

**SPEECH BY DR YAACOB IBRAHIM, MINISTER FOR COMMUNICATIONS AND INFORMATION, MINISTER-IN-CHARGE OF CYBER SECURITY AND MINISTER-IN-CHARGE OF MUSLIM AFFAIRS AT MUIS WORK PLAN SEMINAR ON SATURDAY, 1 APRIL 2017**

Mr Masagos Zulkifli, Minister for the Environment and Water Resources

Chief Executive of Muis, Haji Abdul Razak Hassan Maricar

Mufti of Singapore, Dr Mohamed Fatris Bakaram

Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen

Assalamualaikum Wr. Wb. and a very good morning.

1 We are now in the second year of Muis' 5<sup>th</sup> three-year plan. In the past year, prayer spaces have increased, more people are participating in Islamic Education at our mosques, and our zakat beneficiaries are receiving more assistance. All these are made possible by the community's generosity as well as the strong partnership that Muis has with various stakeholders.

2 Central to the socio-religious life of our community is our asatizah. In a turbulent world darkened by uncertainty, untruths and hate, our asatizah are beacons of light for our community, providing guidance on how Muslims ought to live fulfilled lives in modern, multi-cultural Singapore.

3 For this year's Work Plan Seminar, I would like to speak about the development of our asatizah and their critical roles in forging unity and providing sound religious guidance.

### **ASATIZAH – CREDIBLE SOURCE OF REFERENCE**

4 Asatizah are in a position of influence and authority because they have a mastery over a body of knowledge, and the ability to study and interpret the divine message. Our expectations of our asatizah are high, and necessarily so. We expect our asatizah to nurture our community with sound values, model virtuous behaviour, offer peace and comfort to those in distress, and to always remind that all of us have the social and moral obligation to help one another. In multi-racial and multi-religious Singapore, they set the tone of mutual respect and promote compassion and mutual help, regardless of race, language or religion.

5 Our community's needs and perspectives change over time, and with this, so too the role of the asatizah will evolve. In a society where the socio-religious life is rich and diverse, our asatizah play specialised roles. First, they perform key statutory functions in the Registry of Muslim Marriages, Syariah Court, and Muis. They guide the development and implementation of Muslim law at some of the key moments of life.

6 Second, many of our asatizah are involved in outreach and education. They illuminate the principles and wisdom of the religion to our community, the young and the old, families and individuals. In this regard, our Mosque Religious Officers and Youth Development Officers are closely involved in regularly engaging the community, week in and week out. For example, Ustaz Farhan Nordin of Masjid Al-Istiqamah has been

conducting weekly *fardhu 'ain* classes at the Singapore Boys Hostel for the past 3 years. Another significant contribution is by *asatizah* in the Religious Rehabilitation Group who counsel those who have been misguided by extremist ideologies. The contributions of our *asatizah* are not bound only to matters of faith, because they are also well-placed to serve the community in the social services. As I had mentioned in my speech during the Committee of Supply debate in Parliament last month, *asatizah* are also being tapped on as counsellors in the social sector, for marriage and divorce. We would like to see more of our *asatizah* contribute in such roles.

7 Third, we need *asatizah* steeped in knowledge and learning who can provide guidance to the community on emergent issues and challenging questions. Such *asatizah* are the scholars, thought leaders and pillars of a confident Singaporean Muslim community, firmly anchored in faith and in our diverse, Singapore context. Today, we have *asatizah* such as Dr Muhammad Haniff Hassan, who contribute to research at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, and Dr Nazirudin Mohd Nasir who is a member of the Bioethics Advisory Committee responsible for addressing ethical, legal and social issues arising from human biomedical research. We need more of them.

8 As we see even more qualified and competent *asatizah* coming to the fore, so too have more been keen to share their knowledge and expertise beyond religious education, to equally important areas such as counselling and legal assistance. Muis is therefore conducting a manpower study to better understand the current landscape, and project for future needs. Optimising manpower is necessary not only to ensure our limited *asatizah* talent pool is able to meet the socio-religious needs

of the community, but also about exploring opportunities for our asatizah to leverage on their strengths and develop new skill sets. This would broaden the competencies and professional pathways for our asatizah, and in turn, allow them to serve the community in multiple areas if they so wish.

