Religious Communities and The Secular State: The Singapore Story

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The following article is adapted from the presentation by Ms. Yeoh Chee Yan at the ICCOS 2022. It was presented as part of the panel on entitled 'Enhancing Social Cohesion and Active Citizenry', with a focus on how religion, through the various religious organizations and leadership, could enhance social cohesion and active citizenry at the institutional level by working together with institutions of similar interests, such as government and international bodies. Ms. Yeoh presented on the Singapore experience, notably the role of the secular state in facilitating social cohesion by working alongside religious groups of various faiths.

Born Again: A Secular State

Our story begins in 1965 with Singapore's independence from Malaysia. You need to know a little about our "origin story" to understand our fixation on racial and religious harmony. In a nutshell: a multiracial, multi-religious society - badly scarred by the violent communal politics of the 1950s and 60s, we were reincarnated as an independent, secular state with our separation from Malaysia. In what way are we secular? First, our laws and policies are not based on any religion. Second, religion is kept out of electoral politics. Thirdly, all 3 branches of Government - the Legislature, the Executive, and the Judiciary - are neutral regarding religion. This "separation of church and state" allows the Government to be a neutral arbiter should a conflict arise between religious groups.

Multi-Religious Society: Balancing Socio-Religious Needs & Cohesion

Although a secular state, it is a common misconception that we are a secular society. We are not. We are better described as a multi-religious society. If one looks at the data from Census 2020, between 2010 and 2020 the proportion of Muslims and Christians grew slightly, Hindus held their own, but the proportion who claim no religious affiliation grew from 17 to 20%.[1] This is one notable shift in the boundary between the religious and secular in our society. Nonetheless, 80% of Singaporeans still claim religious affiliation. And, according to Pew Research Center, Singapore is one of the most religiously diverse countries in the world.[2]

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[1] Census (2020), Chapter 5 pp. 31-32.
[2] Pew Research Center (2014), "Religious Diversity Index".

Our hawker centers reflect this. You can find halal, vegetarian, Chinese, Malay, and Indian food in every hawker center managed by the National Environment Agency (NEA), because this is ensured by NEA's tender process. Singaporeans of every religion will queue up for Nasi Lemak - and whether you wear a tudung (headscarf), Buddhist beads, or a cross, we sit at the same tables to eat our favorite hawker food.

This reflects our pragmatic approach to social cohesion: we know we need to address socio-religious needs like dietary restrictions, and we know that religion cannot be completely confined to the private space - at the same time, we take care that religious practices in public do not divide us. We want Singaporeans of all faiths, from all walks of life to mix and mingle in daily life. Maintaining national unity and social cohesion is fundamental to governance in Singapore. It has been seen as something that constantly needs to be managed, a constant balancing act.

A Force for the Common Good

Religion is a powerful identity marker in Singapore society. But rather than being seen only as a force to be managed - it is widely seen as a force for good. It provides moral guidance to the community, meaning and comfort to individuals and families from cradle to grave.   More than a private good, we have seen in Singapore how religion can serve the common good. Religious groups have had longstanding partnerships with Government in providing education, health and social services to all Singaporeans. Malay Muslim NGOs have a long history of active citizenship. For example, the Singapore Muslim Women's Association (PPIS) has a mental well-being programme serving women from all communities. The Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG) is another example. It was initiated almost 20 years ago by volunteers like Ustaz Ali Mohammad and Ustaz Mohamad Hasbi Hassan. The Government has supported this initiative by the asatizah community to counsel religious extremists in detention as it serves a shared purpose. Such longstanding partnerships have built trust between the Government and religious communities in Singapore.

