



**SPEECH BY DR YAACOB IBRAHIM, MINISTER FOR COMMUNICATIONS AND  
INFORMATION, MINISTER-IN-CHARGE OF CYBER SECURITY AND MINISTER IN-  
CHARGE OF MUSLIM AFFAIRS, AT THE ISLAM IN THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD  
CONFERENCE ORGANISED BY THE S. RAJARATNAM SCHOOL OF INTERNATIONAL  
STUDIES, THURSDAY, 28 APRIL 2016, 9:15 AM AT THE AUDITORIUM,  
NANYANG EXECUTIVE CENTRE, SINGAPORE**

Ambassador Ong Keng Yong

Dr Ali Allawi

Distinguished Guests

Ladies and Gentlemen

1. I am indeed delighted to be here today for the 'Islam in the Contemporary World' conference. Muslim communities worldwide are undergoing social transformations and responding to issues such as political participation, secularism, extremism, and human rights in a variety of ways. It is therefore timely that the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies has organised this conference to bring together distinguished scholars who can offer a multidisciplinary approach towards examining complex issues within Muslim communities.

2. How Muslim communities respond to such issues depends on how they answer questions such as what is the best way to govern society, and how far should

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commandments formulated by classical Muslim jurists shape society today? In answering these questions, we have seen how there are diverse views; with each view proclaiming to be the most authentic in terms of Islamic piety and politics.

3. Depending on the interests, ambitions, and beliefs of the various actors, such contestations take place in many different forms and vary widely in terms of goals, tactics and strategies. In places where the society is governed by democratic institutions and the rule of law, the discourse takes place in a marketplace of ideas. In other places, different visions of the future may compete amidst violence.

### **A Contextual Approach towards the Practice of the Faith**

4. However, I do not suggest that only Muslims are grappling with such issues. One only needs to look at the rise of politically assertive religious movements across the globe. The culture wars in the US continue to rage between conservatives and liberals. In fact, it is in the nature of every faith community, not just Muslims, to think deeply about being true to religious doctrine, while at the same time inhabiting and engaging the present.

5. However, unlike those who stridently assert that their vision and interpretation of the truth is absolute, inerrant and beyond criticism, we should instead subscribe to a more progressive culture that affirms the values long held dear by our forefathers – values of mutual respect, humility and inclusiveness. As a result of the changes and transformations in the world today, what should faith communities preserve, and what should change?

6. Throughout history, Muslims in every society have been developing their own way of applying the principles of Islam within the lived realities of their time. Hence, one can see the differences between the practice of Islam in the Indian sub-continent and South East Asia as compared to the Middle East shaped -in part- by their socio-historical circumstances and indigenous cultures. A contextual approach towards the practice of the faith ensures that Muslims can hold steadfast to their religious traditions while contributing towards the growth and development of their country. Here in Singapore, we endeavour to take into account the lived realities of Muslims who build their futures in a multicultural society and a secularly-governed nation.

### **The Singapore example**

7. When Singapore became independent in 1965, one of the earliest Acts passed by the Singapore Parliament was the Administration of Muslim Law Act or AMLA. The drafters had looked to various models in the region and the Middle East, and they adapted these models to Singapore's context before proposing the legislation. AMLA led to the creation of a centralised authority regulating Muslim affairs called the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore or better known as MUIS, the institution of the Mufti and the Fatwa Committee.

8. Throughout these years, the Mufti who chairs the Fatwa Committee has had to deal with many issues. During the early years, urban redevelopment meant giving up old mosques and *suraus* (prayer halls) in the villages. Under the then-Mufti Syed Isa Semait's religious guidance, we ensured that the new mosques provide a safe and nurturing space conducive to worship and religious education. Progressive fatwas issued by the Committee

also enabled the revitalisation of Muslim charitable trusts or *wakafs*. Today, the value of our *wakaf* properties is estimated at S\$600 million.

9. In its deliberation of the issues, the Fatwa Committee invites views from experts from various fields to provide inputs. Let me cite an example, Dr Rufaihah Abdul Jalil, a scientist and an Assistant Professor at the Department of Surgery of the National University of Singapore, provides valuable inputs on issues involving bio-medical ethics. This process enables the Committee to have all the necessary information before issuing the fatwa, thereby making fatwas relevant for Muslims living in a modern nation state.

10. AMLA also provided for the establishment of the Syariah Court, which administers Muslim divorces and inheritances. The Syariah Court has over the years adopted an approach that focuses on the welfare of the child in its handling of divorces, even as its presidents interpret and apply Muslim law. Appeals against the decisions of the Syariah Court are heard by the Appeal Board. As the sole appellate tribunal of Muslim family law in Singapore, the decisions of the Appeal Board have the potential to impact the lives of many Muslims. Its decisions leave an indelible mark on the development and the transformation of Muslim family law.

