

# INTEREALTH



PEACE | HARMONY | UNITY

VOL.1 NO.4 JUL 2017  
MCI (P) 163/10/2013



“The Harmony in Diversity Gallery – displaying artefacts which focus on the commonalities across religions – will be a focal point for our younger generation to learn about religious harmony and imbue in them the spirit of give-and-take.”

*Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong*

**“HARMONY IN DIVERSITY”**  
**— A SACRED DUTY —**



INTER-RELIGIOUS ORGANISATION, SINGAPORE

PEACE | HARMONY | UNITY



### INVOCATION

(Prayer used at IRO Meetings)

O Lord, increase in us understanding and knowledge and set us free from the bondage of greed, hatred and ignorance, so that we may awake, arise and advance until the goal is reached, giving our bodies to work and our minds to the Lord.

May we work vigorously, keeping within spiritual discipline to bring peace in our hearts, peace in our families, peace in our cities, peace in our planetary home, the world.

May we learn to master ourselves, sublimate our combative energies into creative channels, and freely offer ourselves in the service of our fellowmen, and our Lord.

Help us, O Lord, to ever strive to keep on these lines to promote peace on earth and goodwill among men.

By Thy grace, may we all prosper.

## PRESIDENT'S NOTE

### IRO PRESIDENT K KESEVAPANY



Over the past seven decades, IRO has grown from strength to strength and has become known for spreading the message of religious tolerance. With the help of its member organisations and individual members, IRO has contributed to the building of religious and racial harmony in Singapore.

longer enough to just tolerate members of a different faith. We should aim at achieving a genuine understanding of each other's beliefs. Among other things, this would require enhancement of current inter-faith dialogues and publication of relevant literature.

#### Reach

Over the past few years however, the challenges facing the country, especially in the sphere of religion, have become daunting. Religious extremism is on the rise world-wide both at the collective and individual levels. In our immediate neighbourhood, we are witnessing attempts to infiltrate and establish movements and ideologies foreign to us. At the level of individuals, we are seeing how the social media is being used to change established patterns of social behaviour. Communities who had lived in peace for generations are being torn apart. Families are becoming strangers with parents not knowing what their children are doing.

It is no longer enough to preach to the converted. IRO's reach must be expanded to include those who are not in our circle so that they have to come to understand what religious harmony is. Programmes for schools and institutions of higher learning could be developed to realise this goal.

#### Rehabilitation

There are many among us who are already engaged in counselling and mediation. These are skills that can be used to address the problem of radicalisation, which is affecting our youth. In time, IRO can develop its own corps of counsellors and contribute to this national endeavour.

It is against this changing socio-religious environment that the IRO would have to work in the years ahead, in tandem with other institutions, both governmental and non-governmental. I would suggest three specific areas for IRO to work on — The Three Rs:

There is a lot of work to be done. With faith and confidence, IRO can contribute towards ensuring that Singapore remains an oasis of peace and religious harmony amidst a sea of turmoil and turbulence. ●

#### Relevance

IRO should move from propagating religious tolerance to religious understanding. It is no

*Excerpt of his speech on his appointment as President IRO, 18 June 2017*

# INTERFAITH

MAGAZINE

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# SECURING SG BETTER

## HARMONY IN DIVERSITY GALLERY

**W**ith the increasing global influence and challenges to Singapore's peace, security and harmony, it is the collective responsibility of the government, community and religious leaders to take the lead to invest in relationships — to go beyond just tolerance and build proper understanding, confidence and trust among the different races and religions. Singaporeans must build an inclusive society and strengthen the common identity, and band together for Singapore's future. When everyone plays their part, this leads to a more integrated and socially-resilient community.



President Dr Tony Tan, with Deputy Prime Minister and Coordinating Minister for National Security Teo Chee Hean, Minister for Home Affairs K Shanmugam, Minister for Culture, Community and Youth Grace Fu, alongside members of the IRO and other guests at the launch of the Harmony in Diversity Gallery on 2 September 2016. (PHOTO: Nizam Neti / MHA)

HIGHLIGHTS



**PRIME MINISTER LEE HSIEN LOONG,  
ON 12 MAY 2015 AT THE ISTANA**

*“The Harmony in Diversity Gallery — displaying artefacts which focus on the commonalities across religions — will be a focal point for our younger generation to learn about religious harmony and imbue in them the spirit of give-and-take.”*

Harmony in Diversity Gallery, at the Ministry of National Development (MND) Building, Annexe B, 7 Maxwell Road, #04-05/06, Singapore 069111. Open from Mondays to Saturdays, 10am to 5pm. Closed on Sundays and Public Holidays. Admission is free.

**harmonyindiversitygallery.sg**



# SG 50 IRO DAY @ ISTANA



The Inter-Religious Organisation (IRO) celebrated its 66th Anniversary at a Dinner hosted at the Istana last evening. Since it was established in 1949, IRO has been playing an important role in promoting understanding, mutual trust and goodwill among the various faiths in Singapore and internationally.

— Posted on President Dr Tony Tan's Facebook

## HIGHLIGHTS

An excerpt of Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's speech:



"The IRO symbolises the ideal of religious harmony. You show that we can transcend our differences. You offer a platform for members of different faiths to learn about one another through inter-faith dialogues, and do good together through inter-faith charity projects. We have come a long way since 1949, when the IRO was established, and when even the idea that members of different faiths should meet and work together was novel. We would like to thank the IRO's pioneers, and the generations of leaders that came after them.

The Pew Research Centre ranks Singapore as the most religiously diverse country in the world, but we are also one of the most harmonious in terms of inter-religious relations, and not by chance. It has happened because we have firmly prevented conflicts from escalating and polarising our society and because we have had responsible and enlightened religious leaders of all faiths so that when we encounter religious differences, everyone understands what is at stake and we can work things out.

