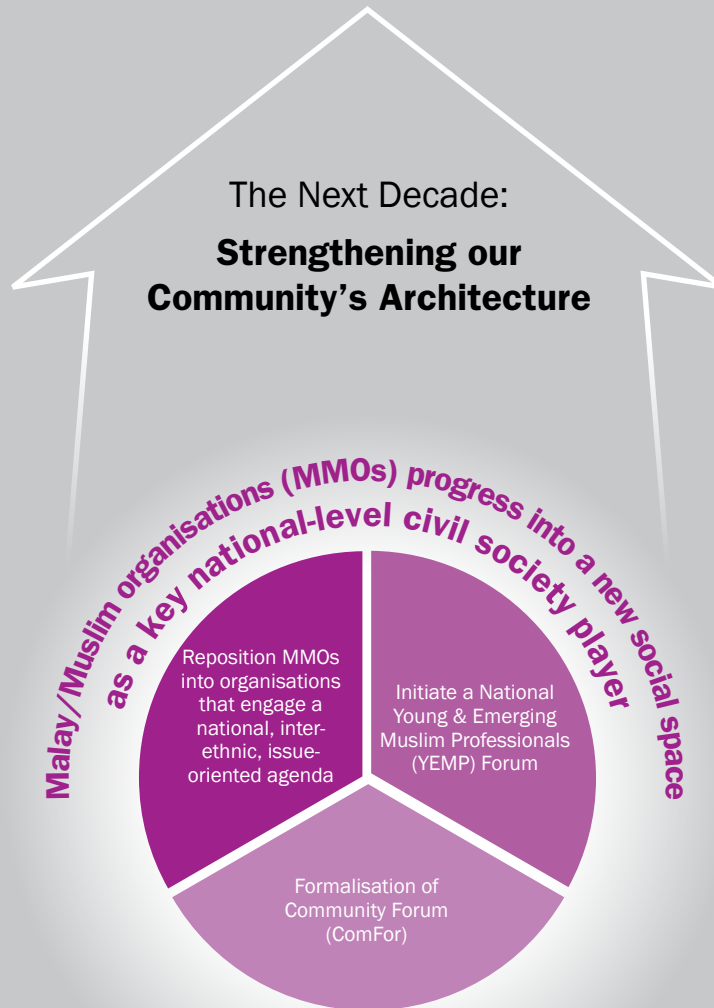




**LEADERSHIP,
CIVIL SOCIETY
AND YOUNG
PROFESSIONALS**

LEADERSHIP, CIVIL SOCIETY AND YOUNG PROFESSIONALS PANEL

STRATEGY AND RECOMMENDATIONS AT A GLANCE



BACKGROUND

A review of the Malay/Muslim community over the years would demonstrate that the community has indeed made much progress in several areas. Notwithstanding this, a closer examination of the key statistics (such as academic performance of Malay students) will show that progress was made in absolute terms (i.e. how the Malay/Muslim community fares now compared to some time ago) but not in relative terms (i.e. how the Malay/Muslim community fares compared with other communities). In fact, certain metrics such as socio-economic gaps between the Malay/Muslim community and other communities have persisted and have, in fact, worsened over the years.

An assessment of the issues confronted by the Malay/Muslim community shows that while there are several problems which are distinctive to the community, such as minor marriages, there are also many which cut across all communities, such as dysfunctional families and academic underperformance. There is a need to rethink whether these should be addressed as national, rather than community issues.

The current strategy of a community-centric approach presents a challenge in terms of the management of these issues. Most of these issues are complex and long-standing, thus requiring resources beyond the capacity of the Malay/Muslim organisations (MMOs) or any other community organisations that are tasked with tackling them. These problems must be addressed through a national approach where MMOs and other community organisations can band together with national organisations and agencies. This approach would allow MMOs to tap on national resources and tackle the issues holistically. In line with this aim, MMOs could venture into the national civil society space and play a bigger role in tackling such issues. MMOs can also partake in civil society

endeavours following the opening up of the national civil society space, especially after the last General Election.

Civil society activities and institutions are growing in Singapore and this is creating an awareness of commonality amongst Singaporeans. The Malay/Muslim community lives, studies, works and plays with other communities. The progress of each community depends not only on its own efforts, but also on national efforts to build a better home for all residents in Singapore. Thus, it is imperative for MMOs to consider moving into the shared national civil society space.

A central dilemma of such a strategy is the perceived contradiction between focusing on the need for the MMOs to address Malay/Muslim problems, and a new objective of becoming engaged directly in national issues and concerns. Achieving a balance between the two may pose a challenge. In fact, it is still perceived by some as being a zero sum game. However, this is not necessarily so. As highlighted earlier, many of the current problems faced by the Malay/Muslim community are encountered by other communities too.

In this context, the MMOs must be cognizant of the distinction between making critical comments or disagreeing with the government and actual advocacy. Here it must be noted that advocacy work requires serious research and engagement with the government on issues that are of prime importance. To address this issue effectively, research must be undertaken to collate data, solutions must be proposed and the issue must be publicly discussed for views and feedback before it is forwarded to the government. Advocacy must go beyond making critical comments in reaction to the government's policy or position. Advocacy will require greater connectivity to civil society and a consistent focus on several national issues.