Meritocracy and Support for Racial and Religious Minorities

Meritocracy and support for racial and religious minorities are important principles in the Singapore Story. Article 152 of the Constitution of Singapore places responsibility on the Government to care for the interests of the racial and religious minorities and recognizes the special position of the Malays, 98.8% of whom are Muslims. This is done in several ways   while upholding meritocracy. The Presidential Council for Minority Rights scrutinizes all new legislation to ensure it does not discriminate or disadvantage any race, religion, or community. The Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura (MUIS), the Hindu Advisory and Endowment Boards, as well as the Sikh Advisory Board, are institutions founded on legislation to serve the socio-religious needs of their respective communities. They advise the Government on matters affecting their religion. While the Government is secular, it actively engages religious groups, including the minority communities, particularly on issues where they have views.Above all, Government policies are based on the national interest, not religious priorities.

While religion is kept separate from politics, we ensure that our Parliament is multi-racial through Group Representation Constituencies (GRC), where teams of candidates standing for election in a GRC must include at least one member from a racial minority. So legal provisions exist to protect minority rights and representation but beyond this, we want all communities to progress through their

own effort and merit. Hence, we have the M3 network of MUIS, Mendaki, and the People's Association MESRA, work together to strengthen last-mile delivery of Government as well as community programmes to uplift the Malay Muslim community.

> 66 **The Singapore approach is for government to actively support efforts by the minority communities themselves to transmit their cultural and religious heritage, make progress and participate fully in the wider society and national life. These principles of a secular state, meritocracy, and support for minority interests to promote inclusive growth underpin social cohesion in Singapore.** 99

Clear Boundaries

Clear boundaries protect social cohesion. Religious freedom is guaranteed under the Constitution but subject to laws on public order, health and morals.[1] Religiously inspired violence or security threats are not tolerated but neither are public expressions that insult or denigrate any religion or undermine inter-faith harmony. We have legal levers to manage this - such as the Internal Security Act and the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act. In Singapore, a magazine like Charlie Hebdo would never have been allowed to publish a cartoon insulting Islam in the name of free speech.
 Whatever your views on this, laws can be a good servant but a bad master. They can protect cohesion, but they do not necessarily strengthen it. So apart from clear boundaries, there are a few ways we foster social cohesion in Singapore.

Fostering Cohesion: Common Space and Cross-Cutting Engagement

The main approach has been to facilitate integration and shared experiences by growing the common space. Generally, the common space in Singapore is made up of secular national institutions, such as the national school system and national service, which provide shared experiences for most young Singaporeans. There are also the larger social commons like residential estates, hawker centers, public hospitals and public parks, where religious practices have to be negotiated so we can interact more peaceably as fellow Singaporeans.

The burning of joss paper during the Hungry Ghost Festival is a good example of negotiation, forbearance, and accommodation. It has been common practice to burn joss paper freely in public spaces. Thankfully, the community-driven "Alliance for Action" stepped up in 2022 to promote burning joss paper in bins - a restriction of religious practice, perhaps, but most would agree it makes the common space more conducive for everyone.

Another way we foster cohesion is inter-religious engagement. On the National Steering Committee for Racial and Religious Harmony, senior government and religious leaders work together to strengthen social cohesion. This Committee has met regularly for over 20 years just as Harmony Circles on the ground have convened local religious leaders in all 93 constituencies. These regular gatherings have built bonds of friendship, trust, and goodwill - something that no law can ever do - enabling them to resolve inter-religious conflict, calm their flocks and express solidarity in testing

[3] Constitution of Singapore, Article 15 (1-4).

times - such as after the 2019 terrorist attack on mosques in Christchurch. It is fair to say that there is a strong sense of shared responsibility for social cohesion among religious leaders in Singapore. But how about Singaporeans at large? A 2019 IPS survey showed that there is a strong public consensus in support of racial and religious harmony as well as church-state separation in Singapore.[4] Those who profess a religion, particularly Christians and Muslims, are less ambivalent and distant towards those of other faiths compared to those who do not have a religious affiliation. This suggests that inter-faith engagement has borne fruit. However, given the growing proportion of Singaporeans with no religious affiliation, it may be important to build bridges between this segment and religious communities - particularly since the same survey showed that their views on potentially controversial issues such as homosexuality and abortion, are relatively more liberal than those with a religious affiliation.