Benjamin Sheares said, "Tolerance can be based on ignorance and lack of interest. But an active tolerance seeks what there is in common, though words and rituals or architecture may differ." That remains true till today. Today, our religious leaders understand that if we choose to focus on our differences and refuse to find common ground, we will all be in trouble. So I am heartened that the younger IRO leaders are continuing this legacy of focusing on the common ground and practising active tolerance." ●

## HIGHLIGHTS



“ The IRO symbolises the ideal of religious harmony. You show that we can transcend our differences. ”

**PRIME MINISTER LEE HSIEN LOONG**  
SG50 & 66th IRO Day held at the Istana,  
12 May 2015

Dr Tony Tan

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Dr Tony Tan  
13 May 2015

The Inter-Religious Organisation (IRO) celebrated its 66th Anniversary at a Dinner hosted at the Istana last evening. Since it was established in 1949, IRO has been playing an important role in promoting understanding, mutual trust and goodwill among the various faiths in Singapore and internationally.

The harmonious co-existence of the diverse religious groups in Singapore cannot be taken for granted. If we are not careful, the trust we have built up among our religious communities can be easily eroded.

As we celebrate 50 years of independence, I hope that we will all continue to do our part to preserve the peace and harmony among the different faiths in our multi-racial and multi-religious society.

TT



HOME ABOUT VIDEOS PHOTOS POSTS COMMUNITY

Lee Hsien Loong  
13 May 2015

In a multi-religious society, from time to time religious issues overlap with social and moral questions, such as LGBT issues or income inequality. Achieving consensus requires much effort. The Government must always be watchful, prudent and hands-on to protect our religious harmony. Religious leaders play an important role too.

Imam Habib Syed Hassan Al-Attas (shaking hands) is a veteran member of the Inter-Religious Organisation, Singapore (IRO). He set up an inter-faith museum at the Ba'alwie Mosque to promote peace and understanding between people of different faiths. After 9/11, at his initiative, 100 Muslim organisations issued a joint statement rejecting terrorism and explaining the true position of Islam.

Last night, at the IRO's 66th anniversary at the Istana, President Dr Tony Tan presented Habib Hassan with the IRO Award for his outstanding work promoting inter-faith harmony.

Here's the link to my speech last night: <http://bit.ly/1ctgRp3> - LHL  
(MCI Photo by LH Goh)



Like Comment Share

HIGHLIGHTS





STORY / HASSAN AHMAD RABANI

# COHESIVE DIVERSITY

## MOVING BEYOND TOLERANCE

**A**s in everything, diversity brings blessings and burden. If managed well, it would bring benefits. If taken lightly, it could breed bedlam.

Increased religiosity — including greater assertiveness and projection of religion in shared spaces, extremism and exclusiveness, poses a real and present risk to social cohesiveness. The inevitable increase in migration adds strain to the anxiety. Perhaps Singaporeans are of the impression that these are not disquieting issues facing a friendly and diplomatically-savvy country; or maybe, it is a reflection of their high confidence in the government of the day to deal with the matter effectively, if need be.

### “UNUSUAL, UNNATURAL STATE OF AFFAIRS”

Singapore is one of the smallest countries in the world, yet it is a sanctuary to the largest number of faiths. The Global Religious Diversity (GRD) Report, ranked the 700-plus square-kilometre country as the most diverse, in terms of religions, out of 232 countries. Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong had earlier shared that “this is an unusual, unnatural state of affairs.”

This young island-state has gotten most part of its politics and policies right thus far. Since the riots in the 1960s, the nation had learnt and went on to enjoy remarkable harmony, where

inter-racial and inter-religious co-existence is concerned. The Housing & Development Board (HDB) policy and the GRC system, *inter alia*, ensured ethnic representations in both living and ruling environments. These help built the foundation for integration.

In the active pursuit and exploration of new formulae for national excellence and global success, Singapore has made bold ventures, *inter alia*, the SAP school system, which have been repeatedly questioned, including by student beneficiaries of that system. Exclusivity isolates those involved from the wider society, as they mix within a narrow social circle. To some extent, it disables them from greater exposure and arrests their social skills, development and circles. In parallel, the status and long-term consequences of full-time Madrasahs here should be reviewed and vetted on the same page as the SAP schools.

### TERRORISM

There are no guarantees to sustained peace and harmony in any society. In this respect, Singapore is better off than most nations. But in this day and age, no nation is immune to terrorism. While everyone has a duty and role in the fight against terrorism, the core strategy must be community engagement and education — progressively building a strong and sincere network of confidence and trust amongst the different denominations.

The many arrests since 2015 here, though unrelated, are evidence that terror elements are no longer facing Singapore at her front door, but already in her backyard. Fortunately, for now, sound legislations, systems and mechanisms are well in place to detect, act or react against threats of terror.

**EFFECTS OF EXTREMISM ON INTER-FAITH RELATIONS**

Matters of religion have always been dicey and have had deep fault lines, and they have become more complex. With the ever-growing reach of and penetration by the social media, people are more exposed, hence more vulnerable to extreme ideologies, where the sources stemmed from differing landscapes, histories, cultures and challenges, hence doctrinal interpretations.

Extremism may not advocate violence, but it is as sharp and pointed to cut through the social fabric and jeopardise harmony and integration. For example, some Muslim scholars prohibited the extending of festive greetings to non-Muslims on their festive occasions. Separately, there is an increasing fixation on and promotion of “halal” consciousness in recent times that have extended way beyond the fundamental teachings of the faith. Such extremisms have caused awkwardness and confusion in the dealings between Muslims and subscribers of other faiths.

