved the way for the creation of three government-supported institutions namely the Registry of Muslim Marriages, the Syariah Court and the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS). Every visitor I have met has been impressed at this innovation, in which religious institutions exist as part of a secular state. These institutions have allowed Muslims

to practise our faith freely and more importantly as Singaporeans living in a multiracial multireligious state. This is indeed a privilege that many Muslim communities elsewhere would welcome.

10 With the introduction of mandatory military service in 1967, it was painful to see an earlier generation of Malay/Muslim men have their loyalty to Singapore doubted. Many faced a double blow, as they subsequently faced economic disadvantage as a result of not having done NS. Our community patiently but persistently pressed our case. Since those early years, much has been done to address this concern and today there are a growing number of Malay/Muslim officers across all uniformed services.

11 The debate on compulsory education inevitably turned the public's attention to our six full-time madrasahs, which pre-date Singapore's independence. For a community proud of its Islamic heritage, the apparent finger-pointing did not go down well. We readily accepted that a cap to madrasah enrolment was necessary in line with our needs for religious teachers. Then, 9/11 happened and a JI terrorist cell was discovered in Singapore, and the entire landscape changed. I was appointed Minister in-charge-of Muslim Affairs just a few months later and suddenly the job had become very different from what it used to be. Our community was put on the defensive, constantly expected to prove our loyalty. Fortunately, the government responded decisively to engage the wider public on the difference between Muslims and those advocating violence by misusing the name of our religion. We responded decisively too giving birth to the Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG) and playing our part actively in the various inter-faith engagements and programmes. Compared

with 2001, I think we are stronger now. Only those who are not in touch with Singapore will fail to see that how firmly engaged we are as Singaporeans. These incidents reflect how circumstances can sometimes push us off-course but because internally the gyroscope has been balanced we invariably revert back to the straight path.

12 The rapid pace of modernization in 1970s and 1980s also brought into focus other issues. The emergence of the drug problem in the late 70s and an increasing awareness of gaps in educational performance raised doubts about the community's ability to adapt to a modern society founded on the principles of fair competition and meritocracy. Despite the daunting magnitude of the problem, we persevered and tackled the drug problem decisively hand-in-hand with the authorities. Since the formation of Mendaki in 1982, we have striven to close educational gaps working together with other Malay/Muslim Organisations. In 2003, we went further to formalise the Community Leaders Forum to share expertise and experiences, and do projects together to develop the community holistically in tandem with government efforts for the nation. Even though many had said we will never catch up, we have never given up on putting in effort and today we have a growing number of students excelling across the entire education landscape. Yet for every Malay/Muslim individual who makes it academically, there will be many others, from our other major communities. Hence for my community, when someone succeeds we rejoice as a community as he or she reflects progress and the hopes of the entire community. And we celebrate our talent in all areas and not just those who excel academically. The Singaporean Malay/Muslim community is well aware that there is no free lunch and that success only comes through consistent effort.

13 The sketch above is not comprehensive but it is intended to give a flavour of the challenges over the last 46 years and how we as a community responded to those challenges. The challenges will not go away. Some say they may intensify because identity issues are becoming more pronounced in a globalised world. However, I am confident we will get better at managing them. What the future holds for us is as uncertain as it is for other communities. This lack of certainty does not mean that we should think less deeply about our challenges and opportunities. We need to concern ourselves with benefitting from government policies as well as ensuring personal and community engagement in the national dialogue. Like other Singaporeans, this is our home, and it is here where we have our roots, started families, nurture our children and chart our future.

14 Some may cynically say that certain government policies and institutions are remote and inaccessible and that the 'Malay problem' cannot be solved. But our history shows the power of engagement to improve the community. We have developed deep experience in dealing with difficult issues. Our community leaders have extensive experience and are well-regarded for their commitment and conviction. There is sufficient institutional memory in the community to avoid the quicksand and the mine-fields. For example, nowadays there are enough community leaders who know what to do whenever there is any hint of inter-religious friction. Indeed, some Muslim groups are at the forefront of inter-faith cooperation. Through our measured and rational approach, our community's leaders have earned the trust of others. We can speak up for the community without being suspected of being chauvinists or extremists. This ability to negotiate and build trust is important

because the tensions will not go away. This tension is not unique to Malay/Muslim community. All communities face similar tensions between racial and religious identity and being Singaporean. There is now more recognition that we can be different, yet equal partners.

15 We need to continue to provide first-hand opportunities to make a difference, to identify problems, understand their causes, and come up with solutions. Open, thoughtful, constructive dialogue is a critical component in this process. Personal commitment and active participation in these efforts is also a key component. But beyond navigating what is, our community needs to be able to imagine what we can be.

16 And in shaping that vision of ourselves, we can draw upon the many diverse experiences that have shaped and will continue to shape our community. We are proud of our faith and our cultural and linguistic heritage. We are proud to be a part of the Singaporean family where we work, live, play and interact with other Singaporeans in this island we call home. Our aspirations, hopes and dreams are no different from those whom we share this island with. All of us carry multiple identities and this a boon and not a bane as some would like us to think. Indeed, our Chinese, Indian, Eurasian and other compatriots have had their own share of trials and tribulations both unique as well as what we have commonly shared as Singaporeans. We therefore need not shed the layers that define us in order to become Singaporean. If anything, these layers should contribute to the continuous project of defining who we are and what it means to be a Singaporean in the 21st century. This is our home and our sense of place in this home can only be secured by continuing

our active participation in the process of nation-building shoulder-to-shoulder with fellow Singaporeans.

17 Mr Speaker Sir, let me now share some of my thoughts briefly in Malay.

[IN MALAY]

18 Masyarakat Melayu/Islam Singapura telah menempuh pelbagai cabaran dan pengalaman sejak negara mencapai kemerdekaan pada 1965. Segala cabaran dan pengalaman ini tidak sahaja mengukuhkan jati diri kita malah ia juga membantu membangunkan kita menjadi sebuah masyarakat yang lebih perkasa dan berdaya.

19 Segala kemajuan yang kita capai – sama ada dalam bidang pendidikan atau sosial – merupakan hasil titik peluh, perpaduan dan kemampuan kita untuk berfikiran progresif. Ini merupakan nilai-nilai yang perlu kita terus amalkan dalam usaha membina visi sebuah masyarakat cemerlang.

20 Sememangnya perjalanan kita ke arah sebuah masyarakat cemerlang memerlukan usaha gigih dan perpaduan yang berterusan. Saya yakin kita sedang bergerak di atas landasan yang betul ke arah visi murni itu demi masa depan anak-anak kita. Terima kasih.