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16 SEP 1978 SPEECH BY DR AHMAD MATTAR, ACTING MINISTER FOR SOCIAL AFFAIRS,  
AT THE OPENING CEREMONY OF THE SEMINAR ON "PROGRAMME FOR  
MUSLIM COMMUNITIES" HELD ON SATURDAY, 9 SEPTEMBER 1978  
AT 2.30 P.M. AT THE SINGAPORE CONFERENCE HALL.

It has been said that Islam was one of the first religions to encourage democracy. In the mosque, for instance, when the Azan (call for prayer) is sounded and the worshippers are gathered together, the peasant and the king kneel side by side in prayers. The presence at this Seminar of Muslims from different parts of the world consisting of different races and environments is proof of the code of Islamic brotherhood which teaches that the whole of humanity is one nation. Differences such as class, colour, race and language are manifestations of God's power and they are merely badges for identification purposes.

I am pleased to note from the title of today's Seminar that the word "community" is plural in form. The organisers realise that the code of Islamic brotherhood takes into consideration the different geographical, historical and socio-political conditions in the countries in which Muslims live. Each Muslim community practises the teachings of Islam within its own setting and relevant to it.

Religion exhorts man to strive and seek for a more sublime purpose and to exert the effort to improve the quality of life and to be better human beings. Singapore is a secular state which recognises the importance of religion and the vital role it plays in the lives of its adherents. There is freedom of worship as it is realised that religion helps to develop and strengthen the individual as it refines the nature of man from passion to purity, from discord to harmony and from cruelty to compassion. A society without a religion can become one empty of ennobling principles and lacking moral fibre which is essential to living.

Singapore is a multi-racial, multi-lingual, multi-cultural and multi-religious country where the Government actively fosters a society in which all can live in harmony regardless of their faith. The policy is to see that the needs of all religious groups are catered for in a just and fair manner with everyone having equal opportunities and facilities necessary for the development of his potential. It is our conviction that only when everyone is treated equally will there be peace and harmony for the overall progress of the nation.

We are all aware that religion can be a contributory factor in creating social cohesion and at the same time it can be a source of social disunity. Whether religion unifies or divides man depends on how religion is woven into the fabric of the society and the nature and extent of communication between people of different religions. The religious leaders must provide the correct leadership and guidance in religious matters. They must underline the importance of religious tolerance, mutual respect and understanding between people and by making sure that religious principles and precepts are not misinterpreted in such a way as to become impediments to national progress.

In Singapore, we are lucky to have enlightened religious leaders who are well aware of the part religion plays in the welfare and progress of our society. For the Muslims, there is in existence the Muslim Religious Council or the Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura (MUIS) to look after their interests in the context of our multi-racial and multi-religious country. It is the supreme Muslim religious body set up by the Legislature to advise the Government on matters relating to the Muslim religion. MUIS has been in existence for the past 10 years and throughout this period, its members and officials have seen to it that the teachings of Islam are not ignored. Besides guiding Muslims and seeing that they abide by the fundamentals of Islam as contained in the Holy Koran, it has to look into detailed Muslim practices to see that Muslims have the discipline, adaptability, self-respect and tolerance to keep up with changing times.

During the past 10 years of its existence, it has worked ceaselessly for the betterment of Muslims. The main functions undertaken by MUIS during these 10 years include:

- 1) Implementing a centralised system of "fitrah" (tithes) collection, the proceeds of which are allocated in accordance with Muslim law to the eight "Asnaf" for worthwhile causes.
- 2) Issuing "fatwas" (religious rulings) through the Fatwa Committee set up to advise Muslims who request for rulings on any point of Muslim law.
- 3) Constituting an Appeal Board to attend to appeals against decisions of the Syariah Court on disputes relating to marital affairs.
- 4) Administering endowments vested in the MUIS.
- 5) Maintaining a register of persons converted to the Muslim religion in Singapore and conducting courses on the fundamentals of Islam for every convert.
- 6) Administering pilgrimage affairs which involve registration of pilgrims, documentation, travel arrangements, provision of welfare services and provision of religious guidance on Haj rituals.
- 7) Attending to the administration of all mosques in Singapore and providing supportive services.

Perhaps some of you may have heard of the Mosque Building Fund Scheme set up by MUIS in 1975 through the help of the Central Provident Fund Board and the Government to collect monthly voluntary contributions from Muslims for mosque building purposes. The setting up of this Scheme is an achievement based largely on the foresight of Muslim leaders in MUIS. On realising the religious needs of Muslims who have been resettled in satellite towns, MUIS was convinced of the need to build mosques in these towns. Six mosques are included under Phase I of the Scheme, and so far, three multi-million-dollar mosques have been built. Three more mosques under Phase I will be completed by the beginning of 1980. The success of this Scheme owes much to the support of Muslims, the hard work of MUIS and the various Mosque Building Committees. I would urge participants from overseas to visit any of these mosques before you leave for home at the conclusion of this Seminar.

I congratulate the organisers of this Seminar and wish to commend them for their hard work and dedication. They have chosen a good and relevant theme. However, no matter how well chosen the theme and the topics are, the wisdom and co-operation of all participants are needed to make a success of the Seminar.

In considering the topics during this Seminar, it may be helpful to bear in mind that Islam is not only limited to the observance of religious rites, it embraces social behaviour as well. It is useful to remember that a true Muslim is not one who only offers prayers and performs religious rites; he is one who, in addition to the above, is willing to come to the succour of the needy, the infirm and the helpless in his community. Prophet Mohammed explained the concept by saying that "the Ummah (that is the community) is a single fold in which each is a shepherd unto the other".

I would like to welcome our Muslim friends from overseas and hope that your stay in Singapore will be pleasant and memorable. Now, I have great pleasure in declaring this Seminar open.

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