**MIGRATION ON INTRA-FAITH**

The influx of migrants is an inevitable necessity for Singapore’s continued growth, but with it comes the risk of adding load to the

cultural, and more so, the religious fault lines. For example, Catholics from the Philippines may continue to keep their spiritual compass aligned to the Archbishop there, or the Muslims from South Asia or West Asia may continue to hold firmly to their school of thoughts where doctrinal interpretations, based on their cultures or heritage, may be inappropriate for practice in Singapore or this part of the world.

**DON'T TOLERATE, ACCEPT**

There is a real need to emphasise on the most fundamental of similarities, based on good morals including peace and compassion. Social cohesion requires civic engineering. There needs to be platforms for Singaporeans — native, new or naturalised — to have real and candid exchanges to better acquaint, educate, understand, appreciate and accept each other’s differences, especially given that the most number of faiths of the world is squeezed into one of the littlest nation.

Interestingly, Social Studies, along with subjects in the Humanities, is now a compulsory and examinable subject in secondary schools. Back in the 1980s, secondary schools introduced Religious Knowledge as an examinable subject at the GCE ‘O’ Levels. Perhaps the Education Ministry might be sufficiently bold to inject Inter-Faith Knowledge into the current Social Studies syllabus. Concurrently, the Defence and Home ministries could introduce a subject on Inter-Faith Appreciation as part of its Basic Training and/or Officer Cadet courses for active NSMen and reservists. National Service is where some parents’ sons, some siblings’ brothers, some schoolmates’ buddies,



some girls’ boyfriends and some families’ relatives, could benefit from a common and mandatory platform. Such knowledge and exposure would serve the individuals, their families and the nation well, when the NSmen step into the working world, marriage life, parenthood and other leadership roles.

Last, people must refrain from using the term or having to ‘tolerate’ other religious practices, as it connotes negativity in relationships. As Singaporeans walk and work together towards sustained racial and religious harmony, they must learn and live to accept and appreciate their differences. Otherwise, cohesive diversity would only be limited to an attractive term or concept. ●

*Writer is a veteran regional humanitarian and a local interfaith activist.*

*Article lifted and adapted from Singapore Perspectives 2016*

PRIVATE SECTOR  
INTERFAITH INITIATIVES

# INSTILLING NORMS @ DORMS

MES initiates intercultural interaction  
for migrant workers

In January 2016, 27 Bangladeshi construction workers who turned radical were arrested in Singapore.

Notwithstanding, construction companies here said they would continue to engage foreign workers due to the limited options, while some felt that the actions of a few should not taint the rest. One senior executive said that workers from India and Bangladesh will continue to be needed in the sector as many shun the hard and laborious work they do.

While those arrested had met outside their dormitories, community leaders here feel dormitories are a suitable venue to educate the workers. Dormitory owners and operators agreed that if workers were well exposed and integrated at their dormitories, it could prevent them from being radicalised.



“It is quite natural that those of the same nationalities would prefer to live together, but we have the responsibility to ensure that they share common spaces for sports and recreation facilities. They must know and understand that they are part of a larger community.”

**MR MOHAMED ABDUL JALEEL**  
Founder and CEO, Mini Environment Service



Mr Mohamed Abdul Jaleel, the founder and chief executive of dormitory owner and operator, Mini Environment Service (MES), said how dormitories are run can influence the behaviour of the workers who stay there.

He shared, “It is quite natural that those of the same nationalities would prefer to live together, but we have the responsibility to ensure that they share common spaces for sports and recreation facilities. They must know and understand that they are part of a larger community.”

In May 2017, MES embarked on its new and ongoing initiative called community

engagement and religious guidance for foreign workers. It involves a group of Islamic religious leaders, including the *Religious Rehabilitation Group*, to educate Bangladeshi workers on the dangers of radical ideology. Around 300 workers attended the inaugural hour-long session at a dormitory in Kaki Bukit.

“We see this as a way to educate the workers and ensure they are not misguided by these ideologies. At the end of the day, it’s about Singapore’s safety,” added Mr Jaleel. ●



“If only my dad was around to see the COU-IRO orphanage, he would have been really pleased to know that the monies that donors trusted upon him have been put to very good use — both effectively and efficiently.”



**MS LEE CHIN CHIN**  
Daughter of late Mr Lee Bock Guan

## LEE BOCK GUAN

### INTER-FAITH LEADER REMEMBERED

**M**r Lee Bock Guan has always been widely known for facilitating donations and assistance to the needy, regardless of ethnicity or nationality. While he was colour-blind in his work, Mr Lee was not blind to the hues of social vulnerability. He served with distinction as an IRO Council Member, enabling a sustainable flow of funds for IRO’s projects. He used to stay in Geylang Lorong 3 till 1973, where he personally experienced the racial riots around his neighbourhood. He witnessed some of his neighbours taking the parangs attacking one another. Mr Lee would remind his family that he wondered why and how those whom he knew, who used to live and play together so frequently and closely, could turn against each other.

Even in his final moments in life, though unwell, he persisted to help the child victims, who suffered from the devastating Nepal earthquake in April 2015.





## RECONSTRUCTION OF COU-IRO HOME, NEPAL

“As we drove around Nepal, I saw the vast devastation caused by the earthquake. I thought the orphanage would be a very normal and simple facility for the children to live in. The long rocky drive to the orphanage reinforced my anticipation that it was going to be an ordinary structure.

But when we arrived, I beamed with great pride when I saw the Singapore flag and the words, *COU-IRO Home* (Children of the Universe). It was an extraordinary feeling,

The older children took care of the younger ones, playing with them and reading to them, even though they are not related by blood, yet they are one big and united family.

