

# THE KARYAWAN

PROFESSIONALS FOR THE COMMUNITY

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## Muslims' Role in Food Security



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# FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

Food security is paramount for the well-being and stability of individuals, communities, and nations alike. Beyond the basic need for sustenance, food security encompasses access to safe, nutritious, and culturally appropriate food sources that are available and affordable for all. Food security is also intricately linked to other critical issues such as poverty alleviation, environmental sustainability, and public health. By ensuring that everyone has reliable access to an adequate supply of food, we not only uphold fundamental human rights but also lay the foundation for a more equitable and prosperous society.

However, food security is not often viewed from a religious perspective. In his article on *Page 12*, Dr Muhammad Haniff Hassan, argues that food security is not just a contemporary concern but one with deep roots in Islam. He also calls upon Muslims to be active participants in ensuring food security, not only through individual actions like sustainable consumption but also by contributing to areas like urban farming and innovation in agriculture.

By embracing sustainable practices, supporting local initiatives, and actively engaging in discussions about food security, the Singaporean Muslim community can play a vital role in building a more resilient and secure future for all.

It is my hope that this issue encourages us to reflect on the role we can play in this critical endeavour.



A stylized, handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of several fluid, overlapping strokes.

**FATHURRAHMAN DAWOED**  
SUPERVISING EDITOR

SINGAPORE'S  
S\$10,869  
MEDIAN  
HOUSEHOLD  
INCOME:  
**HOW ARE WE  
ACTUALLY  
FARING AS  
A SOCIETY?**

BY NUR IZZATIE ADNAN



Many of us would have read the headlines in early February this year: *Median monthly household income in Singapore above \$10,000 in 2023 for second straight year*, The Straits Times reports. CNA gets even more specific in their headlines: *Median monthly household income rises to S\$10,869 in 2023, a real increase of 2.8%*. Its subheading states that “*the median monthly household income from work per household member rose to S\$3500 in 2023.*”

These headlines prompted the incredulity of many citizens, expressing their disbelief at these numbers, as they do not feel that these numbers reflect their own lived experiences. This article explores the concepts of median income – both individual and household – and what they mean, as well as how we can look at these statistics to determine where we may stand in comparison to the rest of the Singaporean population.

### HOW IS THE MEDIAN INCOME CALCULATED AND WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS?

The statistic for household median income is calculated by lining up all Singaporean households' incomes, in order of lowest to highest, and the median is obtained by looking at the income level that is exactly in the middle of this line-up. As compared to looking at the average household income, the median is said to be a better representation of the typical lived experience in Singapore as the data will not be skewed by outliers in the extremes.

What then are the implications of a high median household income? A household median income above \$10,000 for a second straight year suggests a relatively high standard of living or a significant level of disposable income for many households in Singapore. This also suggests potential economic growth and stability that implies a sustained trend, which could be a result of factors like rising wages or increasing employment opportunities. The metric of household median income can be useful in representing collective household finances, hence offering a better picture of the financial resources of households in Singapore<sup>1</sup>.

It is imperative to understand how the median monthly income from work (be it individual or household) is calculated. This statistic comprises three facets: (1) The basic income received from employment and business, which includes overtime pay and/or allowances (2) One-twelfth of annual bonuses (3) Employer CPF contributions<sup>2</sup>

Simply put, let's say a person earns **\$3,500** before deductions, and they earn an annual bonus of two months (\$7,000). This bonus is to be divided by 12, obtaining approximately **\$583.33**. The employer's monthly CPF contribution of 17% would bump this number to approximately **\$4,777.50**. With regard to the inclusion of employer's CPF contributions, Singstat has noted that the “gross monthly income is used to represent an individual's income as bonuses and employer CPF contributions form a part of compensation from work.” While it is true that bonuses and employer CPF contributions are indeed compensation from work, what many are not satisfied with regard to what comprises this calculation is how little in comparison one brings home as compared to this reported number. Barring deductions other than the 20% employee CPF deductions, this person would be bringing home a monthly disposable salary of \$2,800.

### WHAT THE MEDIAN INCOME MIGHT NOT ACCOUNT FOR

We might also note that a collective household median income does not account for household size. A high median income for a large household with multiple earners might not be reflective of the reality of a single-person household with the same income. Hence, finding the average size of a Singaporean household is useful in getting a sense of how much resources each member of the household is allocated. Thus, in 2023, we observe that the median monthly household income from work per household member seems to have increased as well, from S\$3,287 in 2022 to S\$3,500 in 2023. This is with reference to the average size of the resident household of 3.11 persons in 2023<sup>3</sup>.

Furthermore, the median monthly household income and income per household member show data in nominal terms, which means that they are not adjusted for inflation. This explains how this household income seems to grow 7.6% in nominal terms from the previous year, but only 2.8% in real terms, after adjusting for inflation<sup>4</sup>.

Available data from the 2020 census also showed that from the 1,372,559 households whose data were collected, approximately 70% of the households had either only 1 or 2 employed persons. It is not a stretch to imply that an employed household member who is part of that 70% can be said to be earning \$5,434.50 and above on average – half of the median monthly household income. This statistic raises the question: why then might so many Singaporeans feel a disconnect between their lived realities and the fact that a significant percentage earn \$5,000 and above?

A quick look at the headlines on Singapore's inflation rate in 2023 would suggest that inflation remains stable but high. In 2023, it was reported that the headline inflation averaged 4.8% in 2023. In comparison, a steady level of 2% usually signals a healthy economy – but the rise in prices due to inflation can ultimately impact households negatively, especially if the rise in prices is not on par with the increase in wages. Earlier, it was mentioned that the real increase in household median income per household member was 2.8% from the previous year – compared to an increase in inflation rates by 4.7% from 2022. What is even more surprising is that despite the rise in median monthly household income, as mentioned previously in both real and nominal terms, the Ministry's Labour Force in Singapore Advance Release 2023 reports that real median income of an employed person actually fell by 2.3% – despite nominal income growing by 2.5%<sup>6</sup>. All these suggest that inflation is increasing at a rate that is faster than the increase in wages of our citizens. This raises concern in Singaporeans with regard to their ability to sustain in an economy where the cost of living is steadily rising.

<sup>1</sup> Singapore Department of Statistics. (2024). *Resident Households By Age Group Of Household Reference Person And Household Living Arrangement*. Tablebuilder.singstat.gov.sg. <https://tablebuilder.singstat.gov.sg/table/TS/M810651>

<sup>2</sup> Singapore Department of Statistics. (2024). *Why Does The Reported Median Household Income Differ From My Personal Experience?*

<sup>3</sup> *Average Household Size of Resident Households*. Department of Statistics Singapore. (2023). <https://www.singstat.gov.sg/find-data/search-by-theme/households/households/latest-data>

<sup>4</sup> *Key Household Income Trends, 2023*. (n.d.). Singapore Department of Statistics. Retrieved from <https://www.singstat.gov.sg/-/media/files/news/press/07022024.ashx>

<sup>5</sup> Rodrigues, E. (2023). [Updated] inflation rate in singapore and how to protect yourself against rising inflation. *Yahoo/Finance*. Retrieved from <https://sg.finance.yahoo.com/news/updated-inflation-rate-singapore-protect-051807145.html>

<sup>6</sup> Labour Force in Singapore Advance Release 2023. (2023). Singapore Department of Statistics. Retrieved from [https://stats.mom.gov.sg/IMAS\\_PdfLibrary/mrsd-labour-force-in-singapore-advance-release-2023.pdf](https://stats.mom.gov.sg/IMAS_PdfLibrary/mrsd-labour-force-in-singapore-advance-release-2023.pdf)

The cracks may already be showing. In March 2023, it was reported in a survey by Rakuten Insight that rising inflation affected the ability of 73% of Singaporean respondents to pay for basic necessities including food, clothing and healthcare<sup>7</sup>; while 50% of respondents reported that they had difficulty paying their utility bills. If a society is only as successful as its weakest member, a high household median income is not necessarily a cause for celebration yet.

It is then important to look at other measures to determine how we are faring as a society. While frameworks to accurately capture how to determine poverty, income inequality or minimum standards of living are constantly being improved on, we can still use them to roughly gauge how we are faring as a society.

There are indefinite measures and statistics to compare against when exploring the disparity between the reported high median income with lived realities. One useful tool to look at would be the Minimum Income Standard (MIS), which is an estimate of the minimum amount of income needed to meet basic needs in Singapore. This measure is rather comprehensive as it compares not only the cost of a particular basket of goods (as per the Consumer Price Index that is used to measure inflation), but it also takes into account other things that make up what a typical Singaporean deem as a basic need. The MIS takes into account other intangibles like opportunities for education, employment, work-life balance, and access to healthcare, on top of just housing, food, and clothing. Based on MIS calculations, S\$2,556 would be the gross wage earned by an individual in a dual-income household which would be a reasonable target for a living wage in Singapore (that's S\$2,990 inclusive of employer CPF contributions). Looking at the statistics on Singstat on the average monthly household income from work per household member, we see that a significant approximate of 40% of the population do not meet this minimum of \$2,990. While a downfall of this measure would be that its calculations only cover specific household configurations that

**A 2021 study by AMP Singapore has noted that the number of families needing assistance has increased over the years, with many deriving from the middle-income group. The issues that they face are multifaceted – facing a combination of financial difficulties, underperformance of their children in school, juvenile delinquency, and substance abuse, among a few. However, a possible danger of continuing this “self-help” solution or looking at these problems inwardly based on racial lines is that we might run the risk of “individualising” the issue – implying that social mobility is one that can and should only be solved by the Malay community.**

include any configuration of single or partnered parents with one to three children up to 25 years old, the combination of any of these permutations still makes up a huge percentage in the demographic of Singapore's households.

**MALAY ETHNIC POPULATION:  
WHERE DO WE STAND? HOW  
IMPORTANT IS IT TO KNOW WHERE  
WE STAND?**

The burning question still stands: where does the Malay community fit in this data? According to the 2020 census of population that surveyed a total of 151,741 Malay households, about 76% of Malay households are earning less than the \$10,000 median monthly household income from work. This is in comparison to the 57% of Indian households, and 59% of Chinese households that are earning less than \$10,000 median monthly household income from work. Looking at this data, it seems like just another

number that proves how the Malay community is lagging in comparison to the rest of the nation.

One can't help but observe that there is an inevitable and unnecessary racialisation of data in a multiracial country like Singapore, which uses the CMIO model as a seemingly unproblematic categorisation to govern the population. Especially in an increasingly diverse society made up of more than just the three “main” races and a generalised “Others”, there is a need to rethink the way we look at everyday givens – such as statistics – in order to not further perpetuate and entrench stereotypes.

While statistics and data may be hard facts, a constant implicit iteration of how the Malay community may be ‘lagging’ may do more harm than good. In fact, according to findings by CNA and OnePeople.sg, almost half of respondents felt like it was

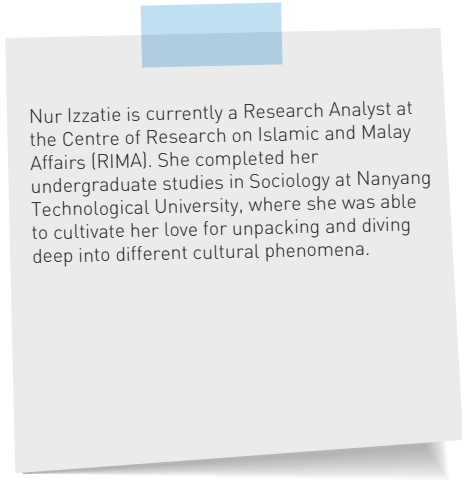
<sup>7</sup> Singapore: Inflation Effect on Household Expenditure 2023. Statista. [2023]. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1380285/singapore-inflation-effect-on-household-expenditure/>

class and income inequality that would be the cause of social divide in Singapore<sup>8</sup>. Of course, we should not discount the intersection of class and race, but when we've spent close to 65 years looking at things through a racialised lens, it may be the only lens we can see through.

Ethnic-based self-help groups are a result of this categorisation of the Singaporean society. These groups that are funded by the Singapore government are regarded as still relevant to Singapore's increasingly diverse multiracial society because they are able to "provide additional support and address issues without raising racial or religious sensitivities". These are said to act as supplements to the government's assistance to low-income families, regardless of race. A 2021 study by AMP Singapore has noted that the number of families needing assistance has increased over the years, with many deriving from the middle-income group<sup>9</sup>. The issues that they face are multifaceted – facing a combination of financial difficulties, underperformance of their children in school, juvenile delinquency, and substance abuse, among a few. However, a possible danger of continuing this "self-help" solution or looking at these problems inwardly based on racial lines is that we might run the risk of "individualising" the issue – implying that social mobility is one that can and should only be solved by the Malay community.

Here are some takeaways with regard to the median income data in relation to the Malay community. Firstly, we should be critical in understanding what the data accounts for – what is included, and more importantly what it does not consider. As expounded above, these may include high inflation rates, as well as the persistence of high income inequality between segments of the population. Additionally, while the positive data reflected in the median household income in Singapore may be a number that reflects a typical Singaporean household, we must also not disregard those that are at the bottom rungs of society. Thirdly, we should question the necessity to view certain statistics via a racialised lens. While it may be natural for us to know where we stand, the question

remains on how we can do so in a way that is constructive and does not perpetuate racial differences. ■



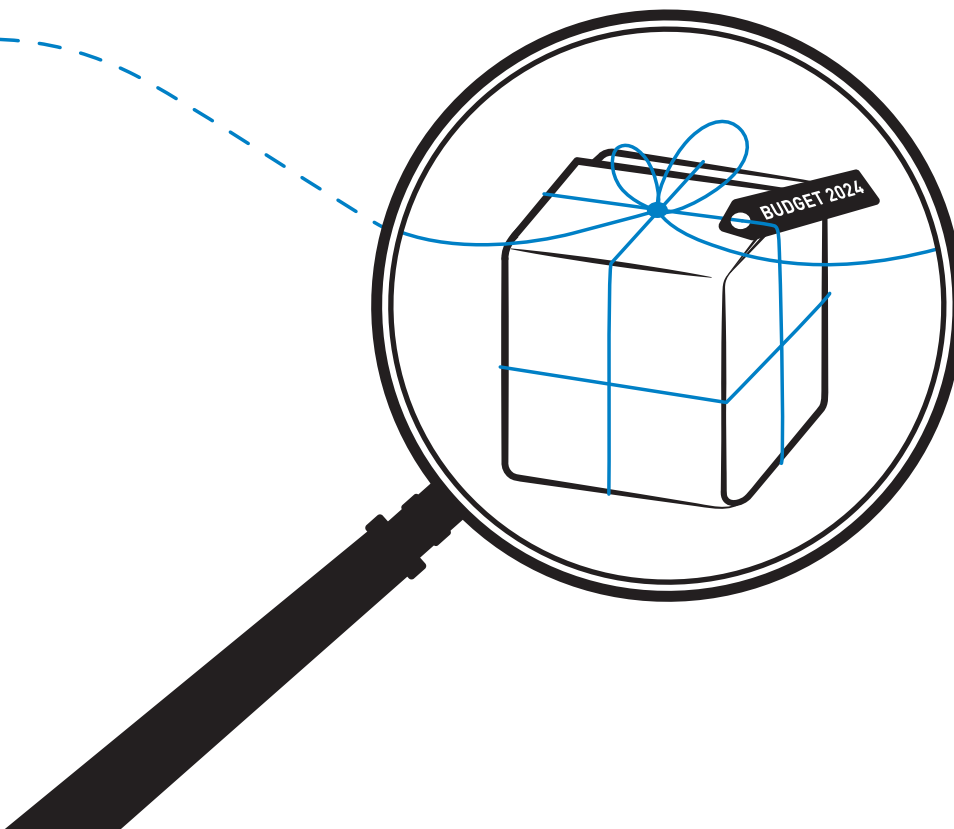
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<sup>8</sup> Low, M., & Paulo, D. (2018, October 1). Class – not race nor religion – is potentially Singapore's most divisive fault line. *Channel News Asia*. Retrieved from <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/cnainsider/regardless-class-race-religion-survey-singapore-income-divide-760506>.

<sup>9</sup> Social Panel: Strategy and Recommendations at a Glance. Association of Muslim Professionals. (2010). [http://amp.org.sg/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/7-Section-4\\_Social.pdf](http://amp.org.sg/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/7-Section-4_Social.pdf)

# Singapore's Budget 2024: An Evaluation

BY CENTRE FOR RESEARCH ON ISLAMIC AND MALAY AFFAIRS



## INTRODUCTION

Singapore's Budget 2024 was introduced at a time of significant global economic turbulence, aiming to provide a blueprint for the city-state's prosperity. The budget aims to navigate the balance between fostering economic growth and

addressing immediate societal needs amid global uncertainties. This article takes a closer look at the budget's implications, especially for the Malay Muslim community, and evaluates its potential to address both current and future challenges.

## A CLOSER LOOK AT EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES

The Malay community in Singapore has seen a 70% rise in professional, managerial, executive, and technical (PMET) roles from 2010<sup>1</sup> to 2020<sup>2</sup>, signalling a stride towards job equity. Yet, the community

<sup>1</sup> Singapore Department of Statistics. (2010). \_Census of Population 2010 Statistical Release 1: Demographic Characteristics, Education, Language and Religion. Retrieved from <https://www.singstat.gov.sg/publications/cop2010/cop2010-sr1>

<sup>2</sup> Singapore Department of Statistics. (2020). \_Census of Population 2020 Statistical Release 1: Demographic Characteristics, Education, Language and Religion. Retrieved from <https://www.singstat.gov.sg/publications/reference/cop2020/cop2020-sr1>



finds less representation in finance and high-tier professional jobs<sup>3</sup>, signalling entrenched hurdles that demand attention. Direct initiatives are vital to pry open these profitable sectors and allow Malays to have fair chances to advance in their careers.

### **In-Depth Analysis of Employment Measures and Their Implications**

#### **1. Temporary Support Scheme for the Involuntarily Unemployed**

This programme is a key support for people who are temporarily out of work, giving them the financial help they need while they find a new job or get more training. The government has yet to release full details of this plan. We remain optimistic that it could significantly aid the Malay community, offering a safety net in challenging periods and ensuring that short-term hurdles don't hinder their long-term economic progress.

