

**SPEECH BY MINISTER FOR THE ENVIRONMENT AND WATER RESOURCES
AND MINISTER-IN-CHARGE OF MUSLIM AFFAIRS DR YAACOB IBRAHIM AT
THE APPRECIATION DINNER FOR RETIRING MUFTI SYED ISA SEMAIT,
FRIDAY 21 JAN 2011, 8.15PM, GRAND HYATT HOTEL**

Our Special Guest, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong

Faith and Community Leaders

Friends

1. Assalamu'alaikum Wrh Wbh. And a good evening to all of us gathered here. It is an honour and privilege for me to speak on our beloved Shaikh Syed Isa Semait who has provided religious leadership as the Mufti of Singapore from 1972 to 2010. Before I go on, allow me to mention how this new salutation in addressing our retired Mufti of Singapore as Shaikh Syed Isa came about. With decades of familiarity that Syed Isa has built with the community and fellow faith leaders here and abroad, it is difficult for us to stop calling him "Mufti". So we discussed this and decided that it would be apt to address Syed Isa as "Shaikh". This will reflect his stature as our wise teacher and a reference point for the Asatizah fraternity. Shaik Syed Isa in his gracious way has agreed to our requests to address him with the title henceforth.
2. As we come together on this important occasion, I would like to recollect the institution of the mufti in the history of Islam and in our own experience here in Singapore. The institution of the mufti grew out the need for guidance as Muslims continued to increase in number and diversity after the period of the Prophet (pbuh) and his companions. The role of providing guidance was then taken over by learned individuals steeped in legal training. Muftis then were individuals who gave their opinions on legal matters sought by common men and women; as well by kathiis or judges overseeing difficult cases. These muftis provided religious guidance or fatwas based on their understanding of Islamic law and jurisprudence. Over time, as fatwas were increasingly seen as important for a harmonious society, these functions and individuals were recognised by the governments of the Muslim rulers then.

3. Today, places with significant Muslim populations have muftis present to provide religious guidance on a wide array of issues. While fatwas may not be binding in nature, they do provide the clarity needed to arrive at some conclusion on issues. That such an institution exists within the community is not something unusual as we can find similar institutions and individuals in major faith communities. It is the nature of faith communities wanting to live their lives as best as they could according to their beliefs; that they will need from time to time religious guidance on matters that are unique or appear to be at variance from rules and laws governing their lives as citizens of a state. This is the challenge that all faith communities living in a modern nation state face.
4. In Singapore, as early as the 1920s, the Muslim community was already discussing the need for religious guidance on issues the community then was facing. On this urging and based on the recommendations of the Mohammedan Advisory Board, the colonial government allowed for the appointment of 12 Kathis to conduct marriages. The Chief Kathi, appointed from among them, was held as the most respected religious figure. However, over time, the community requested for a central authority to deal with issues of festivals, rituals and duties as Muslims. Such concerns only saw the light many years later when Dr Ahmad Ibrahim, a Queen's scholar and the first State Advocate General proposed a new legislation that would create the Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura. When the Administration of Muslim Law Act was passed some years later, after Singapore's independence, Haji Sanusi Mahmood, then President of Syariah Court was appointed as our first Mufti of Singapore in 1968. Shaikh Syed Isa Semait who took over in 1972, and has just stepped down, is our second Mufti. Shaikh Syed Isa, I am told, could be the longest serving among muftis we know.
5. In almost four decades as Mufti of Singapore, Syed Isa has had to deal with many issues thrown up by a community of many voices trying to find its footing in a small, newly independent, fast-growing nation. Urban redevelopment meant the community had to give up old mosques and suraus in the kampungs. Under Syed Isa's religious leadership, we revived the mosques in bigger and more functional form in our housing estates with the

Mosque Building Fund with the support of the government's CPF mechanism. Syed Isa also led in evolving decisions over the difficult issue of organ donation which is now saving lives. More recently he led in resolving the issue of CPF nomination for Muslims. Similarly his efforts in guiding the community through the difficult period following 9-11 and the discovery of the Jemaah Islamiyah cell here is a testimony to his stamina and dedication in wanting the best for Muslim Singaporeans as prescribed in Islam. These efforts are well documented and MUIS is in the midst of producing a book on the contributions of Syed Isa Semait as Mufti of Singapore.