It was very touching, and it was a wonderful job done by the IRO and the Corporate Citizen Foundation (CCF) for the orphans. It was not just a roof to house them. It was truly and properly planned as a home for their development with a future. If only my dad was around to see the COU-IRO



that we can cross borders to help others in need. I was amazed by the entire facility, how it was designed to let the home be self-sufficient; to have clean water; renewable gas for cooking; a plot for them to farm and sell their produce to the hotel, a library for them to read, and very importantly they were not deprived of the opportunity of having an education.

The orphans were able to read and converse in English, and this would surely help them when they are older and looking for a job.

orphanage, he would have been really pleased to know that the monies that donors trusted upon him have been put to very good use — both effectively and efficiently. I know that my dad is very grateful to the men who have worked sincerely and tirelessly, and contributed to the concept and completion of the orphanage.” ●

*Recounted by Ms Lee Chin Chin, daughter of late Mr Lee Bock Guan, on her trip to Nepal to witness the completion and launch of the COU-IRO Home.*



PRAYER FOR HENG SWEE KEAT'S RECOVERY

**“SWEE KEAT REPRESENTS THE BEST OF US...”**

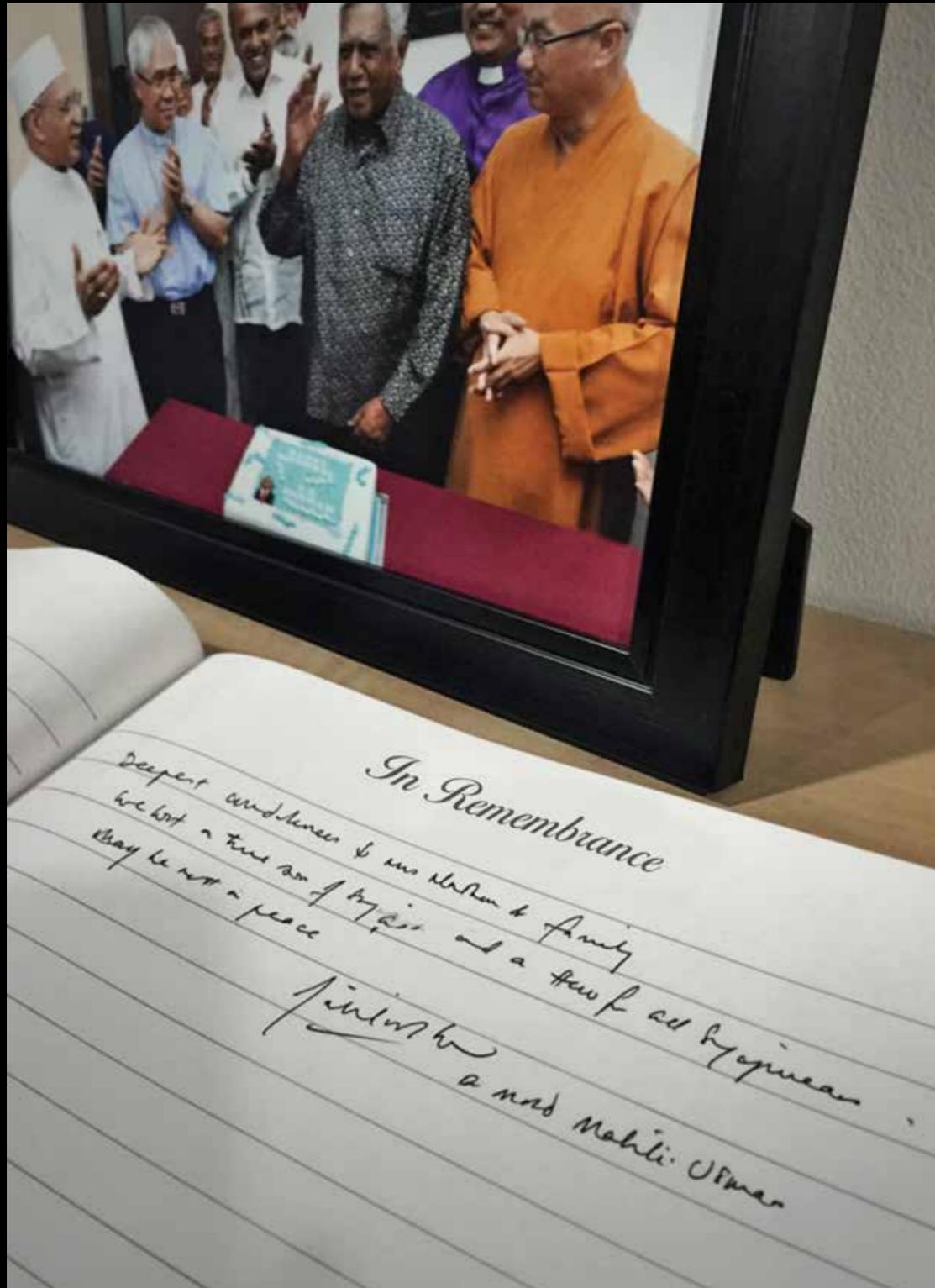
- DPM THARMAN SHANMUGARATNAM



**W**ithin a day of Finance Minister Heng Swee Keat's stroke, religious leaders from all ten faiths of the IRO and interfaith activists gathered on 13 May 2016 to pray for his smooth and speedy recovery, and in tandem show solidarity and support for a man who has been brilliant, committed and sincere to national progress.

At the gathering, Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam, who attended the prayers at very short notice, shared his thoughts on his successor at the Ministry of Finance. Speaking at the session, DPM Tharman said Mr Heng represented the “best in Singapore”, someone “we all aspire to be”.

