



**PERMANENT MISSION OF SINGAPORE  
TO THE UNITED NATIONS**

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**UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY  
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**STATEMENT BY**

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## CELEBRATING OUR DIVERSITY

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### A New Divide

1 A few weeks ago, a young Muslim lawyer in Singapore told me about a recent experience he had in an East Asian city. Unlike others carrying Singapore passports clearing immigration, he was told to stand aside. When he asked for the reason, the immigration officer muttered that there were too many 'Mohamads' that day. Smiling to himself, the Singaporean waited patiently and peered around wondering how long he had to wait. The officer then warned him in a stern manner to stay still. He suddenly felt a chill running down his spine.

2 Muslims all over the world are being profiled by security agencies. Since September 11, Muslims travelling to western countries have been subject to all manner of interrogation and searches. Although the profiling is now done more subtly, it continues. Profiling is increasingly being done in East Asia as well.

3 When sudden threats appear, it is perhaps natural to expect a certain over-reaction from affected communities. After Pearl Harbour, all Japanese living in America became suspect including those born there. Many were interned. By today's standards, this was an affront but, at that time, it was widely felt to be a necessary precaution. Shocked by this reaction, Japanese American leaders set out to prove their American-ness, for example, by forming the Japanese American 100<sup>th</sup> Infantry Battalion which fought heroically in the European theatre.

4 The travails of the Japanese-Americans were not unique. Tribalism is a basic human instinct. We may proclaim that all men are brothers but we reflexively distinguish degrees of closeness. Divisions of race, language, culture and religion run deep in human society and surface under stress. The western ascendancy in the last few centuries created tremendous stresses in non-western communities, upsetting old relationships and giving rise to a variety of responses, all of which sought to reconcile each community's own sense of self with the needs of a western-defined modernity. In Asia, for example, the re-emergence of China and India on the global stage has been a prolonged struggle of reconciling transformation with tradition.

5 This is the broader historical framework against which the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims in the world must be viewed today. It is a subject which concerns us all deeply in the United Nations.

6 There are two evolving developments which feed on each other. One is the change within Islam itself; the other is the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims in different parts of the world. Both require our close attention.

### Within Islam

7 The response of the Islamic world to the challenge of modernisation will affect the development of the entire world in this century. In some ways, it is comparable to that of the Chinese response to modernisation and would probably take a much longer time. The decline of the Ottoman Empire in the 19th century took place around the same time as the decline of the Qing Dynasty in China. Both collapsed at the beginning of the last century. After many twists and turns, China has finally re-emerged onto the global stage with a bright future ahead of it.

8 **There** are about as many Muslims in the world as Chinese. In contrast to China, however, the Islamic world is unlikely to re-coalesce in the foreseeable future. Once Ataturk refused the caliphate and, with iron determination, started reforming Turkish institutions on the western model, the Islamic world lost its centre. From then on, different Islamic societies experimented with different approaches and moved in different directions. It has been a mixed story.

9 **The different** responses of Muslim societies to the challenge of modernisation are accompanied by a great ideological debate among political and religious leaders. Good governance has become a major issue with calls for greater transparency and more democracy.

10 In this debate, it is natural that some groups should look back to a romanticized period when the Islamic world was united and pristine, and seek its re-establishment in the 21st century. Such were the ideas of the Muslim Brotherhood which emanated from Egypt at the beginning of the 20th century. The ideology of that movement continues to inspire Islamic groups in various parts of the world today. If only Muslims were to abide strictly by the teachings of Islam, there would be no corruption, governments would be just and effective, and Islamic societies would become strong again. In many Islamic countries, at various times, these groups have been suppressed for being subversive. Those who funded them were thought to have ulterior motives. The struggle for the soul of Islam is ongoing.

11 However, it is not a struggle unique to Islam. For two hundred years, Europe was bloodied by religious wars which ended only with the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648 which created the system of modern European states. Even then, there was still religious persecution which led many Europeans to flee to the New World. In the last century, the soul of Europe was torn by communism, fascism and anti-semitism. It was precisely to overcome those divisions that the European Union was, by stages, established creating the longest period of peace on that continent.

12 How Islamic society evolves in the coming decades is mainly for Muslims to decide. Generally speaking, non-Muslims would have no standing to participate in this debate but for two factors which have become critical and which will have strategic consequences affecting us all.

13 The first factor is the emergence of the ideology of al Qaeda and its sister organisations like the Jemaah Islamiyah. This ideology is a malignant mutation of the ideas associated with the Muslim Brotherhood and other groups that argued for a return of Islamic society to an idealized past. It takes those ideas to an extreme and preaches hatred against non-Muslims worldwide justifying violence against innocent bystanders even if they are Muslim. The suicide bomber has become a potent weapon in its armoury. The followers of this ideology will not hesitate to use weapons of mass destruction if they can get their hands on them. We have a duty in the UN to join in the global war against them.