LOOKING FORWARD

After the 2011 General Elections, the role of leaders has been an open discussion topic. Closer collaboration between advocacy groups and the government will put the principle of inclusive governance to the test. Civil society groups feel that they have the greater good of Singapore society at heart, and that the best approach will be for the government to engage, have more discussions, and develop an inclusive policy making process. The step from advocacy for the Malay/Muslim community to national level engagement is not so much a fundamental transformation as building on a solid foundation for the future. What needs to be promoted is an inclusive marketplace of ideas led by those with the best, persuasive and most workable ideas and plans. This requires the community to persuade the best and brightest to participate.

STRATEGY

Malay/Muslim organisations (MMOs) progress into a new social space as a key national-level civil society player

There is a need for a new strategy with regard to the MMOs' role within the context of civil society in Singapore. Changes in the socio-political landscape in Singapore have given rise to a growing civil society that is increasingly issue-oriented rather than ethnic-based. As such, this presents opportunities for MMOs to play a larger role on a national platform.

The following are recommendations for MMOs entering civil society. MMOs can play a role in sensitising the community to the fact that many “Malay” problems are in fact social issues that must be tackled at a national level. The message is that the community’s concerns are aligned with the concerns of Singaporean non-Malay/Muslims and non-Malay/Muslim civil society players. MMOs can explore and develop synergies with other Singaporean players along issue-oriented lines and create an awareness of the issue-oriented communalities amongst other MMOs.

This process can be facilitated by the formation of ComFor (Community Forum). This can first be conceived as a loose structure and later, institutionalised. The focus remains within the Malay/Muslim community and amongst the MMOs. Through ComFor, a more issue-oriented cooperative framework within the community can be achieved.

The energies and creativity of Malay/Muslim young professionals should also be tapped to strengthen the community’s role in civil society. The community has the largest youth base, making it even more critical for the MMOs to engage them and harness their creativity and potential. Young and emerging Muslim professionals are the future of the community and the nation, and their abilities and skills should be employed and developed to be future community leaders and policy makers. Over time, their participation will strengthen the community’s role in the civil society space and in advocating for policy changes that will benefit the community and larger Singaporean society.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Three key recommendations are proposed to achieve this strategy.

Research on civil society players, both within the community and others, is required. The goal will be to assist in harnessing issue-specific civil society groups across cultures within Singapore society.

The process can be monitored through the gradual institutionalisation of the process within ComFor. Monitoring the efficacy of the strategy can be achieved by periodic assessments of the participation in this forum, as well as the impact of common contributions to various policy reviews and initiatives.

Although there is space in the national civil society for MMOs, it is expected that not all MMOs would want to do so. As such, the following recommendations are made for MMOs who wish to enter the national arena and advocate for issues that are of interest to the community and beyond.

Recommendation 1: Reposition MMOs into organisations that engage a national, inter-ethnic, issue-oriented agenda

The goal is to reposition MMOs as engaging in a national, issue-oriented agenda for the community. The MMO's community-centric posture remains but it gradually engages in national issues at all levels. This means that the MMO will have to widen its scope to undertake research into the types of issue-oriented initiatives. This repositioning will create the MMO's presence on the national stage.

Over time, MMOs will be seen as organisations with a view on issues of relevance beyond the community.

Recommendation 2: Formalisation of Community Forum (ComFor)

Once a more collective, issued-oriented approach to problem-solving in the community is established, the MMO can move on to facilitate the development of a Community Forum (ComFor), which is envisioned as a platform to discuss issues affecting the community. ComFor are annual sessions with the community to address selected issues. There will be an open invitation to the public to join ComFor sessions to air views on issues identified. ComFor can be seen as an extension of the annual Community in Review event organised by AMP's research arm, the Centre for Research on Islamic and Malay Affairs (RIMA). Unlike the Community in Review, ComFor will address a broader set of issues including national issues. ComFor will also leverage on community perception surveys on specific topics to understand the pulse of the community on these issues. ComFor can also be a mechanism to track the developments and implementation of strategies proposed at this 3rd Convention.

Recommendation 3: Initiate a National Young & Emerging Muslim Professionals (YEMP) Forum

Looking ahead, there is a need for the MMOs to simultaneously engage the young and emerging Malay/Muslim professionals (YEMP) with the intent to mobilise this group to address current and emerging

issues, and challenges facing the community. The YEMP group should be developed as the future expert cadres of policy-makers, community and political leaders in the community and the broader Singapore community. In due time, this will strengthen the community's ability to act as a policy-actor in the future, and has sufficient ability to influence policies and advocate for policy changes and reviews on a broad range of issues at the community and national levels. Perhaps more importantly, it will instill confidence among the YEMP group to engage the community and national leaders on policy issues.

One plausible approach is by institutionalising a National Young & Emerging Professionals (YEMP) Forum. This forum comprises three parts: Formation of Working/Study Groups, National YEMP Forum, and finally, a knowledge database.

First, MMOs could form several working groups and/or study groups among the young and emerging professionals and these groups comprise members from diverse religious and ethnic backgrounds. The benefit of multicultural working/study groups is such that the members may derive new insights from the fertilisation of cross-cultural perspectives. These working groups/study groups would be tasked with the challenge of identifying emerging issues and risks at the community and national level.

Second, the reports and findings from these working groups will be presented and deliberated at the community and national levels with the intent for the final product to be translated into policy reviews, recommendations and strategies.

Third, and finally, these papers will be archived into a community/national repository, which serves as a knowledge database on emerging issues and challenges to community and nation building. This database, which serves as one of the knowledge capital at the national level will be made publicly available.