

6 SEP 1988

Singapore Government

**PRESS RELEASE**

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88-607-14

Release No. 40/AUG05-1/88/08/13

SPEECH BY MR GOH CHOK TONG, FIRST DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER AND MINISTER FOR DEFENCE, AT THE OFFICIAL LAUNCHING OF THE "MALAY LANGUAGE AND CULTURAL MONTH 1988" AT THE PUB AUDITORIUM ON SATURDAY, 13 AUGUST 1988 AT 9.30 PM

Thank you for inviting me to open the Malay Language and Cultural Month. When Sidek Saniff first proposed to me the idea of holding a Malay Language month, I thought it was a good idea. But I felt that a language month might be too narrow in scope. I, therefore, suggested to Sidek that he should not just focus on language but should enlarge the programme to include culture.

I had two reasons for my suggestion. Firstly, I did not want the project to be seen as a response to the Speak Mandarin Campaign. The Speak Mandarin Campaign was started in 1979 with a definite objective. It was to persuade Chinese Singaporeans to drop their dialects and to pick up Mandarin. This remains the thrust of the campaign. Mandarin was taught as the mother tongue for Chinese pupils in our schools. It was logical to persuade their parents to switch from dialects to Mandarin. Otherwise the pupils would suffer a language overload having to cope not only with EL1 and CL2 in school but also with a dialect at home.

There is obviously no need for a similar Speak Malay Campaign. Malay is already the mother-tongue used by Malay pupils and their parents at home and socially. I, therefore, felt that the Malay Language Month should be widened into a Malay Language and Cultural Month. Nevertheless, I fully support the objective of encouraging Malays, especially those who are in school,

to speak and write better Malay, without diminishing their performance in other subjects. It is important that we know our mother-tongue well. Otherwise, we risk becoming too westernized. If Singaporeans speak only English, a Western language, and no mother-tongue like Malay, Tamil or Chinese, we will, as sure as daylight, eventually lose our own cultural identity. That is another reason why I thought you should include cultural activities in your Language and Cultural Month.

The Malay population in Singapore is not large. It is only 400,000. The Malays in Singapore are, therefore, understandably concerned about the use of the language and whether the standard of their language will drop. They should not be unduly anxious. In the first place, the Malay Language will, in my view, have a permanent place among the languages of the world because it is the living language of more than 170 million people in S.E. Asia. It is they who will determine how the language will develop.

The same is true for the Chinese language in Singapore. Chinese language experts here also know that they cannot influence the development of the Chinese Language. But they keep in touch with language developments in mainland China and Taiwan and introduce changes into the Mandarin used in Singapore as changes take place in China.

As a small nation, we cannot evolve our own language whether it is English, Mandarin, Malay or Tamil. Every community is proud of its language and want to develop it. But we have to reconcile ourselves to the fact that the impulses will come from outside our country. It is a reality that a small nation like ours has to live with. But we can take comfort that our languages

are major languages spoken by millions of people outside Singapore. Provided we keep in touch with them, our usage will evolve as theirs evolve.

I mentioned that I had two reasons why I felt that the Malay Language Month should be broadened in scope to include culture. My second reason is that by including culture, you would enlarge the common ground for interaction with the other races in Singapore. This will promote greater inter-racial contact and understanding. Our three major cultures, Malay, Indian and Chinese, have in fact, many common areas.

As Asian cultures, we share many core concepts and values. For example, we all agree on the paramount importance of the family, its internal relations and obligations. Each group may have different customs and ways of promoting family cohesion. But the goal is the same: it is to enhance family and community ties, and responsibility. For example, the Malay and Chinese have quite elaborate wedding customary practices. Both spend a great deal of money. The Chinese have special celebrations when a child reaches his first month of age. The Malays also do the same in their "bercukur rambut" (cutting or shaving the baby's hair) and "turun tanah" (touching the ground). But the objective is the same. It is to enhance family ties and responsibility. Take another common area of contact. Food. In the food we eat, we have adapted and borrowed extensively from each other. Where else in the world can you enjoy Indian fish-head curry, Malay satay and Nonya Laksa in a Chinese restaurant? These similarities also can be found in our mode of dressing like the "high collar" in the cheongsam or the coat for the Chinese men, the Malay "cekak musang" and the high collar shirt that the Indians wear on special occasions.

We have a large common ground on which our people can mix and interact. We have many similarities, just as we have some differences. By recognizing them, and through constant interaction, a common Singaporean identity based on shared values and experiences will emerge.

We need to keep trying to make the common area larger. The larger it is, the greater will be the social cohesion and integration of our multi-racial society. Today, all our children go through the same schools. Our young men share the same National Service experience. We are exposed to each other's cultural heritage at our different festivals.

The Government will continue to do whatever it can to promote inter-racial understanding. Private civic and culture groups can do more on their own too. In this respect, I am pleased to know that the People's Association aims to set up a Malay cultural or interest group in each of the 67 modern community centres by the end of the year, and in eight new centres next year.

The Civil Service recently started a Malay language course for its senior officers. The original intention was to have only six classes of 20 students each. But the response was overwhelming. More than 400 senior officers applied. The number of classes has to be increased to 10. The class size also has to be raised. Even then, about 65 officers had to be put on the waiting list for this year's course. Another 150 officers will be considered for next year's.

We can do more to promote our cultures. On an occasion such as the Malay Language and Cultural Month, why not have special items or events planned specially to

interest and involve those from other races? The same approach can be taken by the other ethnic groups when they celebrate their festivals or plan their cultural events. A good example is the Sing Singapore. It has become a multi-racial/multi-cultural event. In Sing Singapore, we have made a start to sing each other's songs. We should do more. What about plays and dance? Why not have more inter-ethnic performances in addition to those which feature only one racial group?

Unity in diversity is what we must aim and work for. This means that every ethnic community, while trying to preserve its distinct identity, must also look outward and seek to interest and involve others in their cultural activities. Through interaction and sharing, old bonds will be strengthened and new bonds created. But this must be done without compulsion. No community should coerce another community to adopt its customs.

May I close by wishing the organisers of the Malay Language and Cultural Month success in their efforts. It is not just an event organised by the Malays for Malays. It is a Singaporean event.

Dengan ini, saya dengan rasminya membuka Bulan Bahasa 38 ini.

Sekian. Terima kasih.