Fellow Member of Parliament from Mr Heng's Tampines GRC, Mr Baey Yam Keng, joined the collective prayer held at the IRO Headquarters. ●



OUR GRIEF



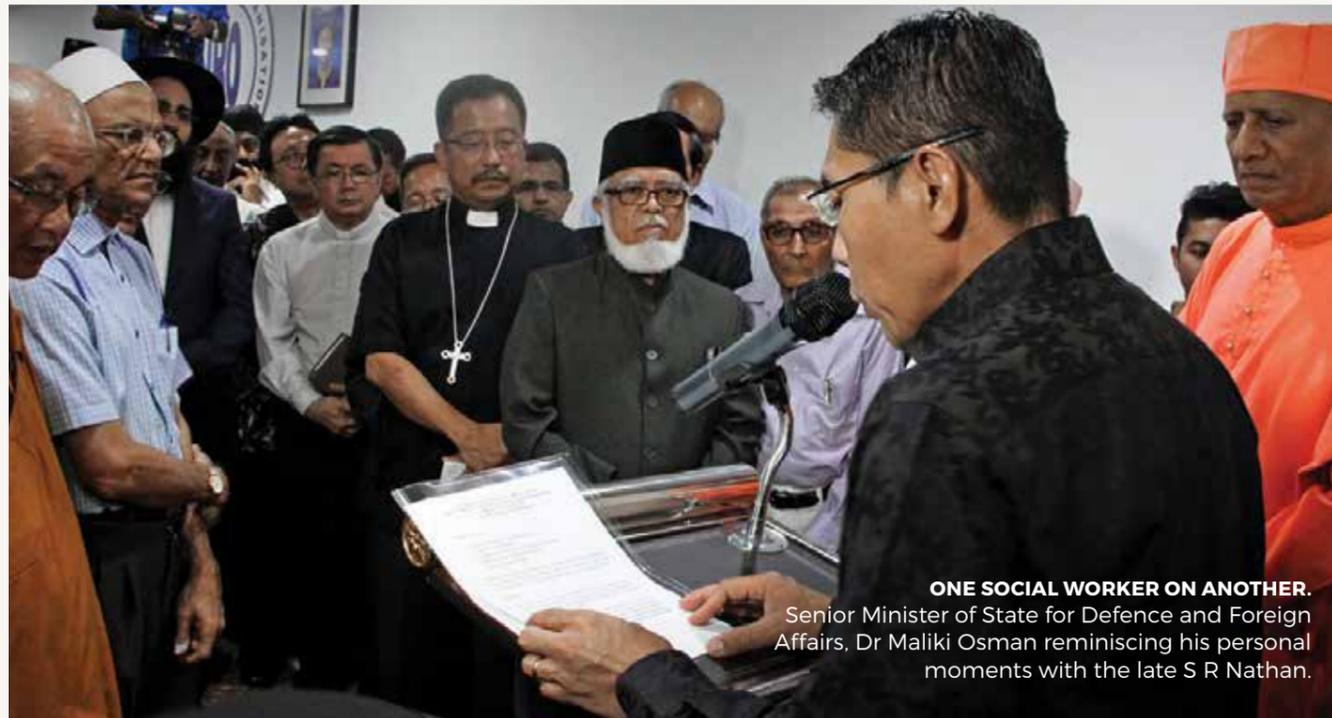
# S R NATHAN

PASSING OF PATRIOT, PRESIDENT, PATRON

As the nation grieved over the loss of a compassionate and charismatic President, the IRO paid tribute to its first and serving Patron, S R Nathan.



OUR GRIEF



OUR GRIEF

Leaders, members and friends of the ten main faiths attended a tribute held on 24 August 2016, to pen and share their affections and reminiscences on Singapore's beloved 'People's President'.

Dr Mohamad Maliki Osman, Senior Minister of State for Defence and Foreign Affairs, graced the gathering along with local and foreign dignitaries. Dr Maliki, who himself was a social worker like President Nathan, posted a poem as a tribute to Singapore's longest-serving Head of State. ●



**"A HUMBLE TRIBUTE TO S R NATHAN –  
OUR TIMELESS COMPASS OF TRUE COMPASSION"**  
posted by Dr Maliki Osman on his Facebook (24 August 2016)

He was a sterling stalwart, who lived his utmost, and loved by most.

His history scripted as a street samurai, who served and sacrificed for the nation's rise.

He was endowed with dynamic diplomacy and energetic elegance, which he used for selfless success.

His Excellency charted and started the President's Challenge, to care and share amongst his constituents. His spirit remains to the nation, the timeless compass of true compassion.

As a fellow social worker, at heart and by art, he was a true inspiration that moulded my determination. He gave his love and soul for his fellowmen, with greater attention to the less fortunate.

A leader who was a shiny shepherd, he wielded the wand of wisdom and warmth. The Laju incident exemplified his bravery, beyond brawn, brains and bizarre boundaries.

Singapura has lost an admirable aristocrat, but stands to gain more from his legacies yet. His life story will be an inspiration to many generations of Singaporeans to come.



