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**KEYNOTE ADDRESS BY PRESIDENT HALIMAH YACOB AT THE  
NATIONAL IRCC CONVENTION 2018 AT SUNTEC CITY  
CONVENTION CENTRE ON SATURDAY, 27 JANUARY 2018**

Ms Grace Fu, Minister for Culture, Community and Youth

Mr Baey Yam Keng, Parl Sec, MCCY

Dr Teo Ho Pin, Mayor, North West District

Distinguished Guests

Ladies and Gentlemen

1. I am delighted to attend this inaugural National Inter-racial and Religious Confidence Circles (IRCC) Convention.

2. Inter-religious and inter-racial harmony form the bedrock of our multi-cultural society. Today's theme "United People. Strong Society" reflects this important philosophy. Since our founding as a nation, Singapore has worked hard at maintaining peace and harmony. We chose early on to build on our principles of multiracialism and meritocracy, so that we can achieve a fair and just society where all can progress.

3. We have not done badly. Both the Government and community have stayed committed and worked tirelessly to nurture positive communal relations. As one of the most culturally diverse society, we have enjoyed relative peace and harmony. Singaporeans are at ease with one another, regardless of race and religion, and have good understanding and mutual respect for one another's traditions and practices.

4. But this has not always been the case. The lessons of the racial riots in the 1960s remain an indelible part of our history. Till today, I still vividly remember my own experiences during that

period when we had the curfew and my mother had to make the difficult decision to continue selling food at our pushcart stall to

earn some income. Unfortunately my mother missed the last bus, and the three of us – mum, my brother and I - had to spend the night under a makeshift tent made out of a canvas sheet covering our pushcart! That was the most frightening moment of my life. Fortunately, it was not all gloom and despair. Amidst

the fear and uncertainty, that period also left a deep impression on me. The neighbourhood that we lived in was very peaceful and we had nothing to fear, although there were just a handful of Malay families living there. That experience taught me that we cannot take racial and religious harmony for granted.

5. We have come a long way in building trust and respect between the communities which has become part of our Singapore Spirit. We have learnt to live together, embrace our differences and celebrate our diversity. Last year, a netizen shared online that he saw a Chinese funeral and Malay wedding alongside each other at the void deck, and recalled that the wedding guests stood to pay their respects as the funeral procession passed by.

I dare proudly say that this only happens in Singapore!

6. It is this mutual respect that forms the foundation for our social cohesion. And to foster this spirit of mutual respect, it is necessary for Singaporeans of all races and religions to reach out to one another – whether in our housing estates, in National

Service, in our hawker centres or in our schools. Our willingness to accept and embrace the diversity of ethnicities and faiths is our strength as a country.

### **Challenges to Social Cohesion**

7. Unfortunately, every now and then, world events of strife and inter-community tensions remind us never to take our religious and racial harmony for granted. For example, the London attacks in June last year which happened at two popular tourist areas. The attack was horrific. It brought home the stark reminder that peace is fragile and an attack can happen just about anywhere. But beyond the human tragedy, I was also struck by how Londoners banded together quickly in an outpouring of support. The messages of solidarity on social media, the stories of cab drivers giving free rides and shop owners giving emergency workers free food, drinks and (I quote) “warmth” (unquote) – were all testimonies of a community’s resilience and solidarity. It gave us hope in

humanity. It also set me thinking – should a terrorist attack happen on our shores, how will we compare to these brave Londoners? How will we respond online and offline?

8. At home, Singapore is under the highest terror threat in recent years. Two ISIS attacks were planned on Singapore in 2016, and disaster was avoided within our shores only because of the hard work by our security agencies behind the scenes. Such threats will not be the last. And if the inevitable attack really happens, our ability to bounce back quickly and be even stronger depends on the preparedness of every Singaporean, organisation and community.

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9. Four individuals were issued detention orders by the authorities last year because they were radicalised by propaganda put out by terrorist groups and radical elements in cyberspace. We will not see the last of Singaporeans being influenced by what they read and who they meet online. We will likely see more cases of foreign religious teachers preaching hate, or preachers

exhorting followers to stay away from those who do not share the same faith. Extremism, segregation and hate are not exclusive to any one religion or race.

10. All of you here today are activists in one way or another. You are leaders and volunteers in your respective religious organisations and IRCCs, and all of you are key agents of change. I therefore encourage you to work together to build bridges between communities, forge shared experiences from doing good together and build a crisis-ready Singapore.

### **Building bridges between communities**

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11. Regular, positive social exchanges between different races and religions provide the foundations for social cohesion. Like a rich tapestry, our Singapore story is alive only because of the fine, interwoven threads of social interactions.

12. The Government can provide the opportunities for different communities to come together, build mutual respect and trust, as well as deepen the understanding of each other.

13. Today, at the national level, the Government regularly engages ethnic, community and religious leaders through the National Steering Committee on Racial and Religious Harmony. We have the Presidential Councils for Minority Rights and Religious Harmony, both of which ensure that our laws and norms safeguard social harmony. We also have national policies such as HDB's ethnic integration policy to encourage ethnic and religious interaction.