6. While we recollect these, I believe it is also important for us to reflect on what those fatwas and guidance that he and the fatwa committee produced did for the institution of the mufti in a multi-racial secularly governed Singapore. The fatwa committee consists of religiously trained individuals with the Mufti as its chairman. In its deliberation of the issues, it has evolved from a small group of *asatizah* to include experts as resource persons to provide specialist inputs to the deliberations. The committee has gone beyond referring to only religious scholars worldwide, past and present, but to also draw upon experts from fields like medicine, finance, economics and civil law. This reflects a desire to embrace knowledge, understand current thinking across diverse fields and search for a common ground between Islamic laws and regulations with those that Muslims encounter as citizens of a modern world. This process also seeks to inform the committee's decision based on reasoned thinking thereby making the fatwa more relevant for Muslims living in a modern nation state.
7. As the Mufti of Singapore, Shaikh Syed Isa's main pre-occupation has always been to find ways to ensure that Muslims in Singapore live full lives as good Muslims. He has approached issues with a view to find common ground and searched for meaningful solutions that will enhance our lives. His legacy is not one of confrontation and advocacy but of deeper understanding and conciliation based on Islamic principles that have helped Muslims be more Singaporean and not less. And he also brings this way of thinking in the area of inter-faith engagement which he has led with dedication even if there is more work ahead as confidence-building involves all levels and is always

work-in-progress. At the same time in identifying which issues need guidance, Shaikh Syed Isa has always taken the position that when it comes to personal matters more fatwas may not be better. Given the complexities in a multicultural society, and the multiplicity of contexts that arise in our fast paced life, he prefers to let your conscience decide based on your own common sense and understanding of the matter, rather than imposing rules that will fail to distinguish nuances and introduce rigidities and onerous requirements.

8. As a result of his leadership as our Mufti of Singapore for 38 years, the institution of the mufti in Singapore has grown into a mature, stable and progressive one. His keenness in wanting to find solutions that help Muslims to be a part of the larger Singaporean family has also contributed to the harmonious relationship among our various communities in Singapore. The legacy of the institution of the mufti and that of Syed Isa as our longest serving mufti, which I have just outlined, is something I believe we must continue to preserve, nurture and develop. We must continue to strengthen and grow the institution of the mufti that not only responds positively to new challenges but also be pro-active in identifying issues which need guidance in the coming decades and beyond. The overall objective of ensuring that Muslims in Singapore stay true to our faith while confidently contributing to a strong and harmonious community and nation must continue to underpin the institution of the mufti.
9. One key role that Shaikh Syed Isa has played over the years is to nurture future religious leaders. Indeed it is his enthusiasm and infectious personality, even in the midst of complex issues, that has made many of our young asatizah his fervent admirers. Another key attribute of Syed Isa is his continuing desire to develop more specialist knowledge among the religious leader fraternity. So when we contemplated how we should remember Syed Isa after he steps down as Mufti, we decided to merge the two to come up with a legacy to show our appreciation for Syed Isa. I am therefore happy to announce that we have decided to launch a scholarship award to honour Shaikh Syed Isa for his scholarly work, his profound religious leadership to the community and contributions towards engendering greater inter-faith

understanding. The Syed Isa Semait Scholar (SISS) Award would also help to preserve his legacy, outstanding contributions and love for knowledge, and to inspire younger generations towards rendering their service for the development of the Muslim community and the nation. MUIS has an existing Post-Graduate Scholarship (PGS) scheme. This scheme sponsors full-time post-graduate studies in a reputable institution, local or overseas in fields of knowledge important to the development of the Muslim community. The Syed Isa Semait Scholarship Award will be an additional monetary award, granted to the most outstanding among the Post-Graduate Scholarship recipients each year. The quantum of the Award will be S\$10,000 per annum for the duration of the course of study. I would like to thank all our generous donors to this scholarship award fund who share a common desire to see our long-serving Mufti's name remain as a valuable legacy in our community.

10. Shaikh Syed Isa has brought great honour to the appointment of Mufti of Singapore, and not just within Singapore. He is widely respected by religious leaders – both Muslim and of other faiths. His voice resonates in us as he makes the prayer call and as he speaks earnestly and progressively from the pulpit on issues that matter to us. His sermons which are now put up on the internet have a good following across the world. In sum, his principal contribution has been to lead us by faith to contribute as good, confident Muslims for the well-being of our community, nation, and humanity.
11. Shaikh Syed Isa was supposed to have retired 12 years ago to spend more time with his grandchildren. But time and again, he agreed to stay on and guide us. In fact, we have just gotten him to agree to stay on as a Consultant to the Office of the Mufti. And over the last seven years, he has guided our current Mufti Dr Mohamed Fatris Bakaram, giving him more and more responsibilities to prepare him for the position. Mufti Mohamed Fatris has the ideal credentials and disposition to lead as our new Mufti of Singapore. He is well-respected by our religious scholars, the Muslim community in general, and fellow faith leaders, and I am confident that the Singapore Muslim Community will continue to be well-guided and well-inspired under his religious leadership, InsyaAllah.

12. On that note, let me once again thank all of us gathered here – especially our Special Guest PM Lee. Let me thank also the donors for the Syed Isa Semait Scholarship for your support. Finally, I would like to thank Shaikh Syed Isa Semait and his family – for supporting his contributions to our community and nation all these years.

May peace be upon all of us. Wassalam.

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