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A Blueprint for Social Resilience: The Next 1,826 Days and Beyond

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WRITTEN five years after the 9/11 attacks, the document *1,826 Days: A Diary of Resolve* published by the National Security Coordination Secretariat was released recently for public consumption. It is a timely stock take of Singapore's attempt to mitigate life in a complex and uncertain global environment.

Within such an environment, the damage posed by terrorism goes beyond the immediate loss of life. Instead, such attacks hope to sow social unrest and division within a nation. As such, social resilience – defined as the ability of a nation to remain unified in the face of crisis – is an essential pillar of Singapore's national security strategy.

To date, as succinctly captured by *1,826 Days*, efforts to strengthen this pillar are commendable. Since 9/11, an intricate web of programmes promoting inter-racial and inter-religious harmony that permeates all levels of society has inoculated Singaporeans against the insidious ideologies and divisive tactics of extremists. Consequently, the republic has remained an oasis of calm in troubled times.

Unfortunately, this web of programmes may only be a stop-gap solution. As Singapore's social resilience is founded on its policy of multiculturalism, it is imperative our approach to managing diversity is synchronized to current demographic realities. One such foreseeable change to current demographics may be the alteration of Singapore's multicultural composition stemming from immigration from far-flung places as well as more inter-cultural marriages.

Hence, to maintain social resilience for *and* beyond the next five years, the advent of an increasingly multi-hued Singapore may demand two major changes to our current approach to multiculturalism. Firstly, a modification of Singapore's CMIO (Chinese, Malay, Indian, Others) approach to classifying and managing racial as well as religious difference may be needed. Secondly, it may be essential for the value awarded to the nation's diversity to be altered. Combined, these two changes will produce an inclusive society well-placed to take on the challenges of tomorrow and beyond.

Whither CMIO?

The CMIO classification system has its origins in the days of British colonial rule. As a form of managing Singapore's diverse ethnic and religious groups, this form of administration was designed neither to bridge differences nor create commonality.

With stability the *raison d'étre* of British policy, interaction among the various racial groups was limited to the economic sphere through the allocation of general residential districts to various ethnic groups while, by and large, also dividing labour along ethnic lines. The lack of common spaces ensured the stability necessary for economic growth as social unrest borne out of cultural differences and intolerance was minimized.

While this classification system has contributed to the stability and economic development of Singapore in the past, the evolving demographics of Singapore may lead to a disjoint between the CMIO approach and current realities. There are more inter-cultural marriages and an increasing diverse number of new citizens pledge allegiance to Singapore each year. Furthermore, the need to remain economically competitive in the global market also impels the embracement of an increasing number of transient talents comprising a prism of nationalities.

Thus, in response to the changing economic imperative, the CMIO classification may require an expansion. This is to reflect a more inclusive mode of identification to accommodate the flowering of diverse cultures on the ground.

Diversity need not be divisive

Singaporeans have come a long way in fostering multicultural harmony. Surveys by the Ministry of Community, Youth and Sports conducted before and after 9/11 as well as following the arrest of the Jemaah Islamiyah all indicate a consistently high level of satisfaction with current race and religious relations and optimism of future relations. Moreover, in spite of strong religious and racial group identification, the surveys also indicate that virtually all Singaporeans feel proud to be Singaporean and think of Singapore as their home. This nuanced negotiation of multiple identities by Singaporeans was deemed almost impossible to reconcile in Singapore's early years.

In keeping up with current realities, our mindset towards the nature of our racial and religious diversity should correspondingly alter. Unlike in the past, our diversity need not be viewed as divisive and a threat to stability. For example, it could be argued that Singapore is well-placed to respond to the global jihadist threat *because of*, and not *in spite of*, its Muslim community. Their presence permits an understanding of the complex issues within the wider Muslim world and how this interlaces with regional and local issues – an understanding that aids the repelling of extremism.

In light of this, Singapore's multicultural composition may be better viewed through the lens of an understated National Education message – "We have confidence in our future." This framework will permit diversity to be viewed for what it is right now – an asset to security that will see Singapore through the next lap rather than a threat and a handicap.

The next 1,826 days and beyond

It is significant that *1,826 Days* exhibits the crucial forward-looking pro-adaptation attitude needed to ensure the security of Singapore by holding that "security is always a work in progress".

The security of Singapore's social fabric should not be treated any different as the challenges

to our nation's resilience are constantly changing. Singaporeans have two options when responding to this. Either necessary change is resisted, only to be forced upon us eventually, or the need for change is seized upon as an opportunity to shape a better cohesive future while protecting the proud legacy of a harmonious past. If the latter is the more prudent course of action, in order to nurture our burgeoning cultural prism, it is only sensible that our understanding of "multiculturalism" is expanded beyond overly-simplified categories of differences framed within a discourse of conflict.

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