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AT ABU DHABI
SESSION 5: GOVERNING TOLERANCE
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TIME)**

Excellencies. I thank the Federal National Council of the United Arab Emirates for inviting me to this Summit and for the very warm hospitality. It is an honour to be here.

2 This Summit sets for us a worthy goal – united for shaping the future. It is surely in our hands to make the future a brighter place, one that embraces tolerance and harmony.

3 Thanks to advances in technology and increasing economic inter-dependence, the world has become a more connected place. We may live in one region of the world, but our interactions with people, whether face-to-face or in cyber space, span the continents. Thus, learning to live peaceably in an increasingly connected and multi-cultural world is not a "good-to-

have", but a "must-have". This is why we are here today to discuss governing tolerance.

THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES' EXCELLENT EXAMPLE

4 I wish to commend the UAE on its timely and far-sighted initiatives in promoting tolerance. For example, it has created the post of Minister of State for Tolerance who is H.E Sheikha Lubna Al Qasimi, and established a national programme for tolerance. Such initiatives are a reflection of the values of the UAE's Founding Fathers. Singapore welcomes the opportunity to exchange views and ideas with the UAE on tolerance, and to work together to promote peaceful co-existence between different societies.

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SINGAPORE'S EXPERIENCE

5 Now, please let me share Singapore's experience. I would like to suggest that we cannot just "govern" tolerance; we have to "build" tolerance. In Singapore, we have not left this to chance.

6 Singapore gained independence in 1965. We had a difficult start. We experienced racial riots in our early years, but we made a commitment to build a multi-racial society. Since then, the Government has worked hard on three fronts to build tolerance. We implemented deliberate legislative safeguards, deliberate policies and deliberate community programmes. Let me elaborate.

LEGISLATIVE SAFEGUARDS

7 First, legislative safeguards. This is where Parliament, as the institution that debates and passes the laws of the land, plays an important role.

8 We have enshrined the principle of equal protection under the law, regardless of race, in the Constitution of the Republic of Singapore¹. Furthermore, the Constitution bestows upon the government of the day with "the responsibility...constantly to

¹ Article 12 of the Constitution of the Republic of Singapore is entitled "Equal protection" and reads as follows: 12 (1) All persons are equal before the law and entitled to the equal protection of the law.

care for the interests of racial and religious minorities in Singapore"².

9 In 1970, we set up the Presidential Council for Minority Rights to scrutinise all laws passed by Parliament to make sure the laws do not discriminate against any ethnic or religious community.

10 We introduced the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act in 1990 to give the Government the powers to issue restraining orders and take other stern measures against individuals who stir up hatred between ethnic and religious communities. Under the law, it is an offence to promote feelings of ill-will and hostility between different races³. Singapore's Penal Code criminalises

the uttering of words with the deliberate intention to wound the religious or racial feelings of any person⁴.

² Article 152 of the Constitution of the Republic of Singapore entitled "Minorities and special position of Malays" states that: (1) It shall be the responsibility of the Government constantly to care for the interests of the racial and religious minorities in Singapore.

³ Section 4(1) of the Sedition Act.

⁴ Section 298 of the Penal Code.

11 The latest legislative safeguard is related to the President of Singapore. In Singapore, the President is elected via popular vote every six years. Just last month, Parliament debated and passed a Bill to amend the Constitution to allow for a Presidential election to be reserved for a particular racial group in Singapore, if no one from that group had been President for five consecutive terms.

12 This sends a clear signal. The President has an important ceremonial role. He or she is a symbol of Singapore, and plays an important unifying function. Thus, the Presidency must be seen to be accessible to all races. People of all races should have the opportunity to achieve their highest aspirations, including being the President of Singapore⁵.

POLICIES

13 Second, policies. Singapore implemented the Ethnic Integration Policy in 1989 to prevent the formation of ethnic

⁵ Taken from FAQs on the Elected Presidency at gov.sg website.

enclaves. Thanks to this policy, the racial mix in each residential estate in Singapore mirrors the ethnic composition in the national population. It has also given opportunities to citizens to interact and make friends with someone of another race on a daily basis⁶.

14 Another key policy is universal education. Education is compulsory under the law for every Singapore child. The Government builds and funds national schools, and heavily subsidises school fees. Almost everyone sends their children to these schools, and children of all races study, grow up and form collective memories together.

15 While emphasising physical integration, students are also encouraged to value their own unique cultures. So, every student studies the English language, in order to communicate across the races in one common language. But every student also studies his or her own Mother Tongue language as a compulsory subject. To celebrate unique customs, the national schools set

⁶ HDB Sample Household Survey, 2013.

aside one day in the year as Racial Harmony Day for students to wear their ethnic clothes to school instead of the school uniform. Thus, celebrating uniqueness amidst togetherness.

COMMUNITY PROGRAMMES

16 Third, community programmes. And I will list a couple. Singapore set up the National Steering Committee on Racial and Religious Harmony in 2006. It is chaired by a Minister and is a platform for regular dialogue and networking for community and religious leaders in Singapore. It has helped to build trust amongst the groups.

17 Inter Racial and Religious Confidence Circles (IRCCs) are formed in every electoral ward. The Circles are made up of community and religious leaders, and Members of Parliament. These Circles meet regularly and are activated in the aftermath of a crisis or an incident with racial or religious overtones. They help to disseminate accurate and timely information to temper possible negative emotions and tensions.

GENDER EQUALITY

18 Finally, since this is a Summit of Women Speakers, I wish to touch on gender equality. The Singapore Government is committed to the advancement of women as integral and equal members of our society. Gender equality in Singapore is founded on the principle of meritocracy, where equal opportunities are available to men and women. Article 12 of our Constitution provides that "all persons are equal before the law and entitled to the equal protection of the law".

19 In Parliament, women occupy 24 out of the 101 seats, or 23.8%. We have high literacy rates among women - 95.2%. And the labour force participation rate is a very healthy rate of 79.6% in the prime working age of 25-54 years.

20 Our life expectancy at birth is 84.9 years for women, who live longer than the men. Our infant mortality rate is 2 per 100,000 live and still-births.

21 Our women have also done well in subjects that are traditionally viewed as male-dominated. In 2015, 73.4% of all health sciences graduates and 59.2% of natural, physical and mathematical science graduates are women.

CONCLUSION

22 Maintaining racial harmony and social cohesion is the responsibility of every citizen and not just the Government's. Singapore has made and continues to make deliberate efforts in the pursuit of this goal. Our efforts are sometimes complicated by imperfections in our own human nature and in society. But what is important is that we recognise it as a worthwhile and vital effort, and so, we keep working at it to make it better.

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23 Excellencies. Thank you for allowing me to share Singapore's experience. Let me also congratulate President of the UAE Federal National Council Dr Amal Al Qubaisi for being elected as the first female Speaker in the Arab world. It is a significant moment for women in the region and I hope that her

appointment will come to inspire many more women leaders to rise in this region.

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