

**OPENING REMARKS BY
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AT THE REVIEW OF THE REPUBLIC OF SINGAPORE
AT THE 24TH SESSION OF THE UNIVERSAL PERIODIC REVIEW
WORKING GROUP MEETING,
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Mr President,
Honourable Council members,
Distinguished representatives of Observer States,
Members of civil society,

A very good afternoon to all of you.

My delegation and I are truly honoured to represent Singapore for our second UPR.

We are here today with pride and humility.

Last year Singapore celebrated the 50th anniversary of our independence - SG50 as we call it.

Few would have expected Singapore, a city state with no natural resources, not much larger than Lake Geneva, to survive.

The heart of the Singapore story is that of finding the right political, economic and social strategies for the broad uplift of all communities, all groups and forging a nation out of this heterogeneity.

Our population was and is a multiracial mix, a typical post-colonial plural society of Chinese, Malays, Indians and other ethnic groups located in Southeast Asia.

Different languages, different religions and different cultures. A PEW study found Singapore to be the world's most religiously diverse nation.

Many new states have been pulled apart by deep primordial racial and religious differences.

No one would have bet we would become the successful economy and racially-integrated country we are today. We have a history of religious and racial riots in the 1950s and 1960s.

Our social harmony did not happen by chance, but by the deliberate choices and policies. Each community did not insist on the primacy of its race, religion, language or culture, but was prepared to live together and accommodate others in the context of a multi-racial and multi-religious society. Crucially, the majority community, the 75% Chinese, agreed not to assert their majoritarian status, a very exceptional outcome.

This helped preserve the common space for all Singaporeans.

But there were and are times when the Government has to intervene for the common good and take steps that are unpopular with a section of the community.

Because we lacked resources and space, we became pragmatic and innovative in order to survive.

In the first three decades of our nationhood, we focused on the basics: security, providing everyone with fair opportunities for a good education, a stable job and to own a home.

The Singapore story is not just about our rapid economic rise. It is also about the broad-based social uplift of our people in one generation.

We treasure every Singaporean.

In the last ten years, we made a more decisive and deliberate rebalancing to ensure that we remain an inclusive society, because we saw a widening income gap due to globalisation and the technological revolution. This followed a similar trend in advanced economies.

We wanted to do more to ensure social mobility and provide more assurance for older Singaporeans.

To continue to create a competitive economy so that incomes could rise, we paid special attention to ensuring that the low-income and middle-income groups could keep up as our economy progressed.

We have done well so far.

We are 11th on the 2015 Human Development Index

13th on the 2014 Gender Inequality index;

9th on the 2015 Rule of Law index

Singapore has one of the lowest crime rates in the world and one of the lowest recorded rates of drug abuse.

More than 80% of Singaporeans live in good quality public housing they own.

Our development and human rights philosophy

Mr President,

I have spent some time talking a bit about SG50, because it helps explain our outlook, and why we deal with development and realise human rights the way we do.

It also shows our Government has remained committed to, and invested in, the relentless task of caring for our citizens and protecting their fundamental rights, independent of any UN human rights review process.

SG50 – and the passing of our founding Prime Minister Mr Lee Kuan Yew – last year, also gave our people an opportunity to reflect on where we came from, where we are today, and chart where we want to go from here.

My Prime Minister Mr Lee Hsien Loong in his 2015 state of union address, which we call the National Day Rally speech, attributed Singapore's success to three factors.

Firstly, we are determined to remain a multi-racial, fair and just society. That was the fundamental reason for our foundation as a country.

We are tough on racial and religious chauvinists and extremists. We do not allow anyone to exploit freedom of expression to denigrate other religions or ethnic groups.

We are proud that we have made significant progress on this front. One of our think tanks – the Institute of Policy Studies in 2013 found in their survey that Singaporeans overwhelmingly believe they will receive fair treatment from the Police, regardless of race or religion. I think many of our friends around the world would find this very remarkable.

Secondly, we created a culture of self-reliance, and also mutual support.

We provide equal opportunities for all Singaporeans to succeed regardless of their starting point in life.

But we also encourage those who have succeeded to give back to society.

Thirdly, the Government has developed a bond of trust with the people over the past 50 years. It has kept its politics honest; delivered on promises to build a fair and inclusive society; and taken care of the most vulnerable groups in society.

In return, the people trust the Government to have their interests at heart and support the Government and its decisions for the common good.

The 2015 Edelman Trust Barometer global survey found that 70% of Singaporeans trust their government.

The Government's policy direction is validated through regular elections with universal franchise. The latest General Election in September 2015 saw a resounding 69.9% win for the incumbent People's Action Party, signalling a strong endorsement for the Government and its policies and its future direction.

Undoubtedly, good governance, being responsive to citizens and a forward-looking outlook are the other key ingredients for our success.

Forging our future together

So where do we go from here, and how do we get to where we want to go?

We recognise that Singapore society is changing.

There are more interest groups advocating issues ranging from environment, heritage, gender to animal rights.

Our citizens are among the most connected in the world. They have access to information globally via the internet and engage in robust debates about policies and politics.

Our population is rapidly ageing.

Technology is transforming society and bringing in new ideas, but also exposing us to divisive forces like religious extremism. Globalisation has not resulted in one single happy global village. On the contrary, atavistic tribalism has a global reach nowadays.

Race and religion remain very sensitive matters, and in some ways, more complex and difficult to handle today because of rising religiosity, greater exposure to extremist ideologies and social media.

More than ever, the Government needs to engage the different groups more deeply and their competing interests in a pragmatic way.

Our goal today remains the same as at the time of our independence – to build a nation where our citizens lead meaningful and fulfilling lives in a fair and inclusive society.

Since our last UPR, our Government has implemented several new policies to enhance social protection for our citizens – in particular the most vulnerable groups – and to strengthen social harmony.

These progressive social policies include Medishield Life, the Pioneer Generation Package, an Enabling Masterplan for Persons with Disabilities.

We also signed the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) and acceded to the UN TIP Protocol in 2015, and ratified the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in July 2013.

We have made substantial investments to improve the quality of education, healthcare and housing.

We are now implementing the SkillsFuture initiative to support and promote lifelong learning of our citizens to meet the challenges of globalisation.

We will be starting a new initiative, the *SGFuture Conversations* this year to have a national level dialogue with all segments of society to talk about “*The Future of Us*”.

We have also formed a high-level committee to consider the future of Singapore’s economy, for without growth, we will not have the resources to overcome our burgeoning social and demographic challenges.

Mr President,

Before I conclude my opening remarks, I would like to acknowledge that our principles of governance, the way we care for citizens, protect human rights and preserve our social harmony, may not fully conform to how other societies have organised themselves.

We respect their point of view, given each society's unique circumstances.

However, our view is that we have to take a practical and not an ideological approach to the realisation of human rights.

We believe that rights, and people's approach to and understanding thereof, evolve over time as their societies change.

We have seen in recent times countries in the West have had to review some of their more liberal policies because they proved inadequate in dealing with contemporary manifestations of terrorism, extremism and immigration.

We therefore believe every country should be given the time and space to deal with its own development and advance human rights in its own way, taking into account its unique social and cultural context.

We look forward to hearing the presentations and recommendations of the delegates, and we will attempt to respond to the issues raised to the full extent possible in the time given to us.

I thank you, Mr President.