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RIMA's Post-National Day Rally Forum

A Report by the Centre for Research on Islamic and Malay Affairs (RIMA)

Based on the diversity of issues aired and the quality of discussions which took place, the Post-National Day Forum held on Saturday, 8 September 2012 was indeed a success. Organised by the Centre for Research on Islamic and Malay Affairs (RIMA), the research arm of AMP Singapore, the forum saw more than thirty participants turning up to hear the presentation of perspectives from the invited speakers and participate in the lively interaction which ensued thereafter.

Mr Yeoh Lam Keong, the former Government Investment Corporation (GIC) Chief Economist kick started the dialogue by acknowledging that members of the Malay community situated at the bottom tier of income earners are the ones most vulnerable to economic shocks. He stressed that the authorities need to step in and assume the role of interventionist whenever the market fails to do its job. He highlighted six main social policy areas that the government needs to focus on: the social security system and safety nets, public housing, education, health care, public infrastructure and transportation, and population and immigration issues.

He then elaborated on each of these issues. Turning first to the issue of healthcare, he noted that this has become a most pressing policy issue. Given Singapore's increasingly ageing population - a situation exacerbated by longer life spans of individuals - health care has now become an unaffordable luxury, especially for those in the lower strata of society. To curb this problem, Mr Yeoh proposed reforms which include greater assurance of financial security, an increase in GDP spending for the health sector and higher co-payment from the government.

In addition, he called for more inexpensive public housing, made possible through higher government subsidies as well as a more comprehensive subsidy of rental public housing. Elaborating further, Mr Yeoh explained that entry level flats used to cost just 2-3 times our annual income. Currently however, the price has inflated to 3-4 times more and is projected to be even higher in the future. The two initiatives that he

proposed would therefore lessen the financial burden of the median income earners and the poorer cohort in the community.

Mr Yeoh also touched on what lies at the heart of the matter for many in the Malay community and this relates to the issue of safety nets for education. For instance, he explained that reforms need to be made to the current pre-school education system. Specifically, he lamented that the curriculum adopted by the cheaper PAP/NTUC pre-schools are so rudimentary that it resembles those practiced in childcare centres. However, 'real' pre-schools unfortunately come with at least an \$800 fee per child, which is unaffordable for parents in the low income group.

The second speaker for the afternoon, Ms Halijah Mohamad, a practicing lawyer and an activist for the Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE) focused on the issues of gender and work-life balance. She mentioned that despite the numerous schemes introduced by the government to encourage work-life balance, the take-up rate from employers is still very low. Ms Halijah explained that there are several reasons for this. Firstly, there is a lack of data and information to indicate the success of the programmes. Secondly, there is a lack of research or tracking done by the government to measure its achievement. She stressed that one of the key reasons why many women are not having children is because they think that their employment opportunities will be reduced thereafter. The stereotypical role of women as homemakers and men as sole breadwinners is still rife in the minds of the majority of Singaporeans.

Ms Halijah also advised employers to think 'out-of-the-box' when implementing part-time/flexi-time schemes in their organisations. Being an employer herself, she noted that such situations are never easy for the company. To emphasise this point, she recalled the time when her own secretary went on maternity leave, which she said unsurprisingly left her in a difficult situation for a short while. However, she then outlined some creative ways in which the situation can be made more bearable for both parties, especially if specific arrangements can be mutually agreed upon beforehand. For instance, instead of giving an employee 16 weeks maternity leave in a single stretch, she suggested an employer can negotiate an initial 12 weeks off, after which the employee could either spread the remainder of the maternity leave throughout the year, or be given early release from work.

Another interesting suggestion that she made relates to paternity leave. Instead of adding more leave entitlement for working fathers, which only adds to the burden of individual employers, the government can instead introduce legislation which allows organisations to implement a co-sharing of maternity leave - half to be given to the mothers and the other half to be taken up by the fathers. She also suggested that the government allow employers to grant token leave to fathers, and that such time off be taken out of the duration allocated for their reservist training.