14 The second factor necessitating the involvement of non-Muslims in the Islamic debate is the growing Muslim diaspora in many non-Islamic countries. As minority communities, Muslims living in countries like France and Germany, for example, have to accept certain limitations in the practice of their religion. With growing religiosity in recent years, issues like the wearing of the headscarf have surfaced. What constitutes a reasonable compromise varies from country to country. For example, Singapore allows aspects of shariah law to apply to Muslims, including Muslim men being allowed four wives, although only under stringent conditions. It would be hard for non-Muslims to accept this in Europe.

15 The fact is, while some human values are universal, many are not. We have to accept this diversity in the world. A greater tolerance of diversity in the world would create better conditions for peaceful cooperation between Muslims and non-Muslims and influence the debate within Islam itself.

## Muslim vs Non-Muslim

16 If non-Muslims tar all Muslims with the brush of terrorism and majority non-Muslim communities treat minority Muslim communities as problem communities, the future will be bleak for all of us. In such a climate, Muslim extremists will gain ascendancy and the terrorists will find fertile ground for recruitment everywhere.

17 It is ridiculous to argue that terrorism is inherent in Islam. To do so is to play into the hands of the terrorists. That such views are increasingly being expressed in reputable journals and newspapers is troubling. Of course one could find blood-curdling passages in the Koran and the Hadith but these passages must be read in context. We find similar passages too in the Old Testament. As we would not therefore argue that terrorism is inherent in Judaism and Christianity, so we should not make Islam the problem. That would be a big mistake. There were periods in history when Islamic society was considerably more advanced than Western society.

18 Equally, it would be a big mistake for Muslim leaders to allow Muslim extremists to make claims on behalf of Muslims worldwide without contest. This causes non-Muslims to suspect that all Muslims are in sympathy with them. To be sure, there are genuine grievances which have to be addressed like Palestine, Chechnya and the future of Iraq, but these are issues which are really more political than religious. The strategy of the extremists is to polarize Muslims and non-Muslims worldwide thereby widening their base of support. Muslim leaders have to counter this strategy. It is also essential for them to reach out to non-Muslim audiences as well. The recent bombings in London unleashed a strong anti-Muslim backlash at the grassroots which threatened the fabric of British society. This in turn put pressure on Muslim leaders in the UK to condemn the terrorists in clear terms. In the end, the fight against the terrorists has to be won within Muslim communities themselves. It is a battle for hearts and minds which requires Muslims to work together with non-Muslims against a common enemy.

## We Are One Because We Are Many

19 We have to make a concerted effort to understand each other better. The spotlight today is on the relationship between Islam and the West which has been a difficult one over the centuries. In fact, the historical relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims has been different in different parts of the world. Islam's historical relationships with China, with Hindus in South Asia and with non-Muslims in Southeast Asia have been quite different. We have to learn from each other's experiences. With globalisation, all societies have become multi-racial and multi-religious to a greater or lesser degree. The pluralism we hold as an ideal in the UN is not a choice; it is a necessity.

20 The 53rd UNGA declared in 1998 that 2001 would be the 'United Nations Year of Dialogue among Civilisations'. The 56th UNGA in 2001 adopted a 'Global Agenda for Dialogue among Civilisations'. This year, the UN sponsored numerous meetings on interfaith dialogues.

21 We need to translate these declarations of principle into everyday language and into practice. Are there limits to what politicians can say to win votes? Are religious leaders allowed to preach hatred in places of worship? What do we teach our children in school? What does all this mean to the immigration officer in the airport or the waiter in a restaurant?

22 Singapore, as a cosmopolitan city-state with a multi-racial and multi-religious population, is particularly vulnerable. We have experienced ugly racial and religious riots before and learnt that racial and religious harmony should never be taken for granted. It has been necessary for the Government to involve itself in many aspects of ordinary life including discouraging Christian missionaries from targeting the conversion of Muslims, stopping mosques from sharply turning up the volume of their loudspeakers when calling the faithful to prayer, limiting the size of joss sticks which Buddhists and Taoists burn for their rituals and arresting those who incite racial and religious hatred. What may appear to be a small thing to one community can be a serious provocation to another.

23 This has become the world we live in. We cannot ignore the diversity around us in our everyday life and the tribalism which is in our nature. We will continue to disagree on many things like the nature of democracy, gender relationships, the death penalty, stem cell research and what we can or cannot eat. The moment we dismiss these differences as unimportant, or lightly condemn those who disagree with us to be in error, the trouble begins.

24 Therefore, as we strive to achieve the Millennium Goals in the UN - and they are worthy goals - a key task for us is to accept, even celebrate, the differences that divide us in our daily lives. To paraphrase Pope John-Paul II, it is only because we are many that we are one, and the UN expresses that ideal.