Civic Capacity to Discuss Deep Differences

In some countries, this has played out as stridently polarized views between more secular liberals and the religious right. What can we do to avoid the same fate? Perhaps the third key to social cohesion, and one particularly relevant to the challenges of our time, is the civic capacity to discuss deep differences. Conferences like ICCOS help us engage with different perspectives. And there are quite a few initiatives in Singapore, like the Young Leaders' Programme and Roses of Peace, which build civic capacity to discuss difficult issues.

The debate over the repeal of Section 377A is a good test. The Government has been careful to consult religious and LGBTQ groups before the announcement knowing this is a divisive issue related to protecting the current legal definition of marriage from a challenge in court. No doubt it will continue to engage different groups and seek to reach an accommodation without deepening divisions.

Most religious groups have made public statements on the matter as is their civic right and duty to guide their flocks. Although some Singaporeans take the view that religious groups should not express public views on law and policy - the Government has clarified that religious groups, like other civic groups and citizens, are free to express their opinions as long as they do so responsibly without attacking or pressurizing those who hold different views. Likewise, workplaces, as part of the common space, should not be places where employees are compelled to support non-business-related causes. [5]

What are the pitfalls? One danger in this debate is the polarising nature of the internet; the other is aggressive activism which demonizes those who see things differently - "illiberal liberals" or "intolerant conservatives" alike - who want to advance their cause without consideration for how it might polarize society. So how will this chapter of the Singapore Story unfold?

Personally, I think we can be confident. We enjoy racial and religious harmony today because all communities have been prepared to engage and accommodate other faiths. In the final analysis, social

[4] Matthews, Lim and Selvarajan (March 2019), "Religion in Singapore: the Private and Public Spheres" IPS Working Parker No 33, Singapore.
[5] "Section 377A: Ministries looking at ways to deal with cancel culture, work pressure, says Shanmugam", The Straits Times, 22 Aug 2022

cohesion is perhaps the willingness of citizens to make sacrifices and take shared responsibility for the common good. It is why Singaporeans were prepared to wear masks, practice social distancing, and adapt practices at places of worship. In many societies, wearing a mask or getting vaccinated highly divisive. By contrast, the Singapore experience with Covid showed that we have something very precious - we are a high-trust society where citizens will act for the common good.

Likewise, whatever our beliefs about deeply contentious issues, if we - as citizens, regardless of race, religion or tribe - are willing to get to know people who hold divergent views, if we can show mutual respect and consideration for those we may fundamentally disagree with, and if we are prepared to make accommodations for the common good - the unfolding Singapore Story can be one where diversity remains a blessing rather than a blight.

About the Author

Ms. Yeoh Chee Yan is the Chairman of the National Heritage Board and Senior Advisor to the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth (MCCY), Singapore. In 2012, she was appointed Permanent Secretary of MCCY. Under her leadership, MCCY embarked on new strategic plans for sports, heritage and the arts and championed capability building in citizen engagement across the Public Service. She also let the Ministry in several successful national initiatives, including the coordination of SG50 celebrations, the establishment of the National Gallery, the inscription of Singapore Botanic Gardens as a UNESCO World Heritage Site and the successful hosting of 28th SEA Games. She chaired the Committee on Citizen Engagement under the PS21 Executive Committee, which provides strategic guidance and coordination on whole-of-government engagement issues. Ms. Yeoh received a Bachelor of Arts (Honours) degree in Philosophy and Psychology and a Master of Science degree in Social Psychology (with Distinction) from the London School of Economics, University of London, United Kingdom.

About RPCS

The Research Programme in the Study of Muslim Communities of Success (RPCS) is developed as part of Muis' efforts in advancing religious thought leadership for the future. The programme seeks to develop contextualised bodies of knowledge on socio-religious issues that are typical for Muslim communities living in secular states and advanced economies. The RPCS focus will be on developing new understanding, interpretations and application of Islamic principles, values and traditions to contemporary issues and challenges.