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*International Conference on Cohesive Societies*

## **Appreciating Diversity: What Has The ICCS Achieved?**

*By Ong Keng Yong*

### **SYNOPSIS**

*'Many Communities, One Shared Future' was the theme of the recently concluded International Conference on Cohesive Societies (ICCS). A key takeaway is that diversity is not a hindrance to social cohesion; it is how people manage the difference. It is also important that everyone plays a part and not wait for the government or institutions to do something.*

### **COMMENTARY**

LAST WEEK, various speakers and over 1,000 delegates from 40 countries discussed ways to meet the challenges posed by extremism, exclusivism and polarisation that are stoking tensions and propagating divisions across the globe. They met at the International Conference on Cohesive Societies (ICCS) in Singapore, organised by the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS). One outcome was a greater appreciation of social diversity.

There was a recognition of the strengths and challenges involved in weaving together disparate communities in society to make a strong, cohesive whole. For instance, participants cited the need for religion to be included as part of the solution for peace, rather than be the problem causing divisiveness. For that to happen, mutual learning, trust building, mutual respect and inter-faith dialogue were considered necessary steps towards the building of a more cohesive society.

### **Forging a Common Identity**

Education, acknowledging different experiences and welcoming human resilience rather than enforcing a single rigid identity were also highlighted as vital ingredients in unifying communities. If shared values and norms formed the basis of inclusive identities, as many speakers noted, then collective action from every sphere of society was needed to forge a common identity.

What is clear too is that the work is never done. Harmony is a goal that is always a work in progress, particularly at a time when divisive views and fake content designed to stoke strong emotional reactions are rife on digital media.

### **Putting Words Into Action**

One thing that stood out at the ICCS was the oft repeated call to engage the young. This makes sense considering that the problems arising from social fault lines are long term, spanning generations.

Furthermore social media and digital platforms are the arenas where the battle of ideas is increasingly fought and where young people are most likely to be found. The challenge then is to come up with the messages and narratives best suited to win them over.

The ICCS' Young Leaders Programme acknowledges the importance of getting youths involved in playing a bigger and more active role in community building.

### **Sharing Experiences and Ground-up Work**

Building cohesion in society is dependent on many variable factors. What works in one society may not for another. Seen in this light, the ICCS is an invaluable platform for the sharing of ideas among different groups on how to meet their common challenge.

Singapore's multi-racial and multi-religious make-up and its ability to survive the odds with minimal disruption to social harmony makes it an ideal place to host the ICCS.

However, while Singapore can offer inspiration to other communities still trying to bridge social divides, it is essential that Singaporeans not take what the country has attained for granted; instead they should see good communal relations as an ongoing project, working always to find ways to forge stronger common bonds.

The Commitment to Safeguard Religious Harmony, which was unveiled during the ICCS by 259 faith groups in Singapore, is one such example. It also underscores the importance of ground-up initiatives in ensuring peaceful coexistence.

### **Paving Way for New Relationships**

The ICCS may have ended but the boost it has given to the cause of forging social cohesion continues. By bringing academics, policy makers, thought leaders, and practitioners together to participate in robust discussions, it has paved the way for the building of new relationships and the strengthening of existing ones.

The conference provided avenues to learn from others and find similarities in the work they do. This was the case for two speakers – Mr Christian Picciolini, a former American white supremacist recruiter, and Dr Noor Huda Ismail, an Indonesian activist who works to rehabilitate radicalised ISIS fighters. Vastly dissimilar in their backgrounds, both saw common purpose in their current missions.

The hope is that the ideas generated and the contacts made will result in further exchanges and collaborations to find ways to push back against the polarising forces that are threatening to tear apart many countries.

Alongside global initiatives that are already taking place, such as the “A Common Word” initiative and the Christchurch Call to Action, the ICCS seeks to bring more people together on inter-religious endeavours to expand the common ground.

### **Moving into Deeper Conversation**

The strong interest shown in the ICCS suggests that Singapore has accurately sensed the mood for more conversation and engagement in this critical enterprise, not only in ASEAN but farther afield.

And yet while governments, institutions and platforms like the ICCS can create awareness and initiate more dialogues, what matters ultimately is grassroots support. Social cohesion is an ongoing process where everyone has a part to play.

As Singapore’s President Halimah Yacob, who mooted the idea of organising the ICSS, said at the conference: “A nation cannot prosper if its people are divided. A society cannot be proud if its people distrust each other.”

In his keynote address to the conference, Jordan’s King Abdullah II also underscored the individuals’ role in combating the threat to interfaith harmony, mutual respect and trust. “Solutions are not exclusively the job of governments and big companies,” said the King, urging young people to do their part on social media.

Despite the challenges of diversity, it should not be viewed as a hindrance. What matters is how we view diversity in society and make the most of our differences, bearing in mind we share one common future.

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