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OUR BELIEF

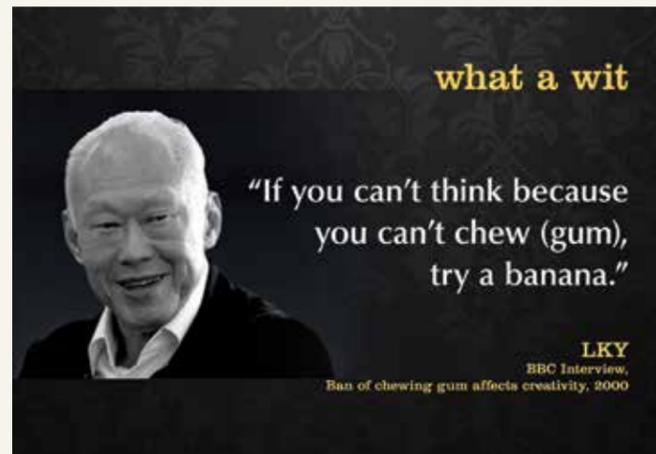
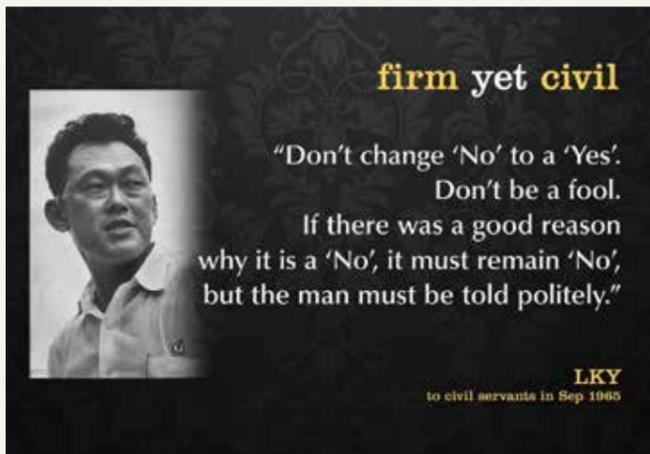


# REMEMBERING LEE KUAN YEW

LAWYER. LEADER. LUMINARY.

On 1 April 2016, members of the IRO, legal practitioners and interfaith activists gathered at an observance to commemorate the first anniversary of the passing of the late Mr Lee Kuan Yew — a lawyer, leader and luminary.

The event was facilitated by the Association of Muslim Lawyers (AML) and, held at and sponsored by Furama Riverfront Hotel. It focused on the significant contributions of Singapore's founding Prime Minister, who himself started his career as a lawyer.



Screenshots of the tribute video presented at the observance.

“When we put up this video, we don't want anybody to tell us that we are hero worshipping. We don't want that – we want the truth. I won't say 'hard truth'. Truth is enough for us.”  
 — President AML, Noor Marican, in his Welcome Note



Lawyer and Member of Parliament, Ms Rahayu Mahzam, stood alongside interfaith leaders as the Guest-of-Honour at the observance event.

In his welcome note, AML President, Noor Marican shared on Mr Lee's strong stand towards integration between races and religions: “His take on integration was to incorporate it into the people's daily lives, for example, the HDB town planning, schools system, etc with the aim of ensuring common spaces for integration. These were not only good policies, but they also contained great wisdom and vision.”

“Today, as we look back on the importance of integration, we truly appreciate his concern and foresight. If we look around us, whether near or far, there are wars, conflicts, unrests and acts of terror. Whether these conflicts and unrests are due to inter-faith, intra-faith or political reasons, Singapore is too small and we cannot afford another repeat of the 1964 inter-race riots.” ●

# REMEMBRANCE & REFLECTIONS



Senior Minister of State for Foreign Affairs and Defence Dr Mohamad Maliki Osman delivered a speech at *A Gathering of Remembrance and Reflections*, a memorial event for the victims of the 13 November 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris, France.

Held at Grand Park City Hall, on 29 November 2015 and organised by the Ba'alwie Mosque, the event was attended by French Ambassador to Singapore Benjamin Dubertret. Dr Maliki witnessed the presentation of a declaration by the various organisations condemning acts of terror to Ambassador Dubertret.



## DECLARATION OF CONDEMNATION by Singapore Muslim Community on Acts of Terror

We are shocked and saddened by the acts of terror and atrocities inflicted on the innocent lives in Paris, on 13 November 2015. Since the 9/11 attacks, countless innocent lives have perished and suffered across Europe, Asia, Africa, Australia, and the Middle East particularly in Syria, Yemen and Iraq.

Our deepest condolence to the victims, their families and loved ones. We wish the speedy recovery for those who are injured, and those traumatised.

Such heinous acts are neither human nor justified, and hold no place in any religion. In Islam, it is Divine decree that, "...Whoever kills a human being... it shall be as if he has killed all mankind, and whosoever saves the life of one... it shall be as if he had saved the life of all mankind".

*(Noble Qur'an, Chapter 5 Verse 32)*

**We stand here together, today, in condemning such acts which are immoral, an affront to humanity and against the true teachings of all religions including Islam. ●**

# REGIONAL SECURITY CHALLENGES



Associate Professor Bilveer Singh from the Political Science Department (NUS) shared his knowledge and experience on regional security issues with leaders and friends of the IRO at a session titled, *Challenges Towards Regional Stability*.

The key areas Prof Bilveer covered included emerging security threats in Southeast Asia (SEA), Singapore as an iconic terrorist target and Daesh-ization of SEA's terrorists. While the self-styled Islamic State (IS)

is losing territories in Syria and Iraq to the western-led coalitions, new dangers are emerging with its ideological spread worldwide. Some of the many Southeast Asian fighters supporting IS could return to launch attacks on home soil.

Held at the IRO premises on 3 August 2016, Member of Parliament, Zaqy Mohamad graced the talk as the Guest of Honour, along with the Indonesian ambassador to Singapore, His Excellency, I Gede Ngurah Swajaya. ●

# ISLAMOPHOBIA & ORIENTALISM

## CHALLENGES

**O**n 26 September 2016, the IRO hosted a lecture and discussion on *Islamophobia and Orientalism*. Speaking on the topic were Dr Leon Moosavi and Dr Ilyas Mohammed, both lecturers in Sociology from the Department of Sociology, Social Policy and Criminology at the University of Liverpool. In the decade following 9/11, numerous studies have confirmed that anti-Muslim prejudice, commonly referred to as Islamophobia, has become a prominent feature of many societies.