#### **2. Increase in the Local Qualifying Salary (LQS)**

The increase in the LQS from \$1,400 to \$1,600, accompanied by the introduction of a new minimum hourly rate of \$10.50, directly impacts the earning potential of lower-wage workers. The Progressive Wage Credit Scheme's augmented co-funding levels and raised wage ceiling to \$3,000 by 2025 serve to incentivise employers to pay higher wages. For the Malay community, this measure could narrow the income disparity gap, particularly for those employed in sectors with lower wages.

#### **3. Expansion of the Workfare Income Supplement Scheme (WIS)**

Raising the income ceiling for the Workfare Income Supplement (WIS) to \$3,000 and the maximum Workfare payouts to \$4,900 a year is a substantial move to improve the financial stability of those earning lower wages. For the Malay community, this increase means

more support on top of their regular earnings, helping to close the gap in economic disparity. This boost in take-home pay is key to improving living standards for those in the community who need it most.

### **Implications for the Malay Community**

The collective impact of these measures on the Malay community is multifaceted. Firstly, they represent a targeted approach to mitigating the risks associated with economic transitions and the vulnerabilities of low-wage employment. By ensuring that the community's workers are supported through periods of unemployment, receive fair wages, and benefit from enhanced income supplements, these measures collectively contribute to a more stable and secure economic foundation for the community.

These initiatives align with the broader objectives of empowering Malay families by strengthening their financial stability. This empowerment is not just about providing immediate relief but about fostering a sustainable environment where the community can thrive economically. The focus on upskilling and fair wages addresses the root causes of economic disparity, laying the groundwork for long-term prosperity.

While these measures are commendable for their intent and potential impact, their success hinges on effective implementation and accessibility for those within the Malay community. Ensuring that these programmes are widely known, easily accessible, and tailored to meet the community's unique needs will be crucial in maximising their benefit and truly bridging the inequality divide in Singapore's evolving economic landscape.

### **SENIOR ASSISTANCE: BEYOND FINANCIAL AID**

Singapore's proportion of citizen population aged 65 and above is rising, and at a faster pace compared to the last decade, making senior assistance a key priority for the government.

**These initiatives align with the broader objectives of empowering Malay families by strengthening their financial stability. This empowerment is not just about providing immediate relief but about fostering a sustainable environment where the community can thrive economically. The focus on upskilling and fair wages addresses the root causes of economic disparity, laying the groundwork for long-term prosperity.**

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

The Singapore Budget 2024 has targeted programmes aimed at supporting the aging population, particularly addressing the needs of Malay Muslim seniors. These initiatives reflect a holistic approach to enhancing the well-being and financial stability of seniors, ensuring they can lead dignified and fulfilling lives in their golden years.

## Key Senior Assistance Programmes and Their Implications

### 1. Enhanced Retirement Scheme (ERS)

The Enhanced Retirement Scheme encourages seniors to make additional deposits into their CPF Retirement Accounts, aiming to secure higher payouts upon retirement. This initiative directly benefits Malay Muslim seniors by providing them with an avenue to bolster their financial security during retirement. However, for this scheme to be fully effective, there must be a concerted effort to raise awareness and understanding of its benefits within the community. Tailored financial literacy programmes could play a significant role in achieving this, ensuring that seniors are well-informed and able to make decisions that maximise their retirement savings.

### 2. Active Ageing Centres and Assisted Living Options

The budget also allocates resources towards expanding the network of Active Ageing Centres and developing more assisted living options. These resources are aimed at meeting the diverse needs of Singapore's ageing society, including the Malay Muslim seniors. Active Ageing Centres serve as community hubs where seniors can engage in social, recreational, and health-promoting activities, fostering a sense of community and well-being. Assisted living options offer an alternative living arrangement, providing seniors with care services while allowing them to maintain their independence. For the Malay Muslim community, these facilities must be culturally sensitive and cater

to their specific needs, ensuring inclusivity and accessibility.

### 3. Silver Support Scheme & Matched Retirement Savings Scheme

The Silver Support Scheme aims to supplement the incomes of lower-income seniors, enhancing their financial resilience. The Matched Retirement Savings Scheme, on the other hand, matches dollar-for-dollar cash top-ups to seniors' CPF accounts, encouraging personal savings and contributions from family members. These programmes collectively offer a safety net for Malay Muslim seniors, particularly those with limited financial resources. By easing the financial burdens associated with healthcare and daily living expenses, these schemes contribute to a more secure and comfortable retirement for the community's elders.

### Broader Implications for the Malay Muslim Community

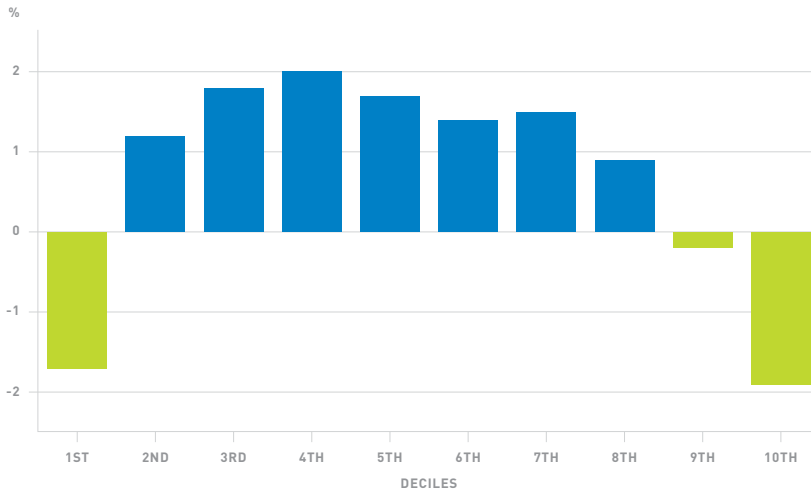
The integration of these senior assistance programmes within Singapore's Budget 2024 highlights a commitment to supporting the elderly, recognising the importance of a comprehensive support system that addresses financial, social, and health-related needs. For the Malay Muslim community, these programmes provide direct financial assistance and foster an environment where seniors can lead active, engaged, and independent lives.

Ensuring that these initiatives are effectively communicated and accessible to Malay Muslim seniors is paramount. Community outreach and engagement efforts, possibly through mosques and community centres, could significantly increase the uptake and impact of these programmes. Moreover, feedback mechanisms involving the community could inform ongoing improvements, making these initiatives more responsive to the seniors' evolving needs.

While the budget lays a strong foundation for senior assistance, its success for the Malay Muslim community will depend on tailored approaches that consider

Singapore's housing affordability issue, as indicated by the rising HDB resale price index and escalating costs of BTO properties presents a challenge, particularly for lower-income families, including those within the Malay Muslim community. While the budget's introduction of short-term reliefs, such as financial assistance and housing grants, provides immediate support, these measures serve as temporary fixes to a complex issue that requires a more holistic and sustainable approach.

CHANGE IN AVERAGE HOUSEHOLD INCOME FROM WORK PER HOUSEHOLD MEMBER IN 2023 BY DECILE



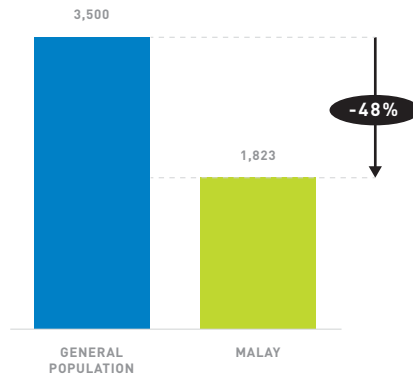
Source: CNA, Department of Statistics Singapore, 2024

cultural sensitivities, enhanced awareness campaigns, and easy access to these programmes. Through these concerted efforts, the budget can truly fulfil its promise of supporting all seniors in Singapore, ensuring they enjoy a secure, dignified, and fulfilling retirement.

### HOUSING AFFORDABILITY AND COST OF LIVING: ADDRESSING CORE ISSUES

Singapore's housing affordability issue, as indicated by the rising HDB resale price index and escalating costs of BTO properties presents a challenge, particularly for lower-income families, including those within the Malay Muslim community. While the budget's introduction of short-term reliefs, such as financial assistance and housing grants, provides immediate support, these measures serve as temporary fixes to a complex issue that requires a more holistic and sustainable approach. Amidst the rising costs, households in the first decile (or those earning the least) had their incomes drop by 1.7%. On the other end of the spectrum, in the ninth decile, the decline was 0.2% and for the 10<sup>th</sup> decile, it was 1.9%.

ESTIMATED MEDIAN INCOME PER HOUSEHOLD FOR 2023, BASED ON GROWTH RATES



Source: Department of Statistics, Census 2020<sup>4</sup>

This issue is compounded by the fact that the estimated median income per household member for Malays is less than half of that for the Chinese population.

## Key Interventions to Address the Cost of Living and Their Implications:

### Assurance Package

This package provides more support for lower-income families and larger households to deal with inflation through payouts, vouchers, and rebates.

The Assurance Package is particularly pertinent for the Malay Muslim community, which includes a proportion of larger households that might feel the brunt of inflation more acutely. The direct financial support through this package can alleviate some immediate pressures. However, to enhance social mobility, initiatives must be paired with long-term strategies such as educational improvements, access to better-paying jobs, and financial literacy programmes tailored for the community.

### PPHS (Open Market) Voucher

This offers one-year support for eligible families to rent an HDB flat in the open market.

The long waiting times for BTO flats disproportionately affect young families, who may struggle with housing costs in the interim. The Parenthood Provisional Housing Scheme (PPHS) voucher is a significant aid for these families, including those in the Malay Muslim community. The measure can provide breathing space, allowing families to maintain stable living conditions while waiting for their permanent homes. It also represents an acknowledgement of the diverse needs within the housing system, accommodating those who may not immediately fit into the standard BTO timeline.

### New Income Tax Policies

These policies involve raising the dependant's or caregiver's income threshold for dependant-related reliefs to \$8,000.

<sup>4</sup> The median income for Malay households in 2020 was \$5,704. The estimated current median income for Malay households, given a similar growth rate as the general population, is ~\$6,748. This is \$4,120 less than the general population income (which is at \$10,868). Given that the Malays have a household size of 3.7 individuals per household (based on the 2020 Census), the median income per household member is \$1,823. This is about half (~48%) of the median income per household for the general population, which is at \$3,500. A compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 5.76% was used for the calculation.

This policy adjustment can lead to tax savings for more families, thus increasing their disposable income. For the Malay Muslim community, which may have higher instances of multigenerational caregiving, this policy could be especially beneficial. It acknowledges the financial implications of caregiving and provides much-needed relief, which can have a knock-on effect on a family's ability to support educational and health-related expenses.

In addressing the rising cost of living, while the government's measures are a commendable attempt to provide short-term relief, the broader implications for the Malay Muslim community should encourage a focus on systemic changes that promote long-term economic stability and social mobility. This would involve educational programmes, job upskilling initiatives, and continued dialogue with community leaders to ensure these measures are effectively meeting the unique needs of the community.

### ENHANCING EDUCATION OPPORTUNITIES: BRIDGING GAPS

The budget's emphasis on education, with financial top-ups and SkillsFuture credits, shows a commitment to bridging educational disparities. However, the Malay community's lower progression rates in ITE and university education underline the necessity for targeted support. This situation calls for an integrated approach that addresses financial barriers and tackles systemic and social hurdles to educational achievement. Community support initiatives that build social capital are essential to ensure equitable educational opportunities and outcomes. For this reason, more efforts to develop the social capital of the Malay community to complement their education are needed.

### 1. Assisting ITE Graduates

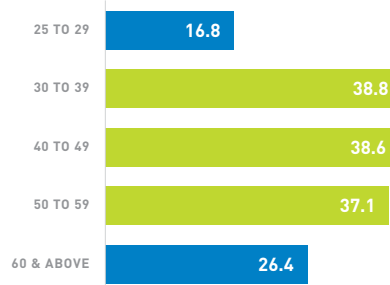
To assist ITE graduates, there will be a \$5,000 top-up in their Post-Secondary Education Account (PSEA) when they enrol, and then a \$10,000 top-up in their CPF Ordinary Account (OA) after completing their diploma. This measure will benefit the Malay community since if there is a higher proportion of Malays in the Normal (Technical) [NT] stream, it is likely that this overrepresentation extends to ITE. The government top-up will provide them with enhanced educational opportunities for skill development, which is crucial for long-term financial stability, including home ownership and retirement savings.

While this measure suggests concern over the low progression rates from ITE to Polytechnics, it may not be addressing the core reasons why students are not advancing their educational journey, as there are several factors that shape their decisions. A deeper investigation is needed to determine the barriers to further education for ITE graduates – whether they are financial, motivational, or due to systemic educational constraints.

### 2. Promoting Lifelong Learning

To promote lifelong learning, the government will be introducing new top-ups and subsidies. Singaporeans aged 40 and above will receive a \$4,000 SkillsFuture Credit top-up, with the existing \$500 credit being expanded for a broad range of courses to promote lifelong learning. From 2025, individuals over 40 will have more opportunities to reskill by pursuing full-time diplomas at institutes of higher learning (IHL) through subsidies. In addition to this, there will be a training allowance for those over 40 enrolling in selected full-time courses, amounting to 50% of their average income from the past 12 months.

UTILISATION OF SKILLSFUTURE CREDITS BY % ACROSS AGE CATEGORIES



Source: CNA, September 2023

While these measures will assist those who are unemployed or wish to upskill and upgrade themselves, the low rates of Singaporeans using their SkillsFuture credits (shown in the chart above) indicate that more must be done to encourage its usage. A study conducted by MENDAKI shows that among the working population in the Malay community, 75 per cent of them are keen to continue looking at reskilling and upgrading. However, there are other factors that are dependent on this, such as employer's support for them to go for upskilling<sup>5</sup>.

### COMLINK+ PROGRAMME: HELPING LOW-INCOME FAMILIES

With the new measures that will be rolled out under the ComLink+ Programme, the Budget extensively addresses the problems low-income families face, primarily CPF contribution, Debt Repayment, and Preschool Education.

### Key Interventions and Their Implications:

#### CPF Contribution

Regarding CPF contribution, it has been identified that many low-income families take up jobs in the gig economy such as delivery drivers, instead of full-time jobs<sup>6</sup>. Though it comes with flexibility and immediate payment, this means that they do

<sup>5</sup> Channel NewsAsia. (2024). SkillsFuture credit for workers to be doubled in Budget 2024. Retrieved from <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/skillsfuture-credit-workers-budget-2024-courses-4131176>

<sup>6</sup> The Straits Times (2023). Giving low-income families and their kids a fighting chance to escape the poverty trap. Retrieved from <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/giving-low-income-families-and-their-kids-a-fighting-chance-to-escape-the-poverty-trap>

The budget has drawn attention for not adequately addressing the financial challenges faced by Singapore’s under-40 singles, offering limited benefits like the Cost of Living (COL) voucher, tax rebates, and Medisave top-ups that may not meet their real-world needs. As we conclude, it’s clear the budget has its merits but requires a more incisive approach to truly serve every community, including the Malay population. By committing to inclusive growth and a carefully crafted strategy, Singapore can move towards a future that’s prosperous and equitable for all its people.

not have automatic monthly CPF contributions. The Budget introduces new measures to attract low-income families to make voluntary CPF contributions or secure a CPF-paying job. Those who secure and sustain a CPF-paying job of >\$1400 will receive cash and CPF payouts for every quarter of employment. Those who remain in the gig economy are enticed to make voluntary CPF contributions as the government will make a 2:1 contribution.

**Debt Repayment**

In addressing the problem of low-income families struggling to pay off their debts, the government will make 1:1 matched debt repayment, up to \$5,000. For low-income Malay-Muslim families who are in debt, this allows them to pay off their debts and achieve stronger financial stability.

**Preschool Education**

In addition to more subsidies being extended to children with working mothers and non-working mothers in lower-income families, there will also be financial incentives to encourage consistent preschool attendance of their children.

There will be a one-off \$500 top-up to the child’s Child Development Account (CDA) when enrolled in preschool (before he/she turns 3) and a \$200 top-up to the child’s CDA for every quarter of good attendance (>75% attendance). These efforts are targeted to encourage low-income families to enrol their children in preschools early.

While these are well-meaning initiatives, it remains to be seen if the new measures will be fully

utilised by low-income families, as there are other factors that will influence their decision, such as the short-term need for cash.

**TOWARDS A RESILIENT AND INCLUSIVE FUTURE**

Singapore’s Budget 2024 is met with careful optimism, recognised for its commitment to helping those in need and investing in new technologies such as Artificial Intelligence. However, there are concerns that the government’s relief measures for the cost of living might be temporary, raising questions about whether they are timed for political gain rather than long-term economic stability.

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The Centre for Research on Islamic and Malay Affairs (RIMA), a research subsidiary of AMP Singapore, has developed a range of programmes in research and established several platforms for the meeting of minds. RIMA conducts research in a number of key areas, which includes economics, education, religion, family, social integration, leadership and civil society.



# Muslims' Role in Food Security

BY DR MUHAMMAD HANIFF HASSAN



On 3 February 2024, the Office of Mufti of the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS) announced a new *fatwa* (ruling) on the halal status of cultivated meat during the Conference on Fatwa in Contemporary Societies.<sup>1</sup> The *fatwa* is significant, as an Islamic response to

Singapore's contemporary challenges, and also for its impact and contribution to the larger and important national issue of food security.

This article seeks to introduce the idea of food security to Muslims, explore its roots

in Islamic tradition and how Muslims can play part in it, beyond the recent *fatwa*.

Food security and its relevance in Islam hold great importance in view of its implications to national security and public interest. Nevertheless, food

<sup>1</sup> Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura (2024), *Fatwa on Cultivated Meat*, 3 February, at <https://www.muis.gov.sg/Media/Media-Releases/2024/2/3-Feb-24-Fatwa-on-Cultivated-Meat> (accessed on 8 February 2024); Justin Ong (2024), "Singapore Muslims allowed to eat lab-grown meat if it's from halal animal cells, free from non-halal ingredients: Mufti", CNA, 3 February, at <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/muslims-singapore-lab-grown-meat-halal-animal-cells-mufti-4096896> (accessed on 8 February 2024).

security is still a new and emerging study among academicians today. Discussions among local *asatizah* are rare and limited. This article hopes to raise awareness and interest on the topic among *asatizah* specifically and Muslims generally.