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14. But in this endeavour to build bridges between communities, Government's effort alone is not sufficient. We also need the commitment of community organisations, religious groups and individuals.

15. At the local level, the IRCCs help foster networks of trust between the different communities. These platforms enable leaders from different communities to come together regularly. They are especially useful when events are organised for members of different communities to attend and interact with one another regularly. And when a crisis strikes, it is these relationships that will count.

16. Beyond interactions and friendships, understanding each other is also important to buttress mutual respect between communities. Issues of race and religion are always sensitive, but that does not mean we do not talk about them and seek to better understand each other's perspectives. To facilitate this, MCCY launched the BRIDGE<sup>1</sup> initiative in March last year, to foster a better understanding of the diverse cultures and religions in Singapore. As its full name suggests, BRIDGE

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<sup>1</sup> BRIDGE is an acronym for Broadening Religious/Racial Interaction through Dialogue and General Education.



facilitates the broadening of religious and racial interaction through dialogue and general education.

17. The 'Ask Me Anything' series of conferences by the Association of Muslim Professionals is one such example. Last year's dialogue was attended by more than 100 participants, and included a short commissioned play by Ms Noor Mastura on the different interpretations of a young Muslim couple on issues such as fasting, social interaction and Muslim rituals. The many questions posed about Islam and the no-holds-barred responses from the panellists showed that we can have an open and candid conversation. I am heartened to hear that our religious and community organisations have strongly supported these BRIDGE initiatives. I look forward to many more similar programmes.

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## **Forging Shared Experiences from Doing Good Together**

18. As a diverse nation, Singapore must find common ground and build shared values. Shared experiences can help forge shared identities and bridge race and religion. When we build collective memories, we bond as one people.

19. And what better way to create these shared experiences than to also help others at the same time. I have always believed that when we do good as a nation, we multiply our impact. When we serve our community together, we bring joy not just to the beneficiaries, but also to ourselves. We also get to know one another better through doing good together.

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20. Indeed, we are already doing so. I am heartened that currently, many religious organisations and local communities do a tremendous amount of good work for charity. Many also work closely together with one another, so that together their help extends to more. We should continue to encourage this.

21. As religious and community leaders, you can inspire your respective communities to collaborate with one another to do good. In working together, you go beyond just being acquaintances to becoming partners. As partners, you get to know each other better. As partners, you build trust and learn to depend on each other. And as partners, you will not let each other down when a crisis strikes.

### **Building Crisis-Readiness as a Community**

22. The sad fact though is that despite the best of our effort, it is unlikely that Singapore will be totally immune to crisis forever. Cliché as it may sound, it is not a matter of “if”, but “when”.

23. Therefore, while it is important for us to build bridges and enhance our common space in peacetime, it is equally critical for every community to prepare a resolute response in the

immediate moments and aftermath of a terror attack. In other countries, places of worship are vulnerable as they are “soft targets”. In this regard, we cannot be complacent. We need to strengthen our resilience. Our places of worship need to be crisis-ready.

24. The Government has recently put in place the SGSecure framework. The SGSecure Community Network complements the work of the IRCCs on the ground to strengthen the Government’s partnership with religious organisations and expand outreach to the religious community. I strongly urge every religious organisation to be part of the SGSecure Community Network. Participate in crisis exercises, be better informed and be more plugged-in to the wider community.

25. I am glad that the mosque sector and a number of churches and temples have been briefed by MCCY and the Home Team agencies. Organisations such as the Catholic Archdiocese and St Andrew’s Cathedral have helped in sharing

their plans with fellow members of their communities. I commend these organisations, and call on other religious organisations to also draw up their crisis-preparedness plans.

## **Conclusion**

26. Ladies and gentlemen, when Singapore became independent, we were inspired by a vision of our founding leaders. A vision of a fair and just society, where everyone has opportunities to progress. A vision of a nation whose people care for and help one another, regardless of race and religion. A vision of a united people with a shared identity of who we are and what we believe in.

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27. In our early days of nationhood, we faced difficulties. We had to build an economy out of practically nothing. We were preoccupied with even the most basic of necessities, from water to housing to security. The racial riots brought fear and instability. But we persevered. We continued to build a Home based on our founding ideals. The challenges only made it

clearer to us that a cohesive and resilient society is key to our nation's survival. Singapore became what we are today because of the hard work of the community.

28. Over the course of the past 50 years, Singapore has changed. We have progressed both economically and socially. But so have the challenges changed with time. We face new challenges like terrorism and extremism. We will have to continue working on building a strong society and a united people.

29. Our people can only be united if each of us share the responsibility of upholding social harmony and building social cohesion. Our society is strong when we support each other, regardless of race, language or religion, whether in peacetime or in a crisis.

30. Achieving this aspiration requires the work from every one of us. I hope today's Convention will help all of us in our mission

to build a united and stronger Singapore. I wish all of you fruitful discussions.

Thank you.

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