11. There are currently 23 members of the Appeal Board; from whom a three-member panel will be formed to hear appeals on an ad-hoc basis. What is most interesting is that the Appeal Board members include Muslim lawyers and judges who are trained in civil law and Syariah law. In the pursuit of justice, the Appeal Board has shown that wisdom can be gleaned from a variety of sources. As such, it has not shied away from using civil law

doctrines and referring to civil law cases as long as doing so would not contradict the ethos and moral vision of Muslim law.

12. As issues become more complex, the Fatwa Committee and the Appeal Board do not merely apply the corpus of commandments formulated by classical Muslim jurists. Rather, they evaluate the facts of each case and assess them not only in the light of the jurisprudential principles, but also with a moral sense of what is ethical and what is just. To further strengthen our institutions so that they continue to have the confidence of the community, we continuously look at ways of building their capabilities. This ensures that the Islamic legal heritage continues to be relevant to the realities facing Muslims in Singapore.

### **Strengthening social cohesion**

13. But beyond the legal realm, this conciliatory approach towards finding common ground has also helped to contribute to the harmonious relationship among the various communities in Singapore. Muslim community and religious leaders, together with those from other races and religions, have worked hard to strengthen the social fabric of a multiracial Singapore and will continue doing so. Strengthening social cohesion is a continuous process that requires both candour and civility. This demands imagination, constant education, and the concerted effort by all members of society, and not just the Muslims.

14. As a young nation, we are constantly working to strengthen our shared sense of what Singapore stands for. This comes from our shared experiences of how we live and grow up

together and how we can become one people, beyond just seeing ourselves as being members of a particular race or a particular religion.

15. The government's role is to create an environment where government policies encourage awareness and respect for cultural diversity and ensure equality of opportunities in such a way that children from poor families are not systematically disadvantaged. The government is also responsible for upholding the rule of law to ensure procedural fairness, and for enforcing effective legislation that criminalises hate speech. These policies support the building of a cohesive society.

16. And for this reason, we stand united against exclusivists of all shades who denigrate deeply held beliefs held by faith communities, and who assert that only one culture has absolute superiority to the exclusion of others. What is worse is when impressionable and untutored young minds are taught to accept violence and reject peace-making, and are socialised to making decisions without discernment of right and wrong. Exclusivist teachings cause mistrust to deepen not only between different religious traditions, but also of the life-affirming values within these traditions. This will not only lead to conflict, but also a rejection of an integral source of dynamism, which is the recognition that it is possible to learn something valuable from what the "other" has to offer.

17. Similarly, prejudice and stereotypes make us poorer. Instead of retreating into ignorance, we should build bridges of understanding. While it is important to speak with moral clarity against bigotry, it is also important to do so with reconciliation and not retribution in mind. We share this earth with people of all creeds, colours and beliefs. This

makes it all the more important that we should reach out to each other and understand each other's hopes and concerns. After all, the essence of our religious teachings is to do good on earth and to each other.

18. Nevertheless, differences will continue to emerge especially in this hyper-connected and increasingly complex world. It is, therefore, important to deal with irreconcilable differences in a calm, rational and dignified manner. This is because how we manage those differences will determine whether we will be able to enlarge the common ground, accommodate a greater plurality of views and ideas, and yet not tear us apart. It is by embracing such differences that we can foster creative coexistence. Undoubtedly, it will be increasingly difficult to try and balance competing interests. This makes the need to instil a sense of curiosity and the appreciation of diversity all the more urgent.

19. Singapore has been through tough times and there will be more tests in the years ahead. The strength of our fortitude and resilience will depend on how we show compassion to one another during hard times, how we overcome our challenges together, and how we reinforce the values of a fair and just society.

### **Singaporean Muslims – Contributing towards nation-building**

20. Singaporean Muslims have always been integral to the nation's progress. We have built Singapore together with other fellow Singaporeans. Whilst we have faced many difficult challenges in the past, we have overcome them in partnership with the Government. This is because we are secure of our position and in our belief that we will

always have a stake in our country. A good future is where everyone, regardless of background or belief, has a stake in the country. With the trust and confidence steadily built over the past 50 years, state-community relations have strengthened, and our community has thrived.

21. Partnership does not mean, however, that the state must accept everything a community imposes. Partnership means that we accept the norms of our multi-racial and multi-religious society. We share our values but do not impose them.

22. Partnership also means recognising that in order to arrive at an optimal solution, there must be a degree of openness, some measure of give-and-take, as well as an appreciation of the concerns and constraints. No doubt our socio-historical context, the choices we as a people had made, and the accommodative nature of our multicultural society had influenced this trajectory and allowed us to reap the benefits. As a result, we have become more confident and more grateful for what life has given us.

23. In closing, allow me to observe that how the contestations within Muslim communities will pan out is indeed uncertain. Charismatic speakers and ideas come and go. But every society must hold true to what is precious to them. For Singapore, since independence, our community and our religious leaders have always approached issues with a view to find meaningful solutions to concrete problems. Our community has a tradition of being guided by the principles of moderation, inclusiveness, and respect for diversity, and participating actively in our nation building efforts. This is the Singapore way and it is what we as a community and as a society must cherish and protect jealously.



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24. I wish all conference participants a fruitful deliberation.

25. Thank you very much.



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