### INTRODUCING FOOD SECURITY

Food security is a situation, “when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.”<sup>2</sup> Food security arises from an expansion of the traditional national security concept; where military and defence power are no longer the only pillars around national security.

Incorporating food security into national security guarantees sufficient food supply for the population to live healthily and comfortably. This in turn ensures that all key functions of the state – social, economic, defence – can run optimally. Food security enhances self-reliance. Heavy dependency on food imports opens the state to vulnerabilities and risks such as supply chain disruptions due to natural disaster, conflicts, safety and health issues, economic constraints, boycott and others. When a state is over-reliant on foreign entities for its food supply, it creates an asymmetrical dynamic in securing its political and economic interests.<sup>3</sup>

### SINGAPORE AND FOOD SECURITY

The Singapore Government regards food security as an existential threat to national security. There is a long history of documented diplomatic incidents stemming from food insecurity between Singapore and Malaysia. This includes the water supply agreements, the suspension of egg exports due to food safety issues, and the ban of chicken exports by Malaysian Government to meet their domestic demand during the COVID-19 pandemic period.

The Government established the Singapore Food Authority (SFA) in 2019 as a dedicated agency to firmly underscore the seriousness of food security. The

Government also launched the “30-by-30” scheme in 2019 to reduce Singapore’s reliance on food imports. The objective is to increase Singapore’s food self-sufficiency to 30 per cent by 2030. SFA launched a masterplan known as the *Lim Chu Kang Master Plan*, in October 2020.

The Government has also invested in innovative agricultural technology. Thus, R&D in these areas are encouraged and explored. For example, SFA supports Sustainir, a commercial entity, which operates vegetable farms to produce non-local seasonal products all year round in an urban setting. Sustainir currently produces 90 tonnes of crops annually for the domestic market.<sup>4</sup> Recent new agrotech methods also show promising results. These include soilless farming through hydroponic technology, vertical farming systems to reduce land usage, and technology that recycles carbon dioxide and agricultural wastes to reduce pollution and contribute to better harvests.

The above initiatives cut across national policy and private sector investments, all in the name of food security.

### THE QURAN AND FOOD SECURITY

Few Muslims are aware that the concept of food security has strong roots in the Quran. There are, at least, three ideas in the Quran that support the concept of food security.

Firstly, the Quran commands Muslims to pre-empt food crises through efficient management of their agricultural resources. Secondly, the Quran appoints Man as God’s vicegerents on earth whose tasks, among others, are to conserve the universe in accordance with God’s law of creations. Thirdly, the Quran denotes destructive unsustainable activities to God’s creations as a prohibited corruption.

#### *Efficient management of agricultural resources*

The Quran contains many verses that highlight the importance of proactive measures to pre-empt any disruption to

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the food supply through good planning and management of resources.

<sup>2</sup> World Food Summit (1996), *The World Bank*, at <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/agriculture/brief/food-security-update/what-is-food-security#:~:text=Based%20on%20the%201996%20World,an%20active%20and%20healthy%20life> (accessed on 8 February 2024).

<sup>3</sup> Paul Teng (2013), “Food Security: What It Means for a Food-Importing Country”, *RSIS Commentary*, 4 December, at <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/nts/2110-food-security-what-it-means-f/#.YzVZaHZByHs> (accessed on 8 February 2024).

<sup>4</sup> Singapore Food Agency (2022), *Sustainir agriculture: Futuristic farming for SG’s food security*, at <https://www.sfa.gov.sg/fromSGtoSG/farms/farm/Detail/sustainir-agriculture> (accessed on 8 February 2024).

Key verses relating to this can be found in *Surah Yusuf* (The Holy Quran, 12:43-55) of the Quran, which contains the story of Prophet Yusuf a.s. who foretold the dream of an Egyptian king of the coming of great hardship affecting their harvest which can be mitigated by implementing certain measures. Prophet Yusuf a.s. offered himself to help in planning and managing the eventual crisis.

The verses contain lessons for Muslims on the importance of good management of food supply and formulating proactive strategies in pre-empting possible food crises. These verses convey that the government carries a greater responsibility on ensuring enough food for the safeguard the people's welfare. A government, represented by a benevolent leader, should be open to seek advice and service from external experts, represented by Prophet Yusuf a.s. It is incumbent on governments to build a framework<sup>5</sup> for a robust and sustainable food supply<sup>6</sup>, where institutions have the capacity to plan, manage and respond to any expected or unexpected crisis.<sup>7</sup>

This is consistent with contemporary studies on the importance of building resilience within our institutions. Given the complexity of food security issues, it is crucial to strategise, develop capacity building and monitoring mechanisms, and also to involve a wide range of stakeholders across all levels of government.<sup>8</sup>

#### *Role of khilafah (vicegerency)*

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The Quran asserts that the creations were made for the benefit of Mankind.<sup>9</sup> Man is entrusted with the duty to protect these creations for them to last till the end of time. This duty is part of Man's role as God's vicegerent in this world.<sup>10</sup>

Although God's bounties to Man is infinite, in reality, no community possesses unlimited resources because it is God's will that His bounties are

scattered in unequal quantities all over this earth. The variation in the availability of natural resources such as plants, vegetation, water, oil, gas, coal, and so on, brings about a unique set of challenges for communities to thrive.

The wisdom behind this is to encourage interdependence, where communities cooperate with each other to meeting their respective needs in a mutually beneficial way. Those with rich agricultural resources can trade with others with abundant energy resources. While those rich with livestock animals in the hinterlands can collaborate with communities in coastal areas for a source of seafood. Through these interactions and exchanges, Man can be prosperous on earth, which according to Muslim scholars, is a vital role conferred to God's vicegerent.

It must be emphasised, however, that nature is not solely for the purpose of securing food for Man. It has bigger objectives beyond Man's basic needs. It is for the benefit of all creations too because the Quran stipulates the role of the Prophet Muhammad (*peace be upon him*) as a "mercy for all creatures" (The Holy Quran, 21:107).

It becomes the role of all responsible Muslims to continue Prophet Muhammad's (*pbuh*) duty after his death until the end of time. The Quranic verse that says, "and provided thereon means of livelihood for you [O men] as well as for all [living beings] whose sustenance does not depend on you" (The Holy Quran, 15:20).

The verse reminds Muslims that the wondrous biodiversity in nature are God's provision for all His creations which is consistent with the idea held by the scientific community that nature's biodiversity has bigger objectives than securing Man's interest.

Following the abovementioned verse, the Quran says, "For, no single thing exists

that does not have its source with Us; and nought do We bestow from on high unless it be in accordance with a measure well-defined" (The Holy Quran, 15:21). This verse stipulates the existence of perfect measurements in God's creations for them to have sustenance that is in complete harmony and balance with nature.

This verse implicitly highlights the importance of a scientific understanding on how to maintain a sustainable, harmonious and well-balanced use of our natural resources. Standards must be in place to regulate human activities to safeguard the fragile and complex ecosystems in our environment. Ongoing efforts by world leaders through various international conventions continue to address food insecurity due to environmental stressors.<sup>11</sup>

#### *Sustainability*

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The objectives of food security must be underpinned with an ethos of sustainability. The conservation of natural resources and environment is crucial in ensuring sustenance for future generations.

Sustainable initiatives are in line with the spirit of the Quran that warn Muslims against those whose hands cause destructions to land and sea.

"[Since they have become oblivious of God,] corruption has appeared on land and in the sea as an outcome of what men's hands have wrought: and so He will let them taste [the evil of] some of their doings, so that they might return [to the right path]" (The Holy Quran, 30:41).

The verse above categorises the human's destructive environmental impact as *fasad* (corruption) to be condemned by God. It is a command upon Man, being God's vicegerent on this earth, to carry the duty to protect and conserve God's creations for the benefits of all God's creations.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>5</sup> International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD) [2013], *Climate Resilience and Food Security A framework for planning and monitoring*, June, p. 1. Food system is "is a complex web of activities involving the production, processing, transport, and consumption." See <https://www.futureoffood.ox.ac.uk/what-food-system> (accessed on 8 February 2024).

<sup>6</sup> Folke C, J Colding, and F Berkes [2003], *Navigating social-ecological systems: building resilience for complexity and change*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 352-387. See also International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD) [2013], *Climate Resilience and Food Security A framework for planning and monitoring*, June, p. 6. <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>9</sup> See the Qur'an, 2:29, 14:32, 16:14, 22:65 and 31:20-21 as examples of verses on creations created for Man's benefits.

<sup>10</sup> See *Sahih Muslim*, hadith no. 1955a, hadith no. 1957a; Sunan Abi Dawud, no. 4941.

<sup>11</sup> United Nation (no date), "UN Milestones", *Food Security and Nutrition - A Global Issue*, <https://research.un.org/en/foodsecurity/un-milestones> (accessed on 8 February 2024).

<sup>12</sup> A. Muḥamad, A. H. Syihab, A. H., & M. Achour [2019], "Quranic Messages on Environmental Sustainability: An Expository Study of Its Relevance", *Al-Bayan: Journal of Qur'an and Hadith Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 1, pp. 38-59.



In view of the consistent alignment between the normative aspects of food security and the messages in the Quran, Muslims are commanded to play their part and contribute to the issue. Muslims must not simply be a passive bystander to pressing global environmental issues affecting our food security.

Muslims should give thoughtful consideration to contribute to areas such as nature conservancy, promoting a sustainable lifestyle, and venturing into innovative agricultural practices such as urban farming.

The recent *fatwa* on cultivated meat should be recognised as an important contribution to the larger narrative on food security. However, more should and can be done. It must be regarded as our *fardu kifayah* (collective obligation).

#### ROLE AND CONTRIBUTION OF MUSLIMS

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As Singaporean Muslims, we are uniquely positioned to take up the mantle of our *fardu kifayah*. Singapore's Muslim identity encourages and guides Muslims to be forward looking, adaptive and inclusive in their religious outlook, and to work with the government and civil society to strengthen social cohesion and promote active citizenry. These efforts have fostered Muslims who contribute to nation-building, becoming important nodes within the national grid.<sup>13</sup> This is encapsulated in MUIS' vision for a distinct Singapore Muslim Identity called RICAP, an acronym that sums up five Islamic qualities – Resilience, Inclusivity, Contributiveness, Adaptiveness and Progressiveness.

Furthermore, Imam Al-Bukhari highlights the importance of Muslim's contribution in a chapter in his book, *Sahih Al-Bukhari Book of Agriculture and Cultivation*. He narrated a *hadith* from Anas (*may Allah be pleased with him*) in which the Prophet (*pbuh*) reportedly said, "There is none amongst the Muslims who plants a tree or sows seeds, and then a bird, or a person or an animal eats from it, but is regarded as a charitable gift for him."<sup>14</sup>

Lastly, Muslims' contribution could also come in the form of showing gratitude to God for the bounties bestowed to them. Muslims can also show gratitude to God to be in a country with good foresight in managing food security for the sake of its citizens' welfare. ■

This article is extracted and translated from *Tafsir Ilmi Ayat-ayat Kauniyat MABIMS: Tumbuh-tumbuhan* written by the author, available at [haniff.sg](http://haniff.sg).

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<sup>13</sup> Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura [no date], *Communities of Success Initiatives*, at <https://www.muis.gov.sg/officeofthemufti/RPCS/About/Background> (accessed on 8 February 2024).

<sup>14</sup> Al-Bukhari, *Sahih Al-Bukhari*, book 39, vol. 3, no 513, at [https://www.iiu.edu.my/deed/hadith/bukhari/039\\_sbt.html](https://www.iiu.edu.my/deed/hadith/bukhari/039_sbt.html)

# SENIORS ARE THE NEW BLACK: Normalising the Shift from Ageism to Active Seniors at the Forefront of Society

BY RIFHAN MILLER



The global population of individuals aged 65 and above is rising worldwide and this trend is largely irreversible (World Social

Report, 2023). Individuals are generally living longer due to general improvements in health and survival and with dropping

fertility rates, the age dependency ratio is also increasing, thus the inevitable result of the demographic transition towards

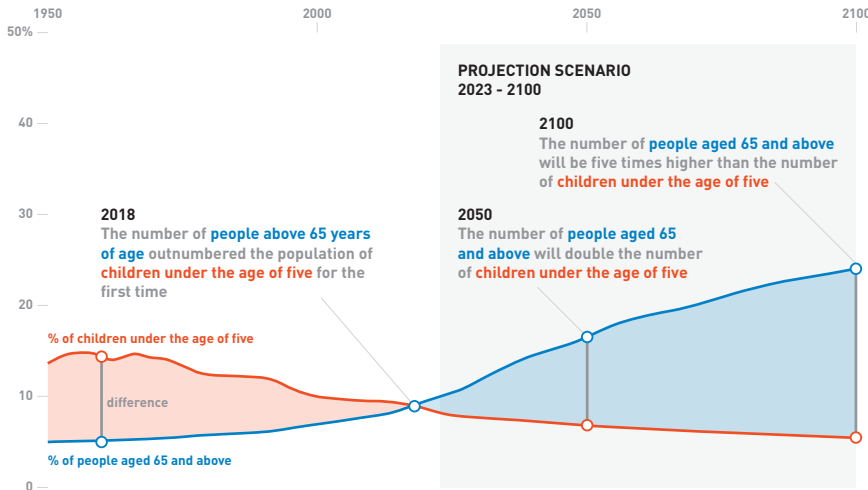


Figure 1

Global population share of children under the age of 5 versus global population of people over the age 65  
 (Source: United Nations World Population Prospects, 2022)

In 2018, just 6 years ago, the number of seniors aged 65 and above outnumbered children under 5 for the first time. By 2050, seniors aged above 65 will double (2.1 billion) children below 5 years and many of us reading this article today will likely live long enough to watch this unfold and join this statistic. By 2100, perhaps three to four generations down, our descendants will merely see 1 child for every 5 senior persons. The world will look vastly different then and we are sitting right through this historic transition.

longer lives and smaller families. This trend is projected to continue, and the world will see increasing proportions of seniors as time progresses. Figure 1 illustrates a crossover diagram depicting the projected changing ratio between seniors and children in the world population.

In 2018, just 6 years ago, the number of seniors aged 65 and above outnumbered children under 5 for the first time. By 2050, seniors aged above 65 will double (2.1 billion) children below 5 years and many of us reading this article today will likely live long enough to watch this unfold and join this statistic. By 2100, perhaps three to four generations down, our descendants will merely see 1 child for every 5 senior persons. The world will look vastly different then and we are sitting right through this historic transition.

This shift in population ageing started in high-income countries but lower and middle-income countries are now also experiencing it. Decreasing fertility rates do, after all, on top of increased life expectancy, influence the ageing of populations, as they do for the shrinking of populations. According to a study by the Institute for Health Metrics and

Evaluation (IHME), the population of 75% of all countries worldwide is projected to shrink by 2050, and at the end of the century, it will shrink by 97%. Only Samoa, Somalia, Tonga, Niger, Chad and Tajikistan are expected to have fertility rates exceeding the replacement level of 2.1 births per female in 2100. It is also interesting to note that by then, when the number of seniors is projected to reach 5 times the number of children below the age of 5, the overall world population is also expected to decrease after hitting approximately 10 billion (World Health Organization).

**WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR US, RIGHT NOW AND BEYOND?**

As quoted by IHME researcher Natalia Bhattacharjee, the “implications are immense”. However, these are predictions after all (albeit informed ones) and the balance between challenges and opportunities should be taken into consideration while processing these figures. There are benefits to having a smaller population, such as for the environment and food security despite disadvantages for labour supply, social security and nationalistic geopolitics. Not all researchers agree either on these projections. For example, the IHME study predicts the global fertility rate to

fall below replacement levels around 2030 but the United Nations predicts this by 2050. Despite this, it will happen. Some of us will live to see it, and others won't.

While this shift is unavoidable as societies progress and evolve, collective actions and policy decisions have the influence to shape its path and consequences. Population ageing also needs to be understood as more than just a set of discrete concerns for a mere group of older individuals. It is set to impact all sectors of society, including labour and financial markets, demand for housing and transportation, and especially family structures and intergenerational ties. Postponing critical measures and being unprepared when a 'silver tsunami' arrives will impose high social, economic, fiscal, and health-related costs.

The prominence of seniors in policy-making discussions was underscored in the National Day Rally 2023 speech, which emphasised Singapore's status as one of Asia's fastest-aging societies, with the proportion of individuals aged 65 and above rising significantly over the past decade. Asia is also increasingly at the forefront of the ageing trend, with Hong Kong, South Korea and Japan projected to have the highest share of seniors aged 65 and older by 2050 (see Figure 2). Singapore, at 15.12% as of 2022, is projected to reach 36.51%, well over the worldwide projection of 24.03% by 2100 (United Nations World Population Prospects, 2022).

Our community, perhaps thankfully, is not ageing as rapidly. This demographic shift in Singapore is not uniform across all ethnic groups, with Malays, who represent the majority of Muslims in the country, experiencing the ageing process differently, due to larger family structures<sup>1</sup>. Even so, our fertility rate of 1.83 (as of 2022), still contributes to a steady rise in the community's old-age dependency ratio<sup>2</sup>.

The expectation for children to personally care for their elderly parents is strong in

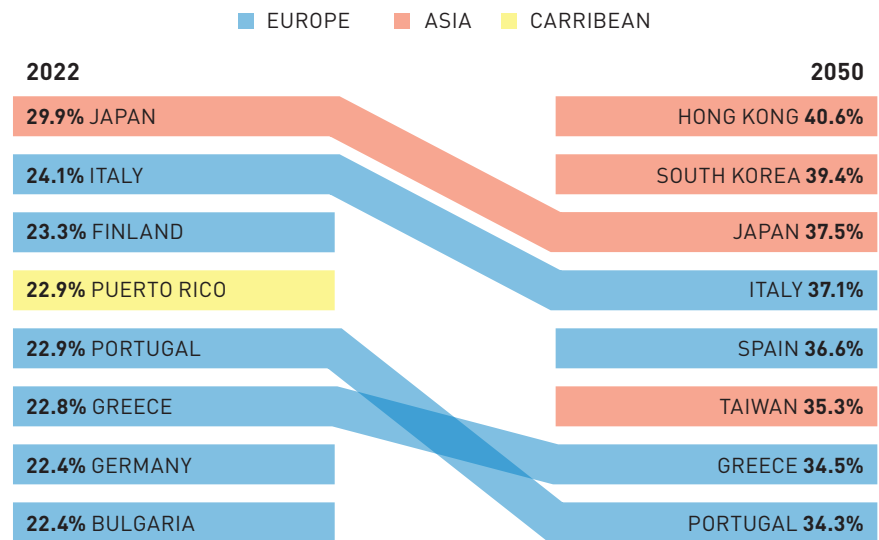
the community, rooted in the deeply ingrained value of filial piety. However, with the growing prevalence of dual-income households, singles, and perceived lack in services and programmes, meeting the needs of our seniors will increasingly add pressure on our Muslim caregiving organisations in the long run as our families get smaller. Furthermore, the balancing act between professional commitments and caregiving responsibilities will also strain individuals who remain single or are part of dual-income households, as they contend with limited available time.