## **STRENGTHENING SUPPORT FOR OUR FUTURE ASATIZAH**

9 Muis' developmental efforts for asatizah begins upstream. The Student Career and Welfare Office (SCWO), formerly known as the Student Resource Development Secretariat, provides students pursuing Islamic studies overseas with comprehensive support programmes and help them remain connected to Singapore. Ever since it was set up, more than 1,000 students had benefited.

10 An example is Syed Muhammad Mahamoud Aljunied. He attended Muis' programmes conducted for students while studying at Yarmouk University in Jordan in 2004 and benefited from Muis' assistance when he encountered challenges with his studies and graduation process. Upon graduation and after a stint with Masjid En-naeem, he joined the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and served four years in Riyadh. Syed Muhammad is now working as a Muis Student Liaison Officer serving students studying in South-East Asia.

11 Muis will intensify its outreach and engagements with overseas students, and to this end, Muis is looking into deploying more Student Liaison Officers.

12 For our returning graduates, Muis will offer programmes which enable a more contextualised understanding and application of religion in Singapore. Last year, Muis organised a 10-day programme attended by 35 young asatizah called the “Islamic Thought in Context”. One of the invited scholars, Professor Ebrahim Moosa, commented that we have a “very able group of young scholars”. During the dialogue session with them at the end of the programme, I found them to be keen learners yet willing to review and re-learn the concepts that they have acquired from their respective institutions.

13 Muis is building on the programme’s positive feedback and will pilot a new certificate programme for returning university graduates, which will enable returning graduates to obtain full recognition under ARS. Two runs of the programme will be conducted for about 100 graduates starting from the third quarter of this year.

14 In addition, Muis will also publish a comprehensive prospectus on pursuing Islamic Studies Overseas to complement its current pre-departure briefing for these students. These briefings and the prospectus will provide information on the available course of studies, cultural norms and overseas student networks. This will greatly help madrasah graduates and their parents to choose the appropriate course of study and institutions.

15 For our asatizah community, as part of the mandatory Asatizah Recognition Scheme, or ARS, Muis and PERGAS have provided over 200 hours of courses and seminars last year under the Continuous Professional Education (CPE) initiative.

16 Last year, about 300 asatizah participated in ten workshops and roundtable sessions, focusing on the themes of “Religion, Society and the Public Sphere”. Last month, 250 asatizah attended the Muis Lecture delivered by Shaykh Abdallah bin Bayyah as part of the Muis’ Distinguished Visitors Programme (DVP). As part of the CPE, these programmes have provided our asatizah a better appreciation of how we can focus on the higher principles of religion and how Muslims living in a secular, multi-racial society can contribute towards peace-building.

17 In February, Muis launched the first of five volumes of Singapore’s Fatwa Publication Series at the recent Fatwa Conference. This is an indeed an important contribution to scholarship, and a source of public education. We can look forward to the second volume on financial and estate planning in 2019. Following up from the Fatwa Conference, I am also glad to note that the Office of the Mufti will be conducting two workshops for asatizah later this year to discuss the progressive thinking documented in the Fatwa compilation series at a much deeper level.

18 Muis will also enhance its CPE courses to include the application of the Asatizah Code of Ethics and use of social media in establishing a credible and engaging online presence to better outreach to our young. Such enhancements are important so that we can promote a contextual practice of Islam that takes into account our lived realities as Muslims living in a secularly-governed nation. Separately, Muis is also developing courses and providing financial incentives to assist asatizah who have yet to receive formal qualification to be ARS-certified.

## **THE ECOSYSTEM FOR ASATIZAH DEVELOPMENT**

19 Asatizah development, however, is not Muis' role alone. The Islamic Education centres and providers are an important part of our ecosystem. Through the ARS, we will have a platform towards greater collaboration in improving standards, the pedagogical tools, and curriculum. To ensure that our asatizah continuously upgrade themselves so that they can meet contemporary challenges, we need the sectors that employ asatizah to also strongly support their training and development. I urge employers in these sectors to work closely with Muis so that our asatizah stay relevant for the community.

20 For the longer term, Muis is studying plans to develop a Singapore Islamic college which will play a key role in nurturing our future asatizah. While this is a huge undertaking, Muis and I are committed to turn this idea into reality, but we will require time and the community's strong support.

## **CONCLUSION**

21 We start from a position of relative strength and we must continue with our efforts to build a strong asatizah fraternity. The development of capable and learned asatizah grounded in the Singapore context will be the best assurance for our Muslim community for the generations to come.

Wabillahi Taufiq Walhidayah Wassalamualaikum Wr. Wb