Ms Halijah also agreed with Mr Yeoh on the need to lessen the financial burden of parents placing their children in child care and infant care centres. By the same token, she proposed that more support and subsidy be given to childless couples looking for fertility treatment.

The third speaker of the day, Dr Faizal Yahya of the Institute of Policy Studies, noted that many Malays occupy the bottom rungs of the employment sectors, especially in manufacturing. Hence, as Singapore progresses on to a service and knowledge-based economy, there will inevitably be further negative implications for the community. He also took care to highlight the large youth base of the Malay community, and emphasised that the Government and the MMOs should do all they can to engage this group in order to maximise their full potential.

The final presenter, Mr Nizam Ismail, Chairman of RIMA, discussed the concept of meritocracy, the proposal to initiate the 'National Conversation' and the impact of current immigration policies. Highlighting the 'myth of meritocracy' as a cornerstone of the Singapore governmental system, he opined that meritocracy is by application 'heartless' in its unwavering focus on abilities. It ignores differences in abilities among individuals resulting from an inherently unequal society. Such inequalities in turn place these individuals in either advantageous or disadvantageous positions at the 'start line' of the 'race' in life. Given the highly stratified nature of Singapore society, as evidenced by the nation attaining the 2nd highest Gini coefficient in the world, Mr Nizam suggested that it is now time for the government to intervene and remedy the situation via affirmative action programmes. Mr Nizam also mentioned that he took issue with segments of Minister of State Halimah Yacob's National Day Rally speech, which he said implied that the Malays are not working hard enough to succeed. He said that her statement ignored 'real' problems, as the meritocratic system she emphasised actually 'masked over social inequality'. In his view, meritocracy will inevitably breed elitism. Research in the US has shown that meritocracy not only leads those who have succeeded in life to believe they deserve accolades for their achievements; it also leads them to look down on those who have failed.

Agreeing with the issues Ms Halijah touched upon earlier; Mr Nizam also expressed his hope that the newly established independent committee overseeing the National Conversation would be transparent and include alternative views and voices of civil society. In fact, he mentioned that there is already a diversity of platforms and views in Singapore that the government can already engage with. Hence, there was no need to set up this additional initiative. Mr Nizam made reference to Mr George Yeo's earlier call for civil society to flourish in Singapore, which he said appears to have been forgotten. According to Mr Nizam, there had been many similar attempts at engaging Singaporeans, but the results have all been rather 'patchy'. He argued that the managed process should be a bottom-up approach, rather than the previous top-down approach used during similar past initiatives.

Reinforcing the perspective presented by Dr Faizal, Mr Nizam also touched on immigration issues where the latter questioned whether the current policy is actually meant to address the problem of falling Total Fertility Rate (TFR) of Singapore as a nation or merely that of the Chinese community. He said there seems to be opacity to the current immigration policy and related several anecdotes that reflected such incoherence and lack of transparency.

The presentations by the 4 panelists were then followed by a Question-and-Answer session.

A participant, Mr Fadli, initiated the session by commenting that issues calling for greater government transparency raised by the panelists had been discussed on many previous occasions. However, in the absence of civil liberties – freedom of information, freedom of the press, freedom of speech, freedom of assembly and freedom of information – there had been limited means to check on the government. The panelists were then asked for their views on his comments.

Ms Halijah was of the viewpoint that the government should establish a more level playing field by allowing for a more equitable sharing of viewpoints. In her words, once issues concerning human rights are respected by the authorities, “all will fall into place”.

Mr Hossein Bahari shared his doubts on positive outcomes stemming from the event, especially since no representative from the government was available to participate in the session. He also sought clarification on statistics reflecting the 2:1 ratio depicting locals vis-à-vis foreigners in the country. He is of the notion that since the category comprising locals is actually made up of a combination of citizens and PRs, a more accurate representation should be more of 1 local to 1 foreigner. The implication thus is that the situation bodes more negatively on citizens of the country.