Over time, we may need to increasingly address the stigma associated with seeking external assistance and outsourcing care due to necessity and it should not diminish the importance of familial bonds. Rather, it can even enhance the quality of care provided to the elderly by well-trained and qualified service providers. Caregivers too, need their respite after all.

## EMPOWERING SENIORS TO EMBRACE ACTIVE AGEING

Ageism refers to self-limiting beliefs about the physical and mental capacities of seniors. It can also manifest in various ways. It can be institutional, where for example, workplace policies favour the promotion of younger employees as opposed to seniors with extensive industry experience. Interpersonal ageism occurs when a person overcompensates for a senior's presumed needs, like speaking louder or slower to a senior with intact cognition, followed by comments like "they are sharp for their age." Self-directed ageism refers to internalised biases wherein seniors believe they should not or cannot pursue certain activities due to their age, for example, wanting to pick up a new hobby but believing that they are too old to learn anything new. Sadly, ageism in all its forms restricts seniors from exercising agency, limiting their rights to independence, values, priorities, and preferences.

A good real-life example of ageism at play is when Lien Foundation first rolled out



\* only includes countries/territories with a population of more than 1 million people

Figure 2  
World's Oldest Populations: Countries with the highest share of people aged 65 and older  
(Source: United Nations Population Division)

<sup>1</sup> The Malay community still maintains a relatively youthful age profile compared to the national average. The median age for Malays was 31.4 years, while the national median age was 37.4 years. The proportion of working-age adults (aged 25-64) within the Malay community is currently higher than the national average. 71.5% of the Malay population was in the working age group, compared to 73.7% for the entire population. [Source: Demographic Study on Singapore Malays conducted by AMP]

<sup>2</sup> Ratio of older dependants (people older than 64) to the working-age population (those aged 15-64), who will be taking care of their senior parents, for example.

In time, when our seniors outnumber our youths by a lot, I hope to see our society evolve to one that allows our seniors (and by then, I'll be one of them) to shine and achieve greater visibility, as well as prominently represented in socio-economic, cultural and spiritual spaces as active contributors instead of passive audiences.

Gym Tonic, an evidence-based, senior-friendly strength-training programme that improves the functional abilities of the elderly with advanced equipment and software (TODAY, 2015). This is a strength training programme to help seniors restore, maintain, and improve their physical mobility. It faced considerable pushback at first due to ingrained perceptions that strength training is 'dangerous' for the elderly. This is despite it having demonstrated otherwise in countries like Japan and Finland.

### WHAT IS ACTIVE AGEING?

Active ageing is defined by the World Health Organization (WHO) as "the process of optimising opportunities for health, participation, and security in order to enhance quality of life as people age." It focuses on promoting active ageing that covers physical, mental,

and social well-being, advocating for active engagement in life, not simply passive acceptance of decline. This active ageing framework consists of three pillars highlighting the importance of social participation, physical health management and security measures in place.

Active ageing is not simply a group of seniors going on walks and participating in Qigong in our neighbourhoods. It provides guidelines in the following areas<sup>3</sup>:

1. Participation: A senior is given opportunities to participate in socioeconomic, cultural and spiritual activities according to one's capacities, needs and preferences.
2. Health: A senior is able to self-manage one's health and keep risk factors for chronic illnesses low to remain healthy for a longer time.
3. Security: Assurance that protection, dignity and care are available if seniors are no longer able to support and protect themselves

Limited understanding of active ageing can lead to underutilised resources and support systems. Worse still, it perpetuates a self-fulfilling prophecy that seniors are incapable of doing much after a certain age, further prioritising dependence on younger generations and resistance to change by individuals both young and old. Going back to the projections in Figure 1, by 2050, and particularly 2100, societies cannot afford to have a large population of able seniors and those younger with self-limiting beliefs of what seniors are capable of. Imagine the strain it will impose.

Even in the event of physical and mental decline, fear of mortality and changing dynamics within a family may significantly impact them emotionally as well and they too deserve to feel secure and supported in comfort and dignity without judgment.

### CLOSING WORDS

I think living in Singapore, where the furthest one can be from a loved one is

probably an hour's drive away, it should not be too difficult to maintain close contact with senior family members and encourage them to participate in various community activities. It is unfortunate that despite our close proximity, loneliness among our seniors persists. In time, when our seniors outnumber our youths by a lot, I hope to see our society evolve to one that allows our seniors (and by then, I'll be one of them) to shine and achieve greater visibility, as well as prominently represented in socio-economic, cultural and spiritual spaces as active contributors instead of passive audiences.

My stepmother lives overseas in a retirement community. She leads a simple yet fulfilling life and despite living apart from her children who are spread across different states, she remains connected through regular phone calls and occasional visits. This does not, however, make her lonely or unhappy. She finds companionship among her fellow neighbours and has access to professional healthcare workers when needed. She is an avid reader and every year, she knits blankets for the homeless in her community, bringing warmth and comfort to those in need through winter. She is a busy senior indeed and it gives her a sense of purpose and fulfilment and she is always cheery when I visit. I hope to follow in her footsteps, when I'm much older, embracing life with passion and purpose, giving back to the community and only limiting myself to what I actually cannot do, instead of what I think or what others think I cannot do. My golden years may just be my best ones yet as my age will not define me, God willing. ■

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<sup>3</sup> Adapted from WHO's policy framework on active ageing.

# Reality of Seniors Living Alone:

CONTEXT, CHALLENGES AND FUTURE TRENDS

BY QAMAR JANNAH FATEEN





The phenomenon of seniors living alone in Singapore has emerged as a cardinal reflection of societal shifts and demographic changes. Behind this simple narrative lies a multifaceted reality, where Singapore is faced with challenges and profound implications. Such challenges would include accessibility, mobility and health within the ageing community. In a parliamentary session in 2023, it was reported that the number of Singaporean residents aged 65 and above who live alone is exponentially rising from 58,000 in 2018, to 79,000 in 2022<sup>1</sup>. A study done by DUKE-NUS Medical School's Centre for Ageing Research and Education (CARE) back in 2018 predicted that the numbers would increase up to 83,000 by 2030<sup>2</sup>. Taking these figures into account, it is fair to say that the numbers are increasing at a rate faster than expected. Subsequently, the Ministry of Health (MOH) expects to see a rise in seniors living alone as average household size continues to decrease<sup>3</sup>. As populations age and family structures evolve, it is important to explore the reasons why more and more seniors live alone, which would include empty nests, singlehood (including those who are widowed or divorced) and wanting to maintain independence. Given the growing number of seniors living alone in Singapore, it is worrying that 39% of Singaporeans aged 62 and older reported being lonely<sup>4</sup>. It was asserted that loneliness may contribute to mental and critical illnesses, some of which would include progression of Alzheimer's disease, stroke, hypertension, depression and many more<sup>5</sup>. With the growing phenomenon of seniors living alone, will Singaporeans particularly struggle with ageing, which is generally associated with feelings of neglect, loneliness, and isolation? What can the state and community do to mitigate these issues? This should include addressing health concerns, loneliness and the psychological impact of parents experiencing an empty nest and seniors whose circumstances have forced them to live alone.

## EMPTY NEST SYNDROME

As the household size decreases in Singapore, the first thing that comes to mind is the phase of the family life cycle that follows as young adults leave their parental home, leaving an empty nest. As children grow up and leave the family home to pursue their independent lives, parents may find themselves grappling with the empty nest syndrome, experiencing a range of emotions such as sadness, loneliness, and a sense of loss<sup>6</sup>. It is especially difficult for parents who have dedicated their livelihood towards raising their children. Subsequently, when child rearing is no longer the focus of the parents' lives, they may get a sense of loss when greeted by an empty house every day<sup>7</sup>.

This is especially important to understand in Singapore's context, as due to stronger family ties in Asia – compared to western families – there is the societal expectation that children should look after their parents, contributing to a sense of dependency on seniors<sup>8</sup>.

*"I've always cared about my family. Why is it that when I am older, no one seems to care about my matters?"*

– Mdm Khadija, 83 (*not her real name*)

Mdm Khadija (*not her real name*), a participant of a research study by CARE, is 83 years old, and experiences loneliness as a divorcee living in an empty nest. According to a report by CNA, she moved to a rental flat after her son sold their house and moved to Johor Bahru. He hardly ever visits or calls her<sup>9</sup>. As a result, Mdm Khadija is left alone, with only her grandson – who is also rarely home – and no one to confide in. Given the prevalence of empty nest syndrome among elderly women, who typically shoulder more caregiving responsibilities than men<sup>10</sup>, there exists an expectation for their children to be there to support them emotionally and physically as they transition into their senior years. Empty nest marks a significant milestone in the

As children grow up and leave the family home to pursue their independent lives, parents may find themselves grappling with the empty nest syndrome, experiencing a range of emotions such as sadness, loneliness, and a sense of loss. It is especially difficult for parents who have dedicated their livelihood towards raising their children.

<sup>1</sup> Ministry of Health (MOH). 2023. Seniors staying alone. *News Highlight*.

<sup>2</sup> Linton, E., Gubhaju, B. & Chan, A. (2018). Home alone: Older adults in Singapore. CARE Duke-NUS Medical School.

<sup>3</sup> Ministry of Health (MOH). 2023. Seniors staying alone. *News Highlight*.

<sup>4</sup> Chan, A., Malhotra, R. & Maulod, A. (2023). Commentary: Loneliness is an overlooked public health challenge in ageing Singapore. *Channel News Asia*.

<sup>5</sup> Yanguas, J., Pinazo-Henandis, S. & Tarazona-Santabalbina, F. (2018). The complexity of loneliness. *Acta Biomed*, 89(2), 302-314.

<sup>6</sup> Kristensen, K., König, H. & Hajek, A. (2021). The empty nest, depressive symptoms, and loneliness of older parents: Prospective findings from the German Ageing Survey. *Archives of Gerontology and Geriatrics*, 95. & McDaid, D. & Park, A. (2022). Addressing loneliness in older people through a personalised support and community response program. *Journal of Aging & Social Policy*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08959420.2023.2228161>

<sup>7</sup> Kristensen, K., König, H. & Hajek, A. (2021). The empty nest, depressive symptoms, and loneliness of older parents: Prospective findings from the German Ageing Survey. *Archives of Gerontology and Geriatrics*, 95.

<sup>8</sup> Kiyota, E. (2019). Living with independence and purpose. *Civil Service College*. <https://knowledge.csc.gov.sg/ethos-issue-20/living-with-independence-and-purpose/>

<sup>9</sup> Chan, A., Malhotra, R. & Maulod, A. (2023). Commentary: Loneliness is an overlooked public health challenge in ageing Singapore. *Channel News Asia*.

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/commentary/senior-loneliness-mortality-risk-ageing-public-health-crisis-3615171>

<sup>11</sup> Kiyota, E. (2019). Living with independence and purpose. *Civil Service College*. <https://knowledge.csc.gov.sg/ethos-issue-20/living-with-independence-and-purpose/> & Bougea, A., Despoti, A. & Vasiliopoulos, E. (2019). Empty-nest related psychosocial stress: Conceptual issues, future directions in economic crisis. *Psychiatriki*, 30(4), 329-338. <https://doi.org/10.22365/jpsych.2019.304.329>

ageing process for parents, and this may exacerbate feelings of isolation and adjustment to living alone. Consequently, there are reports of seniors experiencing symptoms of depression, behavioural symptoms (e.g., changes in sleep pattern, changes in appetite, loss of motivation, etc.) and cognitive impairment<sup>11</sup>. While an empty nest is a natural part of the parenting life cycle, it can be challenging for individuals to navigate without adequate support and coping mechanisms.

### COMPANIONSHIP AND SUPPORT

Seniors who are single, widowed, or have no children often find themselves facing unique challenges in their later years, assuming that they have no other family members who are still alive. The nature of human beings is that we often yearn for closeness and affinity, especially when we observe and envy others with families. In return, it will most often trigger loneliness in us<sup>12</sup>. Admitting loneliness is uncomfortable for many seniors in Singapore, which may result in seniors avoiding social participation due to low motivation<sup>13</sup>. However, there are some, who are open about their loneliness:

*“I was born lonely with no siblings, and I will stay lonely and die lonely.”*

– Mr Sarmugam

Mr Sarmugam is a divorcee with no family and is relying on the Silver Support Scheme for sustenance<sup>14</sup>. He dives into a pool of loneliness as his physical health slowly steals his mobility, resulting in him not being able to venture beyond his estate area as he needs his wheelchair to get around. Similarly, going back to Mdm Khadija, she grew up as an orphan and never went to school like others. As such, she has always felt isolated from the society. Subsequently, it contributed to her

yearning for social interaction; however, it is difficult for her to reach out for support due to the lack of intrinsic motivation and physical health that limits her mobility<sup>15</sup>.

Apart from issues like social isolation and loneliness due to the lack of daily companionship and support – which in social construct, usually comes from living with a partner or family members – they also face financial struggles<sup>16</sup>. Seniors of low socio-economic status (SES) who live alone tend to face this problem as they are solely responsible for managing their own household expenses and retirement savings<sup>17</sup>. In a study done by Wee et al. in 2019, it is apparent that seniors who are of low SES (which is attributed to lower household income, poorer perceived physical environment, poorer functional status and more) are more prone to feeling lonely<sup>18</sup>. On the other side of the spectrum, despite these challenges, there are seniors living alone in Singapore who value their independence and autonomy, cherishing the freedom to live life on their own terms<sup>19</sup>. Nevertheless, it is crucial for communities and support networks to recognise the unique needs of seniors living alone and provide resources and services to help them maintain their well-being and quality of life as they age. Acknowledging that not all seniors living alone are experiencing loneliness, there are studies who found that social interaction moderates causes of loneliness<sup>20</sup>. It is significant for Singapore to consider seniors' limitations to seeking out social interaction and support. Not to mention, to see what programmes are working and what are the gaps in meeting the needs of seniors living alone.

### THE “MANY HELPING HANDS” APPROACH

For seniors who are living alone and are unemployed, what can they do to combat loneliness and sadness? As pointed out by the World Health Organization (WHO), active ageing is important in optimising opportunities for health, participation, and security in order to ameliorate the quality of life of seniors. Evidently, these three pillars are also reflected in Singapore's Successful Ageing Framework in 2006 where it is delivered across four strategic thrusts<sup>21</sup>:

1. Enhance employability and financial security;
2. Provide holistic, affordable healthcare and eldercare;
3. Enable ageing-in-place and;
4. Promote active ageing

Ultimately, the Many Helping Hands approach stresses the involvement of not only one, but multiple stakeholders to achieve successful ageing. Stakeholders would also include non-state actors like individuals, voluntary welfare organisations, charities, and communities<sup>22</sup>. Accordingly, whilst there are many organisations and initiatives that encourage social participation for the elderly population, Participate in Design (PiD) is an organisation that has a unique approach to participation. Essentially, the organisation utilises participatory design approach in order to bring the elderly together, make connections and bonds, and uses their inputs and talents into creating a change. One notable project is the Fajar Spring Community Kitchen. As part of an initiative by the National Council of Social Services (NCSS), PiD assisted in bringing senior participants together in prototyping a community kitchen for the senior citizens in the neighbourhood<sup>23</sup>. This is where the seniors are able to give their

<sup>11</sup> Bougea, A., Despoti, A. & Vasilopoulos, E. (2019). Empty-nest related psychosocial stress: Conceptual issues, future directions in economic crisis. *Psychiatriki*, 30(4), 329-338. <https://doi.org/10.22365/psych.2019.304.329> & Fakoya, O. A., McCorry, N. K. & Donnelly, M. (2020). Loneliness and social isolation interventions for older adults: a scoping review of reviews. *BMC Public Health*, 20(129). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-020-8251-6>

<sup>12</sup> Chan, A., Malhotra, R. & Maulod, A. (2023). Commentary: Loneliness is an overlooked public health challenge in ageing Singapore. *Channel News Asia*. <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/commentary/senior-loneliness-mortality-risk-ageing-public-health-crisis-3615171>

<sup>13</sup> Aw, S., Koh, G., Oh, Y. J., Wong, M. L., Vrijhoef, H. J. M., Harding, S. C., Geronimo, M. A. B., Lai, C. Y. F. & Hildon, Z. J. L. (2017). Explaining the continuum of social participation among older adults in Singapore: from 'closed doors' to active ageing in multi-ethnic community settings. *J Aging Stud*, 42, 46-55. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaging.2017.07.002> & Chan, A., Malhotra, R. & Maulod, A. (2023). Commentary: Loneliness is an overlooked public health challenge in ageing Singapore. *Channel News Asia*. <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/commentary/senior-loneliness-mortality-risk-ageing-public-health-crisis-3615171>

<sup>14</sup> Fang, C. S. & Tan, J. (2023) The problem with being alone: Social isolation, loneliness biggest enemy for seniors in S'pore. <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/all-the-lonely-people-tackling-social-isolation-among-older-singaporeans>

<sup>15</sup> Chan, A., Malhotra, R. & Maulod, A. (2023). Commentary: Loneliness is an overlooked public health challenge in ageing Singapore. *Channel News Asia*. <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/commentary/senior-loneliness-mortality-risk-ageing-public-health-crisis-3615171>

<sup>16</sup> Lee, J. M. G., Chan, C. Q. H., Low, W. C., Lee, K. H. & Low, L. L. (2020). Health-seeking behaviour of the elderly living alone in an urbanised low-income community in Singapore. *Singapore Medical Journal*, 61(5), 260-265. <https://doi.org/10.11622/smedj.2019104>

<sup>17</sup> Wee, L. E., Tsang, T. Y. Y., Yi, H., Toh, S. A., Lee, G. L., Yee, J., Lee, S., Oen, K. & Koh, G. C. H. (2019). Loneliness amongst low-socioeconomic status elderly Singaporeans and its association with perceptions of the neighbourhood environment. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 16(6). <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph16060967>

<sup>18</sup> Lee, J. M. G., Chan, C. Q. H., Low, W. C., Lee, K. H. & Low, L. L. (2020). Health-seeking behaviour of the elderly living alone in an urbanised low-income community in Singapore. *Singapore Medical Journal*, 61(5), 260-265. <https://doi.org/10.11622/smedj.2019104>

<sup>19</sup> Linton, E., Gubhaju, B. & Chan, A. (2018). Home alone: Older adults in Singapore. CARE Duke-NUS Medical School.

