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Singaporean-ness as a Bulwark against Terrorism

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Post 9/11, the Singaporean government was quick to implement a number of necessary structural measures to combat the threat posed by terrorism. The steps taken have included the creation of the National Security Coordination Secretariat as a conduit to facilitate greater cooperation between government ministries, various physical security measures and the establishment of greater cooperation with foreign governments.

However, the continued detention of Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) members under the Internal Security Act – the most recent being the detention of bomb maker Jahpar Osman last month – indicates that the ‘soft dimension’ of security measures cannot be ignored.

The ‘soft dimension’ of fighting terrorism centres on winning the ‘hearts and minds’ of the people. It effectively is a process to ensure that the fundamentalist logic of extremism does not seduce impressionable minds and induct them into their fold. To defend against this, there is a necessity now more than ever to remind Singaporeans of what connects them all, that is, their Singaporean-ness.

Muslim Singaporeans and Singaporean-ness

Deputy Prime Minister and Coordinating Minister for Security and Defence Dr Tony Tan alluded to this point in his review of security policies during a speech in parliament on 16/05/05. Emphasising the need for national resilience, Dr Tan praised the efforts of MUIS and the Muslim community in drawing up ten desired attributes of a Muslim Singaporean. These ten attributes were crafted to shape the identity of the Muslim community in Singapore with respect to their socio-religious life.

It is clear that the attributes are neither meant to isolate the Muslim community from the greater Singaporean community nor are the attributes applicable only to the Muslim community. In fact, the attributes are meant to help the Muslim community integrate with the larger Singaporean community while remain rooted and committed to the teaching of Islam. For example, the desire to be inclusive is clearly stated in the ninth attribute and further reinforced by the seventh, which calls upon Muslims to recognise that they are part of a multi-religious society. Moreover, the sixth attribute seeks to emphasise the compatibility of being both a Muslim and a good citizen.

On the whole, the initiative should be commended because values such as being inclusive and the acceptance of pluralism are important for the preservation of social harmony in the multi-cultural setting of Singapore. Although the ten attributes move in the right direction towards

the fostering of national harmony, they also raise another important issue that requires attention. Muslim Singaporeans have made a good start at articulating how their religious identity meshes with their Singaporean identity but Muslim Singaporeans should not and cannot be the only community involved in this process.

Creating a Singaporean-ness

As the war waged by Muslim terrorists is to a large degree a war of ideologies, a battle line has been drawn between those who deploy violence to impose their image of the world on others and those who are committed to peaceful coexistence. As such, Singaporeans more than ever need to have a clear and confident sense of who we are as a country and what we share in common. With regard to the management of differences between different communities in Singapore, the long-standing government policy has been one of integration and not assimilation. Integration entitles each community to their own cultural identity while also striving to develop a common identity shared by all the other communities. A difficulty for a young nation like Singapore is the discovery and creation of this common identity. With regard to this, the Muslim community's effort to draw up ten desired attributes of a Muslim Singaporean can act as a foundation to think about what it means to be a Singaporean.

Based on the ten attributes, perhaps the following three points should be kept in mind in order to frame the national discussion on Singaporean-ness. Firstly, there is a need for an awareness of our historical roots and routes. Thus, Singaporeans need to remember where our forefathers were from as well as how they built the nation. This would permit Singaporeans to have historical bearing in our conversations. Secondly, there is a need to appreciate what we have as Singaporeans. By appreciating the multiracial, multi-religious and meritocratic society in which we live, Singaporeans would be better placed to acknowledge their common shared values. Finally, there is a need to acknowledge the role of English as the common language of utility without undermining the importance of mother tongues. English is the lingua franca all Singaporeans share and remains the tool to facilitate the conversations Singaporeans of all races have with one another.

All the other races should not view this issue as one affecting primarily Muslim Singaporeans. A common Singaporean identity is something that all the different races of the country have to continually labour at creating and maintaining. National identity is clearly not something that can be ascribed from top-down and it certainly does not arise without effort. A common identity needs to be forged through discussion and through lived experience. In this sense, the government needs to continue to provide a clear legal framework to establish a platform upon which the dialogue between all races and religions can take place. It is in the course of such a dialogue that Singaporeans can arrive at what they consider the attributes of being a Singaporean. With reference to Singapore's fight against terrorism, an inclusive Singaporean identity has to be an integral part of the government's strategy.

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