Having noted his clarification on the ratio between locals and foreigners, Mr Nizam went on to answer Mr Hossein’s doubts on the effectiveness of the session. The Chairman of the RIMA Board of Directors made clear that the event is itself a post-convention activity and not merely a ‘talk shop’. It is part of a series of events implemented as a process towards actualising the proposals agreed upon during the 3rd National Convention of Singapore Muslim Professionals. Dr. Shamsuri, the moderator and Centre Director of RIMA also reiterated the point when he mentioned that the report and opinion piece stemming from the event will be disseminated to all stakeholders via email, RIMA’s website and Facebook posts to create awareness of different perspectives and common viewpoints.

Mr Sadali suggested that AMP embark on a real ‘push’ on specific Malay/Muslim issues such as housing and education. He recommended the formation of an independent body that manages zakat to ‘pull in’ all available resources so as to pursue initiatives to better the community.

Referring to the phenomenon of Malay families who suffer from being deprived of amenities such as water, electricity and even housing due to their failure to make payments, he voiced the opinion that every citizen deserves these basic rights regardless of whether they can afford it. It is thus the prerogative of the government to ensure the continuous supply of such necessities even if it is at the very basic level. He further suggested that the concept of polygamy be revisited and researched upon as a solution to the problem of Muslim women not marrying, which further contributes to the declining birth rate.

Ms Halijah replied that relying on polygamy as a solution to the issue of low TFR will create more problems than solutions. In her experience as a family lawyer, 50% of cases relating to failure to support and ensure maintenance of the family can be attributed to Malay men who are not able to manage their finances. She even attached a religious context to her answer by mentioning Surah An-Nisa in the Qur'an which infers that polygamy was only accepted and legalised in the past due to its value as a social mechanism in avoiding situations of endangerment to women, such as the plight of females during circumstances which can lead them to becoming destitute. She emphasised that such situations no longer exist today.

On Mr Sadali's suggestion that AMP take up the role of financial resource collection centre, Mr Nizam clarified that AMP tends not to duplicate the function of other official bodies such as MUIS which is already playing the role. On the issue of provision of public goods such as water, electricity and shelter for families in need, Mr Nizam is of the opinion that the problem lies with the fact that such utilities, which should be treated as public goods, are however supplied by private organisations which are driven by a clear profit orientation. It is disconnects such as these that has caused problems.

AMP Chairman Mr Azmoon Ahmad queried the need to embark on the National Conversation when there are already existing platforms to discuss issues of public concern and to obtain feedback.

Mr Nizam agreed and elaborated that the need is not so much for a new mechanism but for the existing processes to accommodate alternative viewpoints. The issue is thus about opening up and listening to public discussions so that there can be diversity, thus ensuring representation from every part of society.

The moderator facilitated closure of the event by requesting that the panelists each declare their wish list for next year's National Day Rally Speech.

Dr Faizal declared that for him, there were just too many things to wish for. It was thus difficult for him to choose a specific item.

Ms Halijah specifically wished for the authorities to respect all the dimensions of human rights. She reiterated her conviction that “all will fall into place” if this happens.

Mr Yeoh Lam Keong wished for the government to take back responsibility for areas of public policy which they had previously “let go”. Otherwise, he warned that the authorities will no longer have “substance” in the eyes of the public. The danger then is that they will lose the trust of people.

Mr Nizam capped the panel’s wish list with his insistence that the Government should allow for diverse and independent viewpoints. He highlighted AMP’s experience with the Comfor proposal as an example of such inflexibility. Civil Society must be permitted to flourish and represent their views. His hope is that the Government does not end up in a position at the next General Election where they would lament that “they should have listened”.

The moderator invited Mr Azmoon Ahmad to present tokens of appreciation to the panelists before announcing the conclusion of the event.