<sup>20</sup> [https://www.duke-nus.edu.sg/docs/librariesprovider3/research-policy-brief-docs/home-alone-older-adults-in-singapore.pdf?sfvrsn=6735541\\_0#:-:text=Nine%20percent%20of%20Singaporeans%20adults,and%20wanting%20to%20maintain%20independence%20&McDaid,D.&Park,A.\(2022\).Addressing%20loneliness%20in%20older%20people%20through%20a%20personalised%20support%20and%20community%20response%20program.%20Journal%20of%20Aging%20and%20Social%20Policy.%20https://doi.org/10.1080/08959420.2023.2228161](https://www.duke-nus.edu.sg/docs/librariesprovider3/research-policy-brief-docs/home-alone-older-adults-in-singapore.pdf?sfvrsn=6735541_0#:-:text=Nine%20percent%20of%20Singaporeans%20adults,and%20wanting%20to%20maintain%20independence%20&McDaid,D.&Park,A.(2022).Addressing%20loneliness%20in%20older%20people%20through%20a%20personalised%20support%20and%20community%20response%20program.%20Journal%20of%20Aging%20and%20Social%20Policy.%20https://doi.org/10.1080/08959420.2023.2228161)

<sup>21</sup> Centre for Liveable Cities. 2021. Towards ageing well: Planning a future-ready Singapore. <https://www.clc.gov.sg/docs/default-source/urban-systems-studies/uss-towards-ageing-well.pdf>

<sup>22</sup> Participate in Design (PiD). 2022. *Fajar Spring Community Kitchen*. <https://participateindesign.org/studio-fajar-spring-community-kitchen>




# The reality of seniors living alone encompasses a complex array of challenges and considerations that demand our attention. Recognising the dual responsibility shared by both the community and the government in providing care services and developing programmes for seniors living alone, it becomes paramount for Singaporeans to grasp the reality of this demographic.

input into decision-making, whilst also creating bonds with other peers. P!D advocates participatory design as a way to involve multiple stakeholders in creating a sustainable and effective initiative, enhancing the sense of belonging towards the community<sup>24</sup>. Distinctively, this is a unique way for organisations to encourage social cohesiveness within the elderly community, hence, increasing their social participation in voluntary work, community activities and lifelong learning.

The reality of seniors living alone encompasses a complex array of challenges and considerations that demand our attention. Recognising the dual responsibility shared by both the community and the government in providing care services and developing programmes for seniors living alone, it becomes paramount for Singaporeans to grasp the reality of this demographic. This understanding is essential to not only safeguarding the well-being of seniors, but also for guiding policy formulation and community engagement. While traditionally, family has been seen as the primary source of care, it is vital for us to acknowledge that this is not always the case; particularly in Singapore's diverse society. Seniors may find themselves living alone due to various factors beyond an empty nest. Looking into the future, with the impending silver tsunami, Singapore must redouble efforts to prioritise the unique needs of its elder

population, fostering a culture that cherishes and supports seniors in maintaining independence throughout their later years. ■



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<sup>24</sup> Yeo, J. H. (2020). Youth in action: To create better spaces, non-profit group spends less time on drawing board, more time listening. *Today Online*. <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/youth-action-create-better-spaces-spend-less-time-drawing-board-more-time-listening-says>

# Ageing with Agency: A Guide to Thriving in Your Golden Years

BY AZEEM SULEHRI



The idea of a centenarian – a person who has reached (or even surpassed) the age of 100 – once seemed improbable, like something out of a science fiction movie, where technology could attain feats beyond the human imagination.

However, in 2020, the number of centenarians in Singapore doubled from 700 in 2010 to 1500<sup>1</sup>.

This remarkable growth challenged our preconceived ideas about longevity and raised hopes that we might significantly extend human life expectancy. Building on this optimism, Laura Carstensen of Stanford University suggested that half of the five-year-olds in Singapore at that time could expect to live to 100<sup>2</sup>.

Amid these breakthroughs and hopes for elongated lifespans, we must also confront the stigma associated with ageing. Perceived as a time of loss – particularly of productivity and autonomy – the stigma surrounding ageing is highlighted by a noticeable lack of opportunities for the ageing population. The emergence of Botox reflects a society fixated on youth, while the scarcity of complex, multi-dimensional elderly characters in popular culture suggests a narrow portrayal of the elderly. Dr Peter Attia, a physician focusing on the science of longevity, calls for a radical reimagining: ageing is inevitable<sup>3</sup>. It should be considered a fulfilling journey as opposed to a burden.

As we near the prospect of celebrating many centennial birthdays, we must

epitomise what Dr Attia calls “active ageing.” In this article, we’ll explore how you can take actionable measures to redefine longevity – and celebrate life – on your terms.

## EXERCISE: MORE THAN JUST MOVEMENT

Regardless of age, regular exercise holds the key to unending physical and mental benefits: it allows us to maintain independence, mental clarity, and bodily strength. A study by the American Heart Association highlighted that individuals who engage in moderate or rigorous physical activity respectively have a 20-21% and 19% lower risk of mortality from all causes<sup>4</sup>. Dr Attia often emphasises that “exercise is the only proven fountain of youth,” exemplified

<sup>1</sup> Duke-NUS Medical School. (2020). Reaching 100: Number of centenarians in Singapore has doubled in 10 years. Retrieved from <https://www.duke-nus.edu.sg/allnews/reaching-100-number-of-centenarians-in-singapore-has-doubled-in-10-years-1straits-times-premium>

<sup>2</sup> The Straits Times. (2013). Living to be 100: Governments, society need to catch up, say experts at longevity forum. Retrieved from <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/living-to-be-100-governments-society-need-to-catch-up-say-experts-at-longevity-forum>

<sup>3</sup> Attia, P. (2023). \*Outlive: The Science and Art of Longevity\*. Penguin Publishing Group.

<sup>4</sup> American Heart Association. (2022). New study finds lowest risk of death was among adults who exercised 150-600 minutes/week. Retrieved from <https://newsroom.heart.org/news/new-study-finds-lowest-risk-of-death-was-among-adults-who-exercised-150-600-minutes-week>

by its connection to maintaining a high VO<sub>2</sub> Max (which indicates the health of your heart and lungs). Dr Attia suggests that even a moderate increase in physical activity can sufficiently advance an individual's VO<sub>2</sub> Max regardless of their starting point.

In addition to aerobic exercises like walking, swimming, or cycling, try incorporating strength training and flexibility exercises into your fitness routine as you age. Dr Attia highlights grip strength as a particularly significant predictor of longevity, suggesting that enhancing muscular fitness can be crucial for extending life expectancy.

Simple bodyweight exercises such as squats, lunges, and push-ups help maintain muscle mass and bone density, reducing the risk of falls and fractures. Yoga and tai chi are excellent for improving balance, flexibility, and coordination, promoting overall mobility, and reducing the risk of injury. Activities like gardening, dancing, or recreational sports also provide enjoyable ways to stay active and socialise with others. It's essential to listen to your body, start slowly, and gradually increase the intensity and duration of your workouts to ensure long-term sustainability.

### **NUTRITION: THE FOUNDATION OF LONGEVITY**

Contemporary healthcare is often reactive, which, in hindsight, could be fatal. Preventive steps to remedy chronic illnesses will serve individuals much more meaningfully than simply reacting once those chronic conditions are at their worst.

Nutrition is one of the most powerful ways to prevent the onset of illnesses and chronic conditions. By fueling our bodies with a balanced diet rich in fruits, vegetables, lean proteins, and healthy fats, we can ward off diseases and keep our bodies functioning optimally. Dr Attia advocates for viewing food as "information for our cells," a way to communicate with our bodies and support our overall well-being.

**Cognitive health is an essential component of active ageing. It affects our ability to maintain a positive outlook on life; therefore, engaging in intellectually stimulating activities, socialising and constantly challenging ourselves must become standard practices.**

To get started, Attia recommends shopping the perimeter of the grocery store to find whole, unprocessed foods like meats, dairy, grains, fruits and veggies. Also, consider consulting a nutritionist to tailor your diet to your specific health needs and goals. It always helps to increase your intake of high-quality protein to support muscle mass and overall health.

### **SLEEP: THE SILENT HEALER**

It's important to acknowledge that our sleep patterns change as we age; however, prioritising a good night's sleep should remain a constant, unshakable principle throughout our lives. Deep, restorative sleep connects cognitive function, emotional balance and physical health, therefore impacting our ability to function on the most micro level. The

University of California, Berkeley even revealed that consistent, quality sleep can potentially lower the risk of Alzheimer's and dementia in older adults<sup>5</sup>.

Creating a sleep-conducive environment and establishing a calming pre-sleep routine are essential steps to improving sleep quality. Limiting screen time, reducing caffeine intake, and engaging in relaxation techniques before bed, like mindfulness exercises, breathing drills, and meditations, can enhance the depth and duration of your sleep.

Similar to evaluating your nutrition and physical activity, you should assess and monitor your sleep. Several commercial devices, wearable technology and beds, are available to help you gain insights into how to sleep better; you can even download smartphone apps that track your sleep cycle and offer daily (and monthly) analytics.

### **MENTAL AGILITY: KEEPING THE MIND SHARP**

A healthy body is inseparable from an active, healthy mind. Cognitive decline is perhaps one of the most fearful aspects of ageing, but it's not inevitable. In fact, the ability to retain our cognitive abilities is within our reach most of the time. You could opt for something as simple as using your non-dominant hand to perform basic tasks, or read books regularly to stay sharp.

Cognitive health is an essential component of active ageing. It affects our ability to maintain a positive outlook on life; therefore, engaging in intellectually stimulating activities, socialising and constantly challenging ourselves must become standard practices. Dr Attia points out, "The brain thrives on challenge. Learning something new is like strength training for your neurons." A key way to achieve this is by honouring a commitment to lifelong learning, whether through reading, taking online courses, learning a musical instrument, or even speaking a new language.

<sup>5</sup> University of California, Berkeley. (2023). Deep sleep may mitigate Alzheimer's memory loss, Berkeley research shows. Retrieved from <https://www.humansleepscience.com>

Smaller habits you can start with to build cognitive strength include daily reading, playing brain games, and social learning. Dedicate a fixed time each day to read – it could be books, articles, or even excerpts about random topics that excite you. Engage in brain games like puzzles, crosswords, sudoku or other digital apps designed to enhance cognitive functions. And lastly, find communities that encourage you to enhance your cognitive abilities. Join clubs or groups that focus on learning new skills and hobbies. The social element of meeting new people will add an extra layer of mental stimulation to the mix.

### **NURTURING CONNECTIONS: THE HEART OF HEALTHY AGEING**

The news is ablaze these days with reports of a looming “loneliness epidemic” in youngsters and elderly people alike. With the advent of urbanisation and digital communications replacing intimate, meaningful face-to-face interactions, more people are reporting a sense of disconnection from others. Addressing the loneliness epidemic is crucial for mental and physical well-being, as chronic loneliness is linked to higher risks of depression, anxiety, cardiovascular disease, and an overall reduced quality of life. Even though it might sound trivial, strengthening our social connections and fostering supportive communities can promote healthier, happier lives.

In fact, research shows that loneliness can increase our risk for premature death – it makes us more likely to die of a heart attack by 29% and of a stroke by 32%<sup>6</sup>.

While it may feel challenging to build new bonds and find like-minded people, it’s necessary to our overall well-being. Human beings are inherently social animals who thrive in communal settings; they nurture a sense of belonging and purpose by allowing people to rely on each other freely and openly. There are many incremental measures you can take to build and maintain social networks, digitally, and even in person. While social media may set us back in some respects, it’s allowed

us to stay connected in every sense of the word; regular interaction with friends and family, no matter where they are in the world, is always possible through phone calls, emails, texts and so on. Using these tools to keep in touch with those close to you is a small, convenient step to take to combat loneliness.

Additionally, experimenting with new experiences can also allow you to find purpose and community. Volunteering, for example, can evoke powerful sentiments by allowing you to give back to others, and serve your community to gain a deeper sense of purpose. It offers the valuable experience of working in a team as well, which can enhance your learning and introduce you to new people. The same principles apply to other forms of community engagement, like participating in organising (or merely attending) local events, clubs and workshops that align with your interests.

### **EMBRACING CHANGE: THE FINAL INGREDIENT**

Change is notoriously difficult, but like ageing, it’s also inevitable. Making peace with the fact that our lives will constantly evolve in a way that may or may not always appeal to us is crucial to ageing well. Navigating the later stages of life is synonymous with navigating changes: changes in our appearances, bodies, social relationships, and how the world perceives us. Embracing this change instead of resisting it will, more often than not, culminate in a positive mindset that can transform challenges into opportunities for growth and reflection.

It’s important for the ageing population to adapt to change because it allows older individuals – who are otherwise dubbed as regressive – to stay engaged, connected, and relevant in society. Adapting to change, therefore, complements Dr Attia’s suggestions of enhancing cognitive function, physical health, and emotional well-being. The resilience and flexibility that come with embracing change will allow you to quickly adjust to your exercise, nutritional needs, and strategies for mental well-being. Additionally, adapting to new technologies, social

norms, and environments enables older adults to remain active participants in their communities. This participation allows for them to pursue personal growth and fulfillment throughout their lives.

Embracing change is only possible with mindfulness and reflection. Regularly take stock of your life, acknowledging changes and adjusting your mindset and habits accordingly. Stay curious because it leads to learning and learning leads to growth. Keep asking questions and exploring new interests.

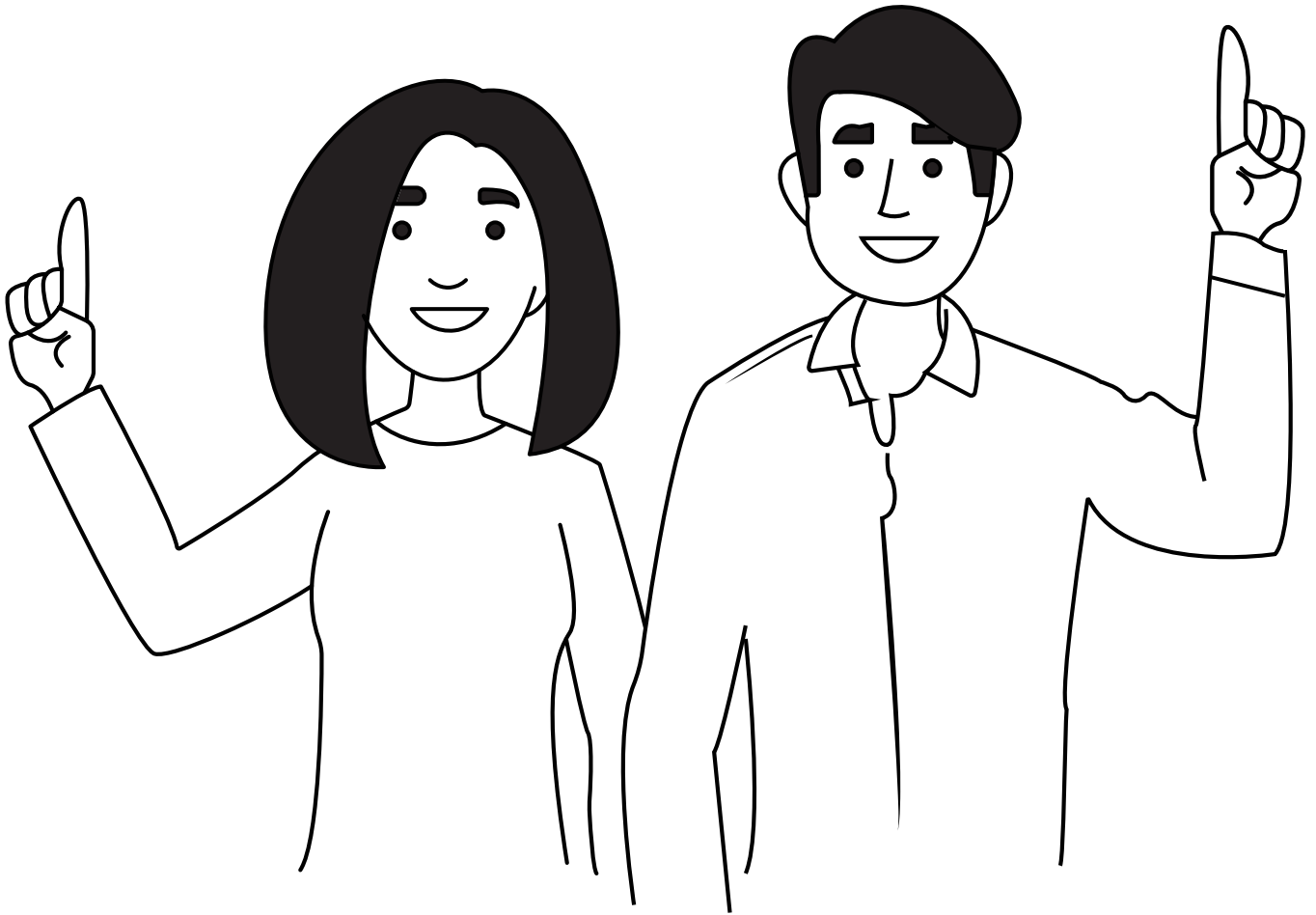
### **A BLUEPRINT FOR THRIVING**

Ageing with agency is an art, but it’s also a science that blends the wisdom of our years with proactive, evidence-based steps that increase our propensity for health and happiness. It’s about more than just surviving; it’s about flourishing – cultivating a life rich with purpose, connection, and joy. Adopting the pillars mentioned in this article into daily life requires more than just knowledge; it demands action. Start with achievable goals, and gradually build up to more significant changes. The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step, and the path to ageing well is no different. Celebrate the milestones, no matter how small, and remember, the goal is progress, not perfection.