Earlier in January, Home Affairs Minister K Shanmugam said that Islamophobia will “tear our society apart” and that Singapore has to guard against it. Singaporeans must take a bigger collective effort to safeguard the racial and religious harmony of Singapore, a secular and multi-religious country. Mr Shanmugam added that any rise in Islamophobia would also play into the hands of terrorists, as a Muslim community that is marginalised and discriminated against becomes fertile ground for recruitment. ●



# for COMMON SENSES COMMON SPACES

## IRO LENDS HAND TO GROUND-UP INTERFAITH INITIATIVES

*In May 2015, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong cited the Global Religious Diversity Report which ranked Singapore as the most diverse nation, in terms of religions, out of 232 countries. Diversity is strength when properly cultivated and coordinated. But if left unattended, taken for granted or let to be manipulated, it would be disastrous. Singapore's interfaith fabric must be consciously and constantly monitored and nurtured to maintain and strengthen confidence and trust amongst the people of this most religiously diverse nation.*

### ORIGINS OF CSCS

Given the challenges of the global security climate and increased religiosity, it is imperative that the society must constantly and creatively seek ways to bring people together onto common grounds for the common good through common senses.

resilience — of Singapore's Total Defence framework.

The CSCS was conceptualised by Singapore's veteran humanitarian, Hassan Ahmad, who is a keen interfaith activist, a volunteer with Ba'alwie Mosque and District Councillor of South East CDC (SECDC).

The *Common Senses for Common Spaces* (CSCS) interfaith dialogue series seeks to encourage more interaction for a deeper interfaith understanding through the exchanges on key and common religious practices, with the desired outcome that such engagement and acquaintance would help foster greater social harmony and trust. Incidentally, this is in line with two of the five pillars — social and psychological

The CSCS series was adopted, scaled and sustained by SECDC as part of its three-tier pyramid approach to allow for more intensive and effective inter-faith and racial engagements. It seeks to widen the reach, heighten awareness, and deepen understanding on the different faiths and cultures across various strata of society — by focusing on key commonalities within diversity.





## SOURCES & SECRETS OF FASTING

**H**eld at Furama City Centre on 18 June 2015, three globally-recognisable senior interfaith leaders were on one panel at the inaugural interfaith dialogue series — *Common Senses for Common Spaces*, which seeks to exchange and encourage a deeper understanding of key and common religious practices, with the desired outcome that such engagement and understanding will help foster greater social harmony. The three

interfaith leaders — Imam Habib Hassan al-Attas, Venerable Master Chin Kung and Bishop Terry Kee, shared their insights and wisdoms on the topic, ‘Sources & Secrets of Fasting’, at the Furama City Centre.

The panel discussion was moderated by Sujadi Siswo, senior correspondent and bureau chief with Singapore’s Channel NewsAsia. ●



“ We may have different subscriptions of faith. But we must make concerted and concrete efforts to identify and understand the similarities within those differences that exist in our daily lives, and that which could help us bind even stronger as a nation. Improving religious cohesion is one of the cornerstones in strengthening our community vigilance, trust, intuition and cohesion, hence resilience. ”

**DR MALIKI OSMAN**  
Mayor, SECD  
Senior Minister of State  
for Defence and Foreign Affairs



The CSCS dialogue aimed to foster greater social harmony and peaceful coexistence among Singaporeans by catalysing deeper understanding of key common religious practices which are commonly-practised, but which are not commonly-shared.

## SACRED RENDEZVOUS

**H**eld on 11 November 2016, the CSCS dialogue titled, ‘Sacred Rendezvous’ — centred on pilgrimages to holy sites of different religions.

A panel of 4 respected religious figures, from the IRO, comprising former Mufti Syed Isa Semait (Muslim), Sister Janet Wang (Christian), Mr Gurmit Singh (Sikh) and Reverend Dr K Gunaratana (Buddhist), shared on their respective holy places and highlighted the common essences and impacts — mainly piety, purity and the embodiment of humanity — that motivate

pilgrims to embark on their spiritual journeys. Interestingly, some holy sites of the different faiths share the same locations, like Jerusalem. The panel discussion was chaired by Sujadi Siswo, senior correspondent with Singapore’s Channel NewsAsia.

As part of the event’s highlights, an interactive virtual reality (VR) tour feature was made available where guests were ‘teleported’ to the various sacred places — Mecca, Amritsar, Vatican City, Jerusalem — to have an insight and sense of a religion’s holy site and setting. ●



The diverse audience comprising professionals, interfaith activists and youths from the social and corporate sectors, faith groups, IRCCs, schools and government agencies familiarised themselves on the key common consequences of pilgrimages — the fulfilment of piety and purity, and the embodiment of humanity.



IRO Council Member, Harbans Singh, contributing his knowledge and perspectives at the interfaith dialogue.



The experienced dialogue moderator, Sujadi Siswo, helped facilitate a worthwhile exchange of perspectives and clarifications.



# WATER & ENVIRONMENT

## CONSERVE AND VALUE

**W**ith increasing unpredictability of climate conditions that has witnessed great droughts and massive floods that affect water sources and supplies across every continent of the world, all nations must play their part to embrace and observe the right philosophy and practices on consumption and conservation.

Water source and supply has been a traditional, ongoing and growing challenge for Singapore, which has limited land mass. With a fast growing population size, this challenge intensifies acutely.

