**STATEMENT BY FARAH ALJUNIED**

**AT SINGAPORE’S THIRD UNIVERSAL PERIODIC REVIEW**

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Madam President

My name is Farah Aljunied, and I am the Director of Education and Student Development from the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth. I will speak about Singapore’s approach to race and religion.

**Strengthening Racial and Religious Harmony**

2 As a city state with one of the most religiously diverse populations in the world, racial and religious harmony is the cornerstone of our nation. The Government works closely with the community to safeguard and promote racial and religious harmony. Our efforts have borne fruit – in a recent survey, more than 9 in 10 respondents felt that there was “moderate” to “very high” levels of racial and religious harmony in Singapore.[[1]](#footnote-1) We view our diversity as a strength.

3 Our Constitution affirms that **all are equal before the law, regardless of race, language or religion**. It also established the Presidential Council for Minority Rights, which ensures that bills before Parliament **do not discriminate against any race or religion**.

4 **To ensure equitable racial representation in our highest political office,** we amended our Constitution in 2016 to allow for Reserved Presidential Elections. In 2017, Madam Halimah Yacob was elected as our second Malay, and first female President. We also updated the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act in 2019, **to respond more effectively to incidents of religious disharmony and strengthen our safeguards against foreign influences that may threaten our religious harmony**.

5 Beyond legislation, we have also **proactively implemented measures to build trust and understanding between different communities at the national and local levels**.

1. **To build trust and familiarity among the leaders of different races and faiths, and the Government, we established the National Steering Committee on Racial and Religious Harmony,** comprising apex leaders from major faith and ethnic groups.Chaired by the Minister for Culture, Community and Youth, the Committee meets regularly to provide high-level guidance on efforts to promote racial and religious harmony.
2. OnePeople.SG, a civil society organization that promotes racial harmony, has also held six Regardless of Race dialogues, where our national leaders engaged participants from different backgrounds in **frank discussions on race relations** in Singapore.
3. In 2019, our religious leaders, with support from the Government, drafted the Commitment to Safeguard Religious Harmony**,** which **spells out our shared values and the norms of social interaction among Singaporeans of different religions**. More than 750 religious and community organisations have affirmed this Commitment.
4. At the community level, we have established inter-faith platforms known as Inter-Racial and Religious Confidence Circles **in every constituency**. These Circles serve to deepen understanding between religious, ethnic and community groups through activities such as heritage trails, dialogues and various ethnic and religious celebrations.
5. We have also provided support to community-led initiatives, including more than US$5 million in grants to almost 200 community projects since 2013 through the Government’s Harmony Fund. In addition, **in 2017,** we launched **BRIDGE,** which stands for Broadening Racial & Religious Interaction through Dialogue & General Education. This framework encourages more ground-up community programmes **that provide safe spaces and opportunities to foster greater understanding and appreciation of our diversity**.

**Commitment to Social Cohesion**

6 On the international stage, we have **underscored Singapore’s commitment to social cohesion** through our ratification of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination in 2017.

7 **To foster international dialogue and collaboration**, Singapore also hosted the first International Conference on Cohesive Societies in 2019, bringing together over 1,000 thought leaders from 40 countries to discuss shared challenges to social cohesion and inter-faith harmony. Singapore will hold the second edition of this Conference in 2022.

**Conclusion**

Madam President,

8 **Singapore does not take the social harmony we enjoy today for granted**. We will continue to strive towards this fundamental national ideal while adapting to evolving challenges, so that we **remain a cohesive society, regardless of race, language or religion**. Thank you.

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1. This survey was conducted in 2018, by the Institute of Policy Studies, an independent think tank to study and generate public policy ideas in Singapore, and OnePeople.SG, an organisation that promotes racial harmony. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)