The latter half of our lives is affectionately dubbed our “golden years.” We possess the power to ensure they stay truly golden in every sense, not dimmed by fear or inaction but illuminated by the choices we make every day. In embracing these principles, we recognise that ageing isn’t about loss but about evolving, growing, and thriving to become the best versions of ourselves. ■

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<sup>6</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. [2021]. Lonely older adults. Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/aging/publications/features/lonely-older-adults.html>



# **VOLUNTEERING**

– SHOULD YOU BOTHER?

**BY MOHD NIZAM ISMAIL**

In a hyper-competitive environment that is Singapore, it may be counter-intuitive for a young professional to devote time to helping others in the community when he or she is already facing the pressures of balancing professional and family demands.

Why bother to volunteer for the community?

I am mildly ashamed to admit that a lot of my earlier decisions on volunteering were not a result of thoughtful deliberation but based on my gut instincts.

I now set out an overview of my personal journey on volunteerism, and my learning points.

My involvement with AMP started when I was 30, almost by chance.

This started in 1997. I was then a young Deputy Public Prosecutor/State Counsel at the Commercial Affairs Department. My immediate boss, Hamidul Haq, said that AMP was looking to engage younger professionals to tap into ideas for the community.

I instinctively said yes – probably a factor of not wanting to offend Hamidul, but also wanting to do something for the community that I was in.

I'd heard about AMP as an undergraduate at NUS Law School. As a law student, I took a non-law module and studied Political Science modules taught by Prof Hussin Mutalib in my 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> year of studies.

My childhood made me quite aware of the issues faced by the community. My entire childhood was spent in Kampong Tempeh, from the late '60s till the late '80s, and I had personally witnessed some stark issues facing the community.

Drug abuse was prevalent – I learnt the word “stoned” even when I was in primary school. I saw extended members of the family in their stoned glory. There was poverty. Kampong Tempeh was a small Malay enclave located in the middle of swanky Sixth Avenue, which was anything but Malay.

It didn't help that when *kampong* dwellers were told to clear their “temporary structures” by the authority, some sold their land (which was prime land) for a paltry rate of S\$30 per square foot. So the only valuable assets that *kampong* dwellers were sitting on – very precious land – would be quickly taken away from them.

I saw educational underattainment in primary school. Malay students were over-represented in the “Repeat” classes in Primary 6. Or in the then “basic stream” – where I saw rather grown Malay pubescent teenagers still in primary school.

I then had also personally encountered discrimination myself at the SAF, during National Service. As a staff in the HQ of Officer Cadet School, I was appalled to learn that newly-commissioned Malay officers were excluded from many parts of the Army simply due to their ethnicity. It felt to me that discrimination was real and worse, institutionalised.

Unfortunately, a lot of these issues persisted over the decades.

And so, coming back to the conversation with Hamidul to help out at AMP, these factors made me instinctively agree to the suggestion. It was probably the right thing to agree to devote some time – “a few hours a month”, said Hamidul – to give back to the community.

Frankly, I did not think too hard. It felt right and I went with the flow.

This was a learning point for me – to go with the flow and to trust my instincts.

I then helped out in the “STRIDE” Committee – which stood for “Strategic Initiatives Development”. One learning point for me at an early stage of volunteering was that AMP was fond of acronyms.

I met the persons whom I later learnt were the trailblazers of the community – persons such as the late Yang Razali Kassim, Alami Musa and Darke Sani. Along with other Muslim professionals, they all had the fire in the belly to uplift the community.

STRIDE was a platform by AMP to mobilise younger professionals to generate ideas to uplift the community.

I found the discussions on the community refreshing. It was intellectually fulfilling to think critically about the community and the role of the state beyond my professional legal work.

It was inspiring that Muslim professionals from different sectors had devoted their ideas, energies and time, to actualise AMP's vision of a model minority Muslim community.

I fed my curiosity by learning so much about activism and the hard issues faced by the community.

As things would turn out, a lot of the ideas thought about by STRIDE dovetailed into the strategies that AMP had thought about, and proposed at AMP's 2<sup>nd</sup> Convention.

This was a Convention not without controversy.

AMP had then mooted the idea of collective leadership.

I had, as a member of younger professionals, personally presented this on behalf of the Politics, Leadership and Civil Society panel at the Max Atria theatre at the Singapore Expo.

Prior to the convention, nobody thought it was controversial – as the Collective Leadership was meant to be an inclusive platform involving the political and community leadership, to play the role of leading the community on strategies that could uplift it. Many thought it was a critical strategy for the community.

The reaction to the Collective Leadership proposal from the establishment on the second day of the Convention, was, to me, surprising. Then PM Goh Chok Tong brought down the hammer and effectively said “No” to the collective leadership idea.

But as things were to unfold later, the establishment saw it fit to introduce the concept of a “Community Leadership Forum” (CLF) involving political and community leadership with elements that sounded similar to the original



This careful process of thinking and re-thinking the strategic thrusts to find the best solutions not just for the Malay community, but other underprivileged communities in Singapore requires bold and brave discussions with policymakers, who oftentimes may not agree with our approach.

But so long as you are guided by the correct *niat* or intention, and have clarity of purpose, things will be all right.

Collective Leadership Proposal. They say that imitation is the best form of flattery. Certain underlying ideas behind the Collective Leadership proposal – the need for political and community leadership to work together – therefore persuaded the establishment on the need to set up CLF.

There were, of course, many other learning points from the Convention, which was predominantly a volunteer-driven, grounds-up endeavour.

Mobilising the community was important and gave weight to the proposals at the Convention.

One negative learning point for me was the flip-flop of convenience. I recall those who had fervently supported the idea of collective leadership when it was presented on the first day of the Convention, but who would on the next day, provide media interviews denouncing the idea as a bad one.

I learnt that thought leadership may encounter resistance. But fundamentally, one needs to be guided by the clarity of purpose.

After the Convention, Yang Razali would then, on several occasions invite me to join the Board of Directors of AMP. I politely declined, as I had just embarked on a career change, joining the Monetary Authority of Singapore in 2000, and wanted to devote my time and energies there.

In October 2004, Young AMP was launched. This was Yang Razali's brainchild. He was again instrumental in getting me involved in the build-up to Young AMP, and then in convincing me to agree to take up the role of the founding President.

This was my first formal appointment within AMP and one which I took up with an initial sense of trepidation. It was not something that I had put up my hand for but Yang Razali was persuasive.

I enjoyed the stint at Young AMP as it involved working with a blank sheet of canvas. It was fun working with the positive energies of younger and emerging professionals (i.e. students). Young AMP ran Reading Circles at the institutes of higher learning, which were well-received.

Some time after being part of Young AMP, Yang Razali again said that because of my role in Young AMP, I would have an “automatic seat” on the board of directors of AMP. The Board was then chaired by Alami Musa.

I remember chuckling and thought it was clever of him to find a way to get me on the Board.

And that was how I joined the Board of Directors of AMP – again, not by design, but as a result of my role in Young AMP. At that point, it felt right.

I remember Board meetings to be unduly long. They would start typically on a Friday evening and would drag past midnight right into the early hours of Saturday. Of course, there were many critical matters that the community was facing that warranted that time.

AMP's constitution had a clause mandating that one-third of the directors had to step down from the Board every two years. Then, Imram Mohamed had to step down as Chairman, and the issue of the new Chairman surfaced.

The Board had a secret ballot on who should be the next Chairman of AMP, and when the votes were counted, to my horror, my name garnered the most votes.

I recall that my instinctive reaction during the Board meeting was to state that I was not ready to take up the chairmanship. I then promised the Board to give the matter some thought and eventually agreed.

Now, it may seem that these roles that I undertook – in Young AMP, at the Board of AMP, and then chairing the Board were completely random and unplanned.

But what was clear in my mind was the purpose that led me to carry out the roles as best as I could.

What was clear was the community needed every bit of help.

In truth, Muslim professionals are a scarce resource. Yes, the numbers are growing in absolute terms, but we are still under-represented when compared with national figures.

As my AMP journey moved along, it became clear to me that the greatest need that the community needed was thought leadership and policy engagement with the national leaders. This was opposed to characterising issues as community problems, and the community trying to tackle these on its own.

The various issues faced by the community – leadership, economic attainment, social issues, education, demographics – were very deep-seated and complex. They were oftentimes intertwined and are often symptomatic of deeper and more complex issues that warranted robust engagement with national policymakers.

For instance, the only effective solution to alleviate the relative educational under-attainment of Malay children was national policy changes, as opposed to community-centric initiatives which tended to be symptomatic and ineffective treatments. This called into question policy issues as to how meritocracy was being implemented in Singapore.

This careful process of thinking and re-thinking the strategic thrusts to find the best solutions not just for the Malay community, but other underprivileged communities in Singapore requires bold and brave discussions with policymakers, who oftentimes may not agree with our approach.

But so long as you are guided by the correct *niat* or intention, and have clarity of purpose, things will be all right.

When political leaders doubted us, it was important for AMP to be steadfastly guided by its mission and play the role of the conscience of the community.

This complex manner of engagement with policymakers and other members of the community required individuals with the critical ability, leadership and courage to champion these issues.

This required professionals to come forward.

At the back of my mind, my years of volunteerism were probably driven by my understanding of *fardhu kifayah*

(communal responsibility). Muslim professionals have received the blessings of having the cognitive capacity to think critically about issues, define the root cause of problems faced by the community, and suggest strategies for the community to find its pride of place in Singapore.

Supporting the oppressed, uplifting the wrong that befalls them, and maintaining social security are all important tenets of *fardhu kifayah*.

For those considering volunteering, do consider:

- The cause that resonates best with you
- The time that you are willing to devote on a weekly or monthly basis
- The organisation that has a good fit in terms of cause, and need for volunteers
- Whether an organisation has a good volunteer management framework

From my end, volunteerism has helped me grow.

I found an immense sense of satisfaction in contributing ideas. We know that some of these suggestions have influenced policy.

Moreover, volunteering transcends charity; it fosters personal growth, strengthens networks, and cultivates lifelong friendships. As we mentor the younger generation, we pass on the torch of responsibility, nurturing future leaders committed to serving their community. I have made a lot of friends bound by a commonality of purpose.

In essence, volunteering is a manifestation of our faith in action. It is a testament to our commitment to uplift the community.

As Muslim professionals in Singapore, let us embrace volunteerism wholeheartedly, for in serving others, we fulfill our higher purpose.

Volunteering – why bother? Because it is not just an obligation that is rooted in Islam; it is our privilege and our legacy. ■

Moreover, volunteering transcends charity; it fosters personal growth, strengthens networks, and cultivates lifelong friendships. As we mentor the younger generation, we pass on the torch of responsibility, nurturing future leaders committed to serving their community. I have made a lot of friends bound by a commonality of purpose.

Mohd Nizam Ismail is CEO and Founder of Ethikom Consultancy. He was Chairman of AMP Singapore from 2006 to 2011 and the Founding President of Young AMP, the youth wing of AMP, from 2004 to 2009.



# Beyond Religion & Race: Reframing the Conversation on Palestine

BY DR MUNEEARAH AB RAZAK



On 23 December 2023, Reverend Dr Munther Isaac delivered the Christmas eve sermon at the pulpit of the Evangelical Lutheran Christmas Church in Bethlehem, West Bank<sup>1</sup>. In his stirring address, he said “If Jesus were born today, he would be born under the rubble in Gaza. [...] Born among the occupied and marginalised. He is in solidarity with us in our pain and brokenness.”

Representing the Palestinian Christian community, Rev. Munther expressed his unwavering solidarity with Palestinians in Gaza, regardless of faith. He criticised how leaders around the world had refused

to call for a ceasefire on the basis of Israel’s “right to self-defence” and for their financial complicity, whether directly funding the genocide<sup>2</sup> or indirectly supporting Israel’s military industry<sup>3</sup> and arms research and development ventures (which are currently used against innocent Palestinian civilians).

The entrenched impunity of the Israeli military has led to horrifying news of indiscriminate killing of civilians, mass displacements of the entire Palestinian peoples in Gaza and the blockade of essential needs such as healthcare, food and water. This came as a form

of retaliation after 1,200 people were killed in Israel in the 7<sup>th</sup> October Hamas attacks.

As of 18 March 2024, the death toll of Palestinians killed was at least 31,645 people and more than 73,000 people injured<sup>4</sup>. Every day, the death toll of innocent civilian lives increases. International organisations such as the United Nations, have early on defined the violence committed by Israel on Gaza as a “genocide in the making”<sup>5</sup>, as there has been increasing evidence of intent to “destroy the Palestinian people under occupation”.

<sup>1</sup> Munther, I. “Christ in the Rubble: A Liturgy of Lament.” *Red Letter Christians*, December 28, 2023. <https://www.redletterchristians.org/christ-in-the-rubble-a-liturgy-of-lament/>

<sup>2</sup> Reuters. “US House Passes \$14.3bn Aid Package for Israel despite Democratic Opposition.” *The Guardian*, November 2, 2023. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2023/nov/02/us-house-republicans-aid-israel-biden-administration-threatens-veto>

<sup>3</sup> The Database of Israeli Military and Security Export. “Singapore.” *DIMSE*. Accessed April 16, 2024. <https://dimse.info/singapore/>

<sup>4</sup> Varshalomidze, T., & Motamedi, M. “Israel’s war on Gaza updates: Rafah invasion to be ‘avoided at all costs’.” *Aljazeera*. March 17, 2024. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/liveblog/2024/3/17/israels-war-on-gaza-live-13-aid-trucks-reach-north-malnutrition-doubles>

<sup>5</sup> Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. “Gaza: UN Experts Call on International Community to Prevent Genocide against the Palestinian People | Ohchr.” *United Nations*, November 16, 2023. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/11/gaza-un-experts-call-international-community-prevent-genocide-against>

## ALL EYES ON GAZA: SINGAPORE

On 20 October 2023<sup>6</sup>, PM Lee noted that Singaporeans are also following these events closely, stating that it happens “every time there’s violence in the Middle East”. He added “particularly I think the Muslim population in Singapore are very agitated about it because there’s a certain feeling of empathy and compassion, particularly closely felt for the Palestinian cause.”

Deputy PM Lawrence Wong echoed these sentiments adding<sup>7</sup>, “our Muslim community in Singapore feel it more strongly, because of the empathy and compassion for the Palestinian cause. But no matter our race, religion, or background, we cannot help but grieve that so many lives have been lost, and many more remain in danger.”

In many ways, Singaporean Muslims should be proud to be recognised as a community that has a deep understanding of humanity and justice. Everyone should be agitated and concerned that Israel is committing gross violations of human rights and international humanitarian laws, with almost no accountability.

However, in the context of Singapore, the impact of such statements can be misunderstood as singling out the Muslim community. In the same speech quoted above, DPM Wong added:

“On such emotive issues, it makes all the difference to have religious leaders who understand what is happening and what is at stake for Singapore. They are able to guide their flock and help to hold the social cohesion and trust between our different religious groups. Some may think that such guidance is not necessary. But they are mistaken.”

Despite this being a general comment, the Muslim community was the only faith community to receive a religious advisory, in Malay and English, to guide us on our response to “overseas conflicts such as the ongoing one between Israel and Hamas”. This was developed by the

In many ways, Singaporean Muslims should be proud to be recognised as a community that has a deep understanding of humanity and justice. Everyone should be agitated and concerned that Israel is committing gross violations of human rights and international humanitarian laws, with almost no accountability.

Office of the Mufti, under the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (Muis).

It is different to organically get advice and reminders from our *asatizah* on how to understand bearing witness to oppression and injustices in this life and seek spiritual clarity and strength to show solidarity through offering prayers, donations and political action (such as sending emails and letter to our political representatives), as opposed to a centralised advisory that seems to only be for and by the Muslim community.

Is it not reasonable to question whether other racial and religious communities receive such advisories?

The singling out of the Muslim community, as the only community that “needs guidance” as we are “particularly agitated”, assumes that (1) only Singaporean Muslims care about what is happening in Palestine because (2) most Palestinians are Muslims.

## SOME DANGERS OF TALKING ABOUT PALESTINE AS A “RELIGIOUS ISSUE”

Despite these instances, politicians in Singapore have been responding to the genocide in Gaza as a humanitarian issue, with politicians issuing statements for an immediate humanitarian ceasefire, calls for innocent civilian lives to be protected and consistent efforts to provide humanitarian assistance<sup>8</sup>.

With Palestinians documenting life under settler colonialism from the 2014 war in Gaza, which killed about 2,250 Palestinians, to being displaced by Israeli settlers from their homes in Sheikh Jarrah in 2021; from police violence in the Al Aqsa mosque in 2022, to the current atrocities in Gaza, there has been a shift in how people are viewing the “Israel-Palestine conflict”. Most understand it to be a humanitarian issue.

However, as described above, there seems to be an underlying racial or religious framing of a political struggle that needs to be addressed and rejected.

## The ‘Israel-Palestine conflict’ is not a religious issue: it is settler colonialism

Directly from the birthplace of Jesus himself in Bethlehem, Palestine, Rev Munther’s Christmas Eve sermon was a reminder against orientalist narratives that depict Israel’s settler-colonial project as a primordial feud between Muslims and Jews. By looking beyond the essentialist “religious issue” narrative when understanding Palestine, the violent nature of occupation and apartheid is something that can be

<sup>6</sup> Lee, HL. “Excerpt of PM Lee Hsien Loong’s Media Wrap-up in Riyadh, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia” *Prime Minister’s Office, Singapore*, October 20, 2023. <https://www.pmo.gov.sg/Newsroom/PM-Lee-Hsien-Loong-Media-Wrap-up-Interview-in-Riyadh-Kingdom-of-Saudi-Arabia-Oct-2023>

<sup>7</sup> Wong, L. “DPM Lawrence Wong on the Israel-Hamas Conflict (November 2023)” *Prime Minister’s Office, Singapore*, November 6, 2023. <https://www.pmo.gov.sg/Newsroom/DPM-Lawrence-Wong-on-the-Israel-Hamas-Conflict-November-2023>

<sup>8</sup> Kok, Y. “Singapore in agreement with Jordan and Qatar on need for immediate humanitarian ceasefire in Gaza”. *The Straits Times*, March 18, 2024. <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/s-pore-in-agreement-with-jordan-and-qatar-on-need-for-immediate-humanitarian-ceasefire-in-gaza>

challenged and removed, as Rev Munther demonstrated in his sermon. Historically, we have seen how apartheid was deconstructed and rooted out in South Africa in the 1990s.