The IRO collaborated with the Public Utilities Board (PUB) to reiterate the national concern of mindful use of water and its conservation, through religious and spiritual lenses. An exhibition, showcasing teachings of the ten main faiths on water, sought to fulfil the desired impact of this event.

Minister of State for National Development, Desmond Lee, graced the occasion as the Guest of Honour, in the attendance of faith and social leaders, along with diplomatic dignitaries.

Welcoming the guests, IRO's then-Vice President Foo Check Woo said, "To the religious communities — water is life. And we will work hand-in-hand with one and all to conserve water such that Singapore continues to enjoy adequate and quality water for life".

Mr Yap Kheng Guan, a member of the Panel of Experts from the Centre for Liveable Cities, shared an insight on the history and evolution of water in Singapore.

Additionally, the IRO had on display religious artifacts of the ten faiths including century-old Bibles and Qurans, which are not usually available for public viewing. ●



# WISDOM of our FOUNDERS

The first concrete step towards the formation of the *Inter-Religious Organisation* in Singapore was taken at a lunch party held on the 15<sup>th</sup> of January 1949 at the home of Syed Ibrahim bin Omar Alsagoff, President of *The All-Malaya Muslim Missionary Society*, in honour of His Eminence Maulana Mohamed Abdul Aleem Siddiqui.

Here are excerpts from the speeches by the founding fathers of IRO.

## WISDOM OF OUR FOUNDERS

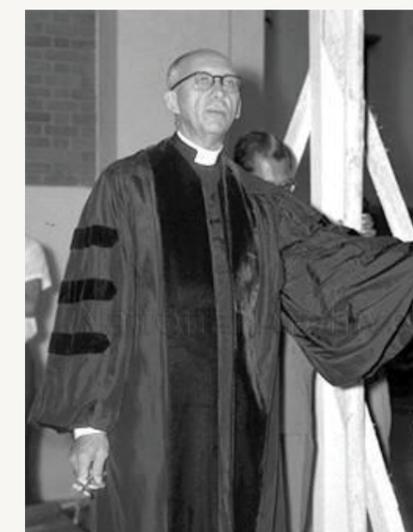


**ABOVE** His Excellency the Commissioner-General, the Rt. Hon. Mr Malcolm MacDonald P.C.

“ In some ways, this is the most remarkable meeting that has ever been held in Singapore... That is why we welcome this bold movement of religious leaders in Singapore and Johore to come together — without any abandonment of their individual faiths — to seek some understanding. ”

“ Our purpose is to work together for the achievement of peace and goodwill among mankind... ”

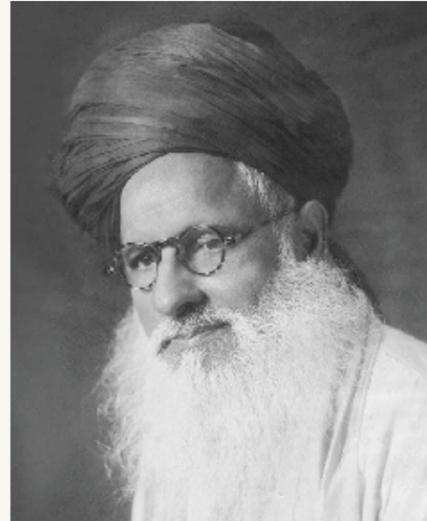
It was hoped that this Public Meeting would be a witness to the citizens of this city and country, that, without surrendering any of their own religious convictions or obligations to share them, leaders of the various faiths could meet amicably; also that since we hold many things in common these surely can form a mutual basis for cooperation along several lines. ”



**ABOVE** Rev Dr H B Amstutz, President of the Inter-Religious Organisation, Singapore and Johore Bahru

“ ... It is not religion that causes disunion, it is rather the *ignorance of religions* that causes disunion. ”

His Eminence Maulana  
Mohamed Abdul Aleem  
Siddiqui



“ Sikhs are ordained to contribute (and they do so) part of their efforts and earnings for the common good of Humanity, in particular the poor and the weak.

The Sikh Gurus not merely preached the Universal Brotherhood of Mankind, but they also practiced it in right earnest. ”

**THE CONTRIBUTION OF  
SIKHISM TO PEACE**  
Sri Mehervan Singh on  
behalf of Sri Kartar Singh

“ In the same spirit, we believe that all religions are but different expressions of the same divine spirit, and that each provides within its fold what the other type promises to fulfill. In this liberal spirit, religions must be viewed as having their own pragmatic justification. ”

**THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE  
HINDU RELIGION TO PEACE**  
Swami Vamadevananda of the  
Ramakrishna Mission, Singapore

“ The only solution for such adjustment lies in the spiritual unity of all faiths and religions in this world to work together as they possess the same object in common in the teachings to do right, and to discard the evils and wrongdoings; and also that the people should learn to love each other; live in peace and harmony.

Of all the qualifications, says the master, LOVE is the most important, for if it is not strong enough in a man, it forces him to acquire all the rest, and all the rest without it would never be sufficient. ”



Sim Boon Hwee for the  
Rev Sek Hong Choon



## Declaration of Religious Harmony

We, the people in Singapore, declare that religious harmony is vital for peace, progress and prosperity in our multi-racial and multi-religious Nation.

We resolve to strengthen religious harmony through mutual tolerance, confidence, respect, and understanding.

We shall always:

Recognise the secular nature of our State,

Promote cohesion within our society,

Respect each other's freedom of religion,

Grow our common space while respecting our diversity,

Foster inter-religious communications,

And thereby ensure that religion will not be abused to create conflict and disharmony in Singapore.



**The Declaration of Religious Harmony** was issued in 2003 by a working committee involving the national bodies of all mainstream religious groups in Singapore, and recited at the commencement of every IRO Council meeting.