Despite the majority of Palestinians being Muslims and the majority of Israelis being Jewish, going beyond the “religious issue” narrative allows us to realise that Israeli settler colonisation, occupation and apartheid are affecting Palestinians as a whole, not only Muslims but Christians, those of other faith denominations or those who do not belong to a faith community. As reflected in Rev Munther’s sermon, non-Muslim Palestinians also experience settler-colonial violence and resist in meaningful ways, seeking strength from their own faith traditions.

It is a sad reality but highlighting violence inflicted on non-Muslim Palestinians, reminds us to regard what is happening in Palestine as a humanitarian crisis, resulting from occupation and settler colonialism. Especially over the long course of the War on Terror<sup>9</sup>, it reminds those who have become apathetic to the deaths of Muslim, Brown and Black bodies that settler colonialism affects all Palestinians.

Without refuting the “religious issue” narrative, there is also the danger that Israel is positioned as the geopolitical face of Judaism, an assertion that many anti-Zionist Jews have critiqued. This is similar to asserting that Saudi Arabia is the geopolitical face of Islam, which does not hold true.

### Normalising Islamophobia

As Mohammed El-Kurd asserts, the “religious issue” narrative has been weaponised by the Israeli government. Palestinians have been and continue to be dehumanised and subjected to Islamophobic violence physically and rhetorically. Prof John Esposito observed that Israeli politics often uses



Figure 1  
Palestinian writer and activist Mohammed EL-Kurd on Twitter (now known as X)<sup>10</sup>

Islamophobic rhetoric to portray Muslims and Arabs as the enemy<sup>11</sup>. Early in the war, members of the Israeli government referred to Palestinians as “human animals”. Netanyahu even quoted the Old Testament, describing Palestinians as the “Amalek”, the Jews’ archetypal enemy. The impact of this is that it is justified to view victims of an indiscriminate war as less valuable than human beings – “collateral damage” in the name of national defence.

Even within the rhetoric of “right to national self-defence”, Netanyahu’s government legitimates this all-out war in Gaza by equating Hamas to ISIS (The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria). The 7<sup>th</sup> October attacks were carried out by Hamas, however Netanyahu and mainstream media claim that these attacks represent all that Hamas is. As Prof Esposito clarifies, ISIS is an extremist militant group and transnational movement whose vision and mission was to create a caliphate in the Middle East, whereas Hamas’ roots are an integral part of the history of Palestinians. It has been a major political movement that governed in Gaza for many years<sup>12</sup>.

It is a sad reality but highlighting violence inflicted on non-Muslim Palestinians, reminds us to regard what is happening in Palestine as a humanitarian crisis, resulting from occupation and settler colonialism. Especially over the long course of the War on Terror, it reminds those who have become apathetic to the deaths of Muslim, Brown and Black bodies that settler colonialism affects all Palestinians.

The media were also quick to fan the flames, without checks and balances. For example, the initial reports that were coming out of Israel mentioned the beheading of babies. President Joe Biden withdrew his statement, confirming its falsehood<sup>13</sup>. But the damage had

<sup>9</sup> Hussain, M. “It’s time for America to reckon with the staggering death toll of the post-9/11 wars”. *The Intercept*, November 19, 2018. <https://theintercept.com/2018/11/19/civilian-casualties-us-war-on-terror/>  
<sup>10</sup> El-Kurd, M. [@m7mdkurd]. (2021, December 5). It’s not the land of Muslims. It’s the land of indigenous Palestinians. Stop advancing the Israeli narrative that this is a religious war. [Tweet]. Twitter. <https://twitter.com/m7mdkurd/status/1392385637051940848>  
<sup>11</sup> Saber, I.F. “Seen as less human”: Why has Islamophobia surged amid Israel’s Gaza war?. *Aljazeera*. December 21, 2023. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/12/21/seen-as-less-human-why-has-islamophobia-surged-amid-israels-gaza-war>  
<sup>12</sup> Anas-Mohammed, “What is Hamas? Seven key questions answered”. *The Conversation*, October 11, 2023. <https://theconversation.com/what-is-hamas-seven-key-questions-answered-215391>  
<sup>13</sup> Al Jazeera, “White House walks back Biden’s claim he saw children beheaded by Hamas”. *Aljazeera*, October 12, 2023. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/10/12/white-house-walks-back-bidens-claim-he-saw-children-beheaded-by-hamas>

been done by imprinting the image of irrational Muslim terrorists.

Inevitably, by painting Hamas with the ‘terrorist’ label that morally dismisses non-state perpetrators of violence and omitting the historical context of 7<sup>th</sup> October<sup>14</sup>, Palestinians, especially in Gaza, are being painted as terrorists or terrorist sympathisers. On the contrary, Palestinians understand the root of violence to be settler colonialism.

This has extended to those who support the Palestinian cause. United Kingdom Prime Minister Rishi Sunak recently warned against the ‘rise of extremism’ in Britain. He was referring to the overwhelmingly peaceful protests calling for a ceasefire in Gaza, and those who had challenged the UK’s export of lethal weapons which kill innocent civilians abroad. In the United States, there are complaints of Islamophobia and anti-Arab bias ranging from verbal harassment to violence against Palestinian human rights supporters.

Locally, in Singapore, the advocacy for Palestine has been largely multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, uniting people of different ages, backgrounds, gender and sexuality – online and offline (see letters for Palestine, audience of the Palestine Film Festival and Gaza Monologues). However, the impact of normalising Islamophobic rhetoric when speaking about Gaza, as well as singling out the Muslim community as “particularly agitated”, was a proliferation of sweeping and outrightly bigoted social media comments about the Muslim (particularly Malay-Muslim) community in Singapore<sup>15</sup>.

### **For the Muslim community: Palestinians are not ‘resilient’**

Despite Muslims ourselves arguing that we support the Palestinian cause because it is a matter of justice and human rights, at times, we have also internalised these assumptions – the “religious issue” narrative on Palestine.

At times, Muslims paddle a romanticised narrative of Palestinians being ‘chosen’ to live in the Holy Land and so we expect supernatural ‘coping mechanisms’ of strength, resilience and patience from Palestinians facing unimaginable horrors. Idealising Palestinian resilience using religious language can unintentionally minimise the reality of their suffering. Palestinian academic Dr Malaka Shwaikh argues against expecting “resilience” from Palestinians arguing that it “imposes mythical terms on our experience and our everyday struggles. It obscures our humanity, reduces the depravity of Israeli violence, and ignores other forms of violence, especially the structural violence that we continue to face every day”<sup>16</sup>.

While Muslims do believe that injustices and trials are a reality of this world and being patient through the trials are a sign of deep faith and strength, which the Palestinians have demonstrated time and time again, this should not result in our negligence towards our ethical responsibility to demand for justice. While we may use our faith traditions as a lens to process harrowing scenes of injustice and violence, what is happening in Palestine and Israel remains to be deeply political and a humanitarian crisis.

### **A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE**

It should be clear that what has been happening in Palestine and Israel for 75 years is not a religious conflict between Muslims and Jews. We are witnessing a humanitarian crisis, with the clear root cause of settler-colonialism.

However, how do we understand the long history of solidarity from Muslim masses across the world, and particularly within the Global South? Historically, as well, Singaporean Muslims have always been in solidarity with Palestine. There are newspaper reports from 1947 about protests against the United Nations’ partitioning of Palestine<sup>17</sup>. Is the ‘secular’ in the language of “humanitarian issue” the only project to encourage intersectional solidarity or the capacity to reach out to the “Other”?

Anthropology scholar Dr Muneeza Rivzi articulates “indeed, believers in Palestine, like their co-religionists elsewhere, situate their opposition to colonial domination not only in the flattening idioms of humanitarian compassion or the politico-judicial register of rights, but also with reference to the moral universe of the *umma*, a concept traversing multiple temporalities and attached to dynamic notions of divine order, dignity, endurance, death and victory”<sup>18</sup>.

In centring the rhetoric of a “humanitarian issue”, it is also important to not erase the many ways Palestinians are resisting occupation, often meaningfully rooted in their own faith traditions.

### **FINAL REFLECTIONS**

The “religious issue” rhetoric is harmful as by projecting the orientalist narrative of a primordial feud between Muslims and Jews, it not only obscures Israel’s settler-colonial project, but it also has unintended consequences of essentialising Muslim communities all over the world and normalising Islamophobia.

At this political moment, we, as a global community, have to reject the dehumanisation of Palestinians by bearing witness to the genocide, remembering the lives lost and calling out the depravity and injustice of Israeli violence on the Palestinian people.

I end by making space to affirm the sanctity of life, a common thread found within all of our sacred traditions. Along with so many around the world, I express my grief, sorrow and anger for every person who had their lives taken unjustly and brutally, whether Muslim, Christian, Jewish, person of any faith, or no faith. ■

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<sup>14</sup> Ab Razak, M., “Can Violence be Moral? Revisiting Fanon on Violence in The Wretched of the Earth”, *LSE Middle East Centre*, January 8, 2018, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2018/01/08/can-violence-be-moral-revisiting-fanon-on-violence-in-the-wretched-of-the-earth/>

<sup>15</sup> Aslam, A. & Tjoa, SH., “Class Was Chaotic: Students and Teachers Chime in on Israel-Palestine COE Slides”, *RICE Media*, March 1, 2024, <https://www.ricemedia.com/students-teachers-israel-palestine-cc-slides/>; more social media comments can be seen on PlanB Instagram page @planb.sg

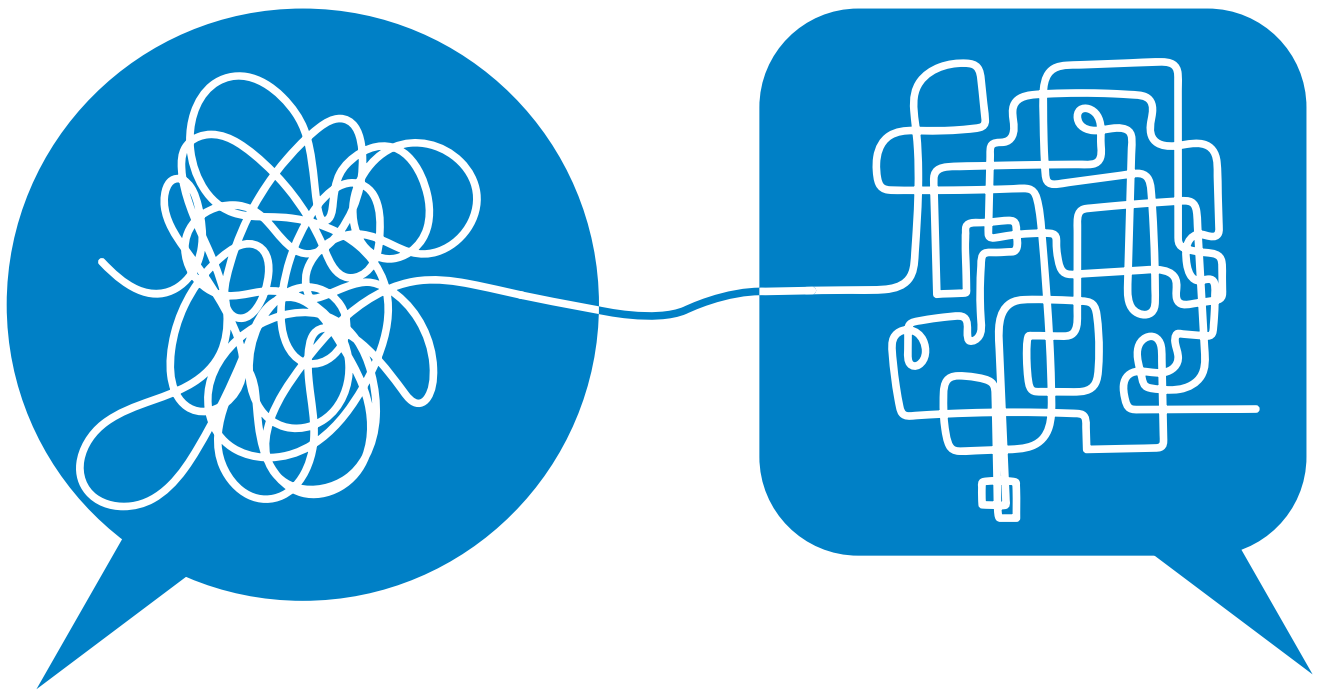
<sup>16</sup> Shwaikh, M., “Against Resilience”, *LRB Blog*, January 23, 2024, <https://www.lrb.co.uk/blog/2024/january/against-resilience>

<sup>17</sup> Sunday Tribune, “Local Muslims to protest to UNO”, *Sunday Tribune*, December 21, 1947, <https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/digitised/article/sundaytribune19471221-1.2.8>

<sup>18</sup> Rivzi, M., “Palestine and the Question of Islam”, *Critical Muslim Studies*, May 27, 2021, <https://criticalmuslimstudies.co.uk/project/palestine-and-the-question-of-islam/>

# Overcoming Differences of Opinion within the Muslim Community

BY IMAD ALATAS





Discussion and debate have always been part of the Islamic scholarly tradition. Muslims differ in their jurisprudence, political views, solutions to modern problems, and theological matters such as the role of reason in knowing and experiencing God. Within Sunni Islam, the major schools of thought are Shafi'i, Hanafi, Maliki, and Hanbali. Within Shi'i Islam, you have the Twelvers, the Seveners, and the Fivers, who are all named after the number of *Imams* each branch recognises. Perhaps one of the biggest debates within Islamic discourse is who succeeded Prophet Muhammad (*peace be upon him*) as leader of the Islamic faith. Muslims also deal with the sensitivities of Sunni-Shia relations; Sunni-Shia romantic relationships are not always received in a positive light. Family members, immediate and extended, debate with each other till they can arrive at a *détente*, if at all. Debates and questions have also been raised in relation to everyday matters, such as whether food can be consumed if alcohol is an ingredient used during the cooking process. Another example is shaking hands with someone of the opposite sex if they are not *mahram*.<sup>1</sup> These kinds of debates can take place in good spirits, as Muslims strive to practise their faith to the best of their ability. However, some debates can cause more discomfort than is necessary. I'd like to talk about an encounter with a fellow Muslim brother that illustrates how even seemingly insignificant debates can serve as a lesson for how we engage with others who disagree with us or question our preferences.

I have been a student at the University of North Carolina (UNC) for about three years now. As an international student, it is always helpful to search for a community, whether defined by religion, race, or simply common interest. UNC has all these, including a visible Muslim community. The crowd is rather young; it is difficult to form any meaningful connections with students who are much younger than I am and are from different generations with different life experiences. Not far away in Durham is Duke, a private research university with a more vibrant Muslim life. Graduate Muslim students are also more visible there, and so I have

made a habit of going there for Friday prayers when I can. A shuttle bus connects UNC and Duke, making it convenient for me.

I was waiting for the bus to arrive from Duke and when it did, a Muslim brother whom I bump into on campus from time to time, alighted. I've seen him at the campus *musalla*,<sup>2</sup> rode on buses with him, and prayed behind him during the Ramadan *tarawih* prayers. After we greeted one another, he asked where I was going. I said, "To Duke." He asked me why. I told him I was heading there for Friday prayers. He started to look perplexed. He became curious and sought to understand why I was going to Duke and not UNC instead for Friday prayers. I told him I simply liked going to Duke. Still not satisfied, he persisted in asking me why. After this repeated several times, he eventually left, with a dissatisfied look on his face.

I shared the above encounter as an example of how even the most mundane dimension of Islamic practice can provoke uneasy discussions. We certainly had a difference in opinion about propriety vis-à-vis who we pray with. The interchange was an opportunity for both of us to manage this difference in opinion. He seemed to struggle with accepting my choice of location for prayer, which perplexed me. Out of curiosity, I googled what Muslims might say about praying in different mosques. I came across a search result about praying in a mosque which follows another school of thought. A questioner was asking whether it was allowed to pray behind a *Hanafi* Imam. The short answer was 'yes'. If schools of thought can differ respectfully as to how one prays and see no issue with praying in a mosque different from your own school of thought, praying in a different mosque, especially of the same school of thought, is not a problem. Furthermore, Islam as a religion is flexible when it comes to where we pray, although the mosque is more desirable. The place should of course be clean.

In Singapore, the Muslim community, though a minority, do have differences in opinion about worship. The Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS) has

stepped in to offer advice on how to deal with these differences. One example is timely: the ongoing plight of the Palestinians in Gaza. In November 2023, MUIS developed a guidebook for various segments of the Muslim community to allow them to process what is going on in Gaza. While the conflict is not solely religious in nature (it is also territorial), Muslims are understandably upset that their brothers and sisters are being oppressed. The guidebook sought to emphasise "Islam's rejection of all forms of oppression, no matter the perpetrator" (Asia News Network, 2023). While the advice is not directly linked to matters of worship, it does mention how to express sorrow and grief in a way that "rests on Islamic values" (Asia News Network, 2023). Such advice was given against the backdrop of MUIS' concerns that apocalyptic religious texts had begun to appear on social media. MUIS understood Muslims' anger at what is happening in Gaza, advising them on how to process this anger rather than admonishing them that they are not proper Muslims if they are too emotional. MUIS also cautioned against some Muslims' dismissal of young people as naïve and uninformed just because of the way they strive for social justice (Asia News Network, 2023). MUIS' implicit overall message was that Muslims all have the same goal of practising their faith to the best of their ability. Some may feel more strongly than others about social justice causes but this need not be a source of division and conflict within the Muslim community.

In another example, MUIS (2021) issued a *fatwa* (ruling) addressing concerns about a deviant religious teaching from a self-styled prophet who had 'spiritual wives' and averred that gambling was allowed in order to help the needy (The Straits Times, 2020). In short, MUIS noted that his teachings were deviant, but it explained why they were deviant and it also defined what characterised a deviant teaching. The *fatwa* also discussed how MUIS determined the status of a teaching. The self-styled prophet may be deemed a bizarre example of a difference in worship, but it is a difference nonetheless, and MUIS responded to it without being incendiary. At the same time, it took a

<sup>1</sup> *Mahram* is a term in Islamic jurisprudence referring to a person with whom marriage is prohibited due to close familial ties.

<sup>2</sup> A space apart from a mosque used for prayer in Islam.

**The cliché “agree to disagree” applies here. Muslims should be able to disagree politely and respectfully with one another about religious issues no matter how trivial they are, especially if we are not contravening the fundamental tenets of the faith. The goal of healthy disagreement with each other is not to eliminate differences in worship or perspectives on how to practice one’s faith. That is not an attainable goal. What is attainable is a healthy co-existence where we are able to disagree with one another and not feel a strong sense of discomfort or even hatred towards other Muslims.**

firm stance on this teaching which it deemed to be against Islamic practice.

Perhaps the most salient example of differences in worship within Muslim communities lies in the realm of Sunni-Shi’i relations. Globally, the majority of Muslims are Sunni, with significant Shi’i populations in countries such as Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon. Shi’is in Singapore live within a Sunni-majority Muslim community. For the most part, Sunni-Shi’i relations in Singapore are harmonious. For example, *iftars* gathering Sunnis and Shi’is every Ramadan are a tradition. Religious authorities in Singapore value the contributions of Shi’is to the Muslim community. When MUIS was being established in 1970, Javad Namazie, a Shi’i legal practitioner, oversaw the process. Relations are also not marred by overt anti-Shia sentiments in a way that they are in neighbouring countries such as Malaysia (Al Jazeera, 2019) and Indonesia (The Diplomat, 2021). However, Sunni-Shi’i disagreements do exist in Singapore. In an article two years ago, I wrote about my interviews with a few Sunni-Shi’i married couples, asking them how they navigated differences in belief (Alatas, 2022). In short, it takes a lot of compromise before couples and their

families are able to accept one another. The couples, aware that Sunni-Shi’i relations in any Muslim society are a sensitive topic, suggested that Islamic education in Singapore do more to educate Muslims about Shi’i beliefs, their socio-political life, and their history in Singapore.

The repercussions of my encounter with the Muslim brother are mild in comparison to the issue of how to practise one’s faith in the context of another’s oppression, the danger of deviant teachings being propagated, and intrafaith relations. Yet these examples share one theme: The importance of respectful communication. I never expected to be questioned for praying at a different place. I never thought it mattered where you prayed. We are all praying in the direction of Mecca with fellow Muslims. Where we pray does not relate to whether our prayers will be accepted. Our sincerity during the few minutes of prayer is more important. Perhaps this is me being idealistic, since Muslims around the world have varying opinions on how to even pray in the first place. What should our hand position be? What should our feet position be? What kind of style should we use to recite the Quran? These are

questions difficult to ignore, as I have witnessed during congregational prayer. Two men on either side of me may hold their hands differently.

My encounter with the Muslim brother was a test for how we engage with someone who disagrees with us, or does not understand our preferences. I can understand his desire to pray with people he knows, but I also have a desire to pray with a community I feel comfortable with. Neither of us are wrong. The cliché “agree to disagree” applies here. Muslims should be able to disagree politely and respectfully with one another about religious issues no matter how trivial they are, especially if we are not contravening the fundamental tenets of the faith. The goal of healthy disagreement with each other is not to eliminate differences in worship or perspectives on how to practice one’s faith. That is not an attainable goal. What is attainable is a healthy co-existence where we are able to disagree with one another and not feel a strong sense of discomfort or even hatred towards other Muslims. Muslims in Singapore may not experience intrafaith violence to the degree that they do in parts of the Middle East. Yet, absence of violence should not be the only barometer for how well we get along. A better indicator would be the ability to respect one another’s beliefs without a sense of self-righteousness or superiority. This applies to me too: If I had more time to engage the Muslim brother, I would have explained why I like going to Duke. Maybe I owe him that explanation, even if his tone struck me as condescending. Another alternative is to not engage in such a conversation if one senses unnecessary tension. Disengaging can also be done politely, which is also what I could have done. ■

Imad Alatas is currently pursuing his PhD in Sociology at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. His main research interests are in gender and religion, topics on which he has written for Singaporean and Malaysian publications.

# HEALING HEARTS ACROSS CONTINENTS: JAAFAR YUSOF'S GLOBAL NURSING JOURNEY

BY NURUL MARDHIAH BTE OMAR



Mr Jaafar (right), who is based in Australia, has spent decades doing what he loved most, which is helping others, through his career as a nurse.

According to a report by the Australian Bureau of Statistics for the Department of Home Affairs, the latest Census in 2016 recorded 54,939 Singapore-born residents in Australia. Out of these, about 6.8% (estimated to be 3,735 residents) identify as Muslims.

As the population continues to increase, Australia is becoming a hot spot for Muslims from Singapore to pursue their education, progress in their careers, and eventually settle down with their families.

Jaafar Yusof, 59, chose to settle down and raise his family in Australia after exploring the world through his career as a nurse. Jaafar shares his story with the *Karyawan* team about his adventures.

## **Q: Can you tell us more about yourself and your family?**

**A:** I married my wife Nora in 1989. We are both nurses and are blessed with three children who are all married.

We recently had a new addition to our family – my grandson, Idris. My daughter, Amalina, her husband, Musa, and Idris are based in Sydney while my other children, Muhammad and Siti are in Victoria, not far from where we lived, in Hoppers Crossing.

Muhammad's wife, Maryam, is of Sri Lankan background and Siti's husband, Liam, is of Irish heritage. All my children's partners are Australian-born. I feel very fortunate to start a mixed culture family here. Australia is home now but every year, I spend my holidays in Singapore to visit my 94-year-old mother and the rest of our family, as well as my 87-year-old mother-in-law who resides in Johor Bahru.

## **Q: What does your job entail and why did you choose nursing as a career?**

**A:** Working in the Emergency Department as a Clinical Nurse Specialist in Werribee Hospital involves identifying medical issues, determining severity to provide immediate support to minimise negative long-term effects and to sustain life in dire situations.

I discovered my interest in nursing in 1982 right after I completed my studies at Maju Secondary School and I later graduated with a Certificate in Nursing in 1985.





Mr Jaafar (third from the right) settled down with his family in Australia after several stints around the world as a nurse. His children have now started families of their own and live in various states in Australia.

Afterwards, I completed my nursing degree in 2000. My main objective in life was to be able to help others. I was fortunate to be part of the Haj Medical team under the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS) on four different occasions. When I was working in Singapore General Hospital, I was part of the Singapore Medical Relief team during the Pakistan earthquake and Afghanistan War. Nursing has brought me to places that not everyone has the opportunity to experience.

**Q: Where else have you worked around the world?**

**A:** Nora and I worked in the Sultanate of Oman for four years and that was when I realised the benefits of a healthy work-life balance as well as having the opportunity to be exposed to and adapt to new challenges while living abroad. Missing family, friends and food are just some sacrifices I have had to make. However, we made new friends along the way, with some becoming our second family.

Exploring Oman's vast desert, meeting the Bedouins and being welcomed into their homes and culture was a priceless experience. Long distance driving in different terrains was an experience I will never forget either. While we were based in Oman, we even managed to travel to

Turkey, India, and perform our minor pilgrimage in Saudi Arabia. I also had a short stint in Jeddah, where I worked for two years just before the pandemic hit.

Moving to Australia and settling down there was a '*hijrah*' (migration) for me and my family. Adapting to Australian life was a challenge as my children were still schooling. We do not have the luxury of a live-in helper, so planning work and upkeep of our home were crucial.

**Q: Why did you choose to pursue a career as a nurse in Australia?**

**A:** In the Werribee Hospital in Australia, my colleagues treat each other with utmost respect. I can sit and have coffee with my medical head of the department without any barriers. Everyone attends the different company events. Nurses, doctors, administration staff and hospitality services will come and have fun together, thus creating a strong bond as a team.

My unit manager allows me to use his office as my prayer room. During Ramadan, I am also given the privilege of taking on morning shifts so that I can break my fast and complete my prayers with ease.

On top of my responsibilities at the hospital, I am also a committee member of the Australian Malay Foundation (AMF)

“As a Muslim, my family and I practise and adhere to both the requirements of Islam and the Australian government.

We shop where everyone shops, dine in the many halal establishments available, have picnics, vote in the elections, pay taxes and many more. We have attended peaceful protests for Palestine. Meeting other practising Muslims from different ethnicities also gives us a wider perspective of Islam and further strengthens our religiosity.”



Although he considers Australia as home now, Mr Jaafar (second from the right) visits family and friends in Singapore every year.

based in the western part of Victoria. We plan activities according to our Islamic and cultural events like Ramadan by conducting *terawih* and Eid prayers. During Ramadan, we set up food bazaars as well. We also ensure we celebrate our Malay culture and heritage with performances like *kompang* and *silat*. Currently, we are preparing a reference guide for individuals and families who are new to Australia, in hopes of providing support for them in assimilating to the Australian lifestyle.

**Q: How do you spend your free time?**

**A:** We have a small garden where I mow the grass, remove the weeds, and spruce up the rose bushes we grow. As the seasons change, a specific kind of care is needed to ensure healthy plants. One of my challenges right now is to grow the pandan plant which is especially difficult during winter.

As I enjoy the outdoors, we will drive up to the mountains during winter to enjoy the snow and to appreciate Allah's creation.

**Q: As a Muslim working in Melbourne, were there any particular challenges you faced? How did you overcome them?**

**A:** As a Muslim, my family and I practise and adhere to both the requirements of Islam and the Australian government.

We shop where everyone shops, dine in the many halal establishments available, have picnics, vote in the elections, pay taxes and many more. We have attended peaceful protests for Palestine. Meeting other practising Muslims from different ethnicities also gives us a wider perspective of Islam and further strengthens our religiosity.

**Q: Do you have any advice for the Muslims in Singapore who are interested in pursuing a career overseas?**

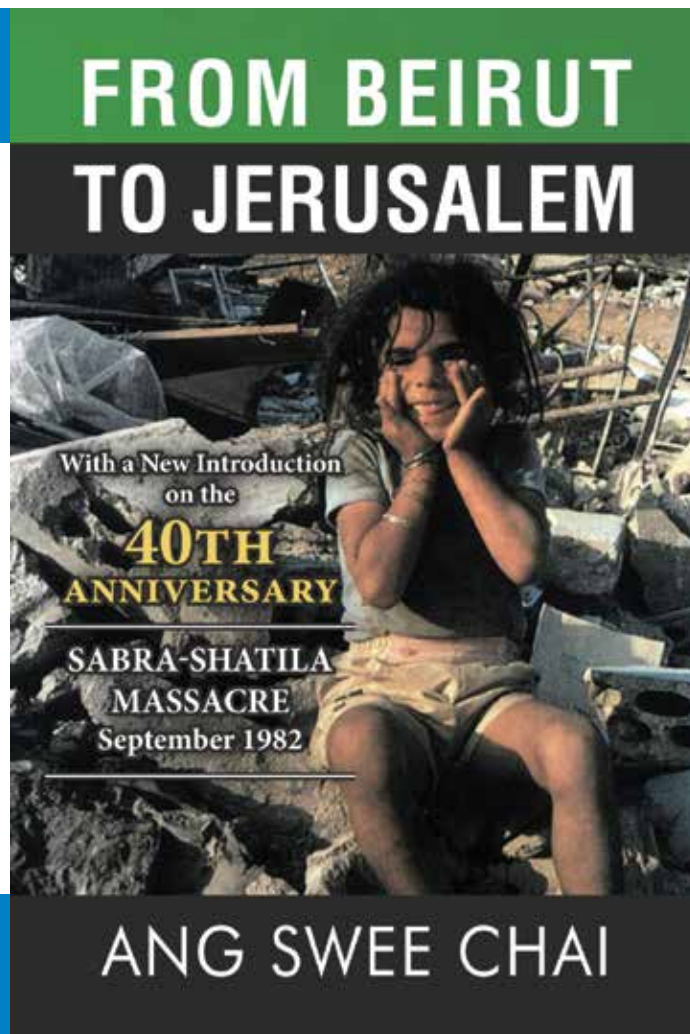
**A:** For those hoping to come to Australia and settle down, my advice is to do your homework. Check your visa (work and visit) and the latest travel requirements, keep and prepare important documents (original and copies), and familiarise yourself with important services and emergency contact numbers. ■

Nurul Mardhiah Bte Omar is a Republic Polytechnic graduate with a Diploma in Mass Communications. She enjoys writing and creating content.

Book Review

# From Beirut to Jerusalem: Lessons on Liberation Theology

BY NUR HIKMAH MD ALI





Israel's ongoing war on Gaza today makes Dr Ang Swee Chai's book, *From Beirut to Jerusalem*, a necessary read. The book, which was originally published in 1989 and then republished with an updated edition in 2023, details the Penang-born Singaporean orthopaedic surgeon's personal journey from a self-declared Christian Zionist to becoming a fierce supporter and friend of the Palestinians.

Many incidents led to her changed views, including a personal encounter with a Palestinian whose family was driven out of their home in Jaffa. Dr Ang also bore witness to numerous attacks and massacres against the Palestinian refugees and Lebanese in the Sabra-Shatila camps in Beirut, Lebanon, including the siege and massacres in 1982 and 1985.

The book is a precious documentation of Israeli atrocities against Palestinians, whether at home or in exile, from the lens of a non-Palestinian, and of Dr Ang's own struggles and efforts in embodying what it means to be a friend of the Palestinians. More than that, Dr Ang's account reveals many universal lessons and values to learn from.

### **A THEOLOGY FOR LIBERATION AND HUMANITY**

Dr Ang unwaveringly and consistently refers to her Christian tradition as a source of insight, faith and strength, that drives her to go above and beyond for the people of Palestine. Though there are moments when she questions God for the tragedies that befall the Palestinians, their resilience and unending warmth and kindness remind her that there is still reason to hold on to faith: "Over the years, I have seen much destruction and death, but I have seen so much love and faith that I am fully assured God is still there."<sup>1</sup>

In a world where religious exclusivism and extremism are rife, it is fascinating to learn from Dr Ang's ability to draw universal values of justice and equality from her Christian tradition and apply them unconditionally to every human being. It is her Christian beliefs that

ground her to embody an unconditional extension of God's mercy and love for humankind.

Beyond practising compassion as taught by her religion, her faith is oriented towards the poor and marginalised, which in this case refers to the Palestinian refugees of Sabra and Shatila – the exiled who have no means of returning to their homeland, and the Palestinians under Israeli occupation.

To Dr Ang, religion does not just compel one to do good, but to take sides with the oppressed and to orient one's life towards them. Her actions echo the ideas of liberation theology, in which one recognises the role of theology in ending or alleviating human suffering. Spanish priest and liberation theologian Jon Sobrino sums up liberation theology succinctly in his quote, that "there is no salvation outside of the poor", instead of "outside the church", as the saying conventionally goes.<sup>2</sup>

What does it mean to seek salvation from the poor? It requires a complete and radical reorientation of one's faith from a self-serving spirituality and religious orientation to one that centres around marginalised groups, regardless of their identity and affiliations. Liberation theology has roots in many movements in various parts of the world, from the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa to liberation movements in Latin America and Indonesia.<sup>3</sup>

For Dr Ang, this concern for the marginalised and oppressed began much earlier on in her life, before her trip to Lebanon in 1982. She recalls being taught in school that "science, to be meaningful, must be channelled to alleviating suffering and poverty", which led her to question poverty and inequality, and how science can be a panacea to these problems.<sup>4</sup> Her deliberations led her to believe later on, during her two years at the Singapore University's faculty of community medicine, that there are "clear links... between disease and poverty and

ignorance... that unequal distribution of wealth resulted in unequal distribution of health."<sup>5</sup>

### **FROM THEOLOGY TO PRAXIS**

Liberation theology demands action – it is not a mere intellectual exercise or an academic debate. Dr Ang's concern for human suffering, particularly Israel's bombing of Lebanon in 1982, was the catalyst for her to spring into action and volunteer as part of the international medical team at the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps. She returned several times to the camps, as well as Jerusalem, to serve the communities there.

After her return to the UK from Beirut in 1984, Dr Ang continued the work of upholding justice for the Palestinians by founding a non-sectarian, non-political medical charity to help Palestinians with several individuals. The charity was named Medical Aid for Palestinians (MAP) to avoid the political question of Palestine and to help Palestinians wherever they were, whether under occupation or in exile.<sup>6</sup> Currently, MAP has a permanent medical services team in Gaza and is setting up another team in Egypt. MAP continues to send medical personnel and services to the West Bank, Gaza and Lebanon.

Dr Ang's efforts point to one truth when it comes to standing up for what is right, which is that sacrifice and discomfort are necessary. On multiple occasions, she had resigned to the worst of fates if it meant she could contribute one step forward in the freedom and justice of the Palestinian people. While waiting to board a ferry from Cyprus to Lebanon in 1982, she received news that Israel had bombed an International Red Cross ship. At the thought that even her status as a doctor would not confer her any protection from being bombed, she only had this to say: "Well, all right, at least if I happen to be blown up, the people of Lebanon will have had one Singapore friend who did try."<sup>7</sup>

On another occasion, after co-signing and submitting a testimony to testify about

<sup>1</sup> See Esack F. (1998). Qur'an liberation & pluralism: an islamic perspective of interreligious solidarity against oppression. *Oneworld*; Gutiérrez G. (1973). A theology of liberation: history politics and salvation. *Orbis Books*.  
<sup>2</sup> Sobrino J. (2008). No salvation outside the poor; prophetic-utopian essays. *Orbis Books*.  
<sup>3</sup> Ang S.C. (1989). *From Beirut to Jerusalem*. Grafton Books & Times Books International, pp. xlii.  
<sup>4</sup> Ang S.C. (1989). *From Beirut to Jerusalem*. Grafton Books & Times Books International, pp. xlii.  
<sup>5</sup> Ibid. Pp. 40-41.  
<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 139-140.  
<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 9.

what she witnessed during the Sabra-Shatila massacre, Dr Ang recalled feeling a sense of relief, and as she looked at a “whole street full of Israeli troops and their armoured cars and tanks”, she remained undeterred: “All their might, I said to myself, could not stop our statement from reaching the rest of the world now.... From that moment, it would not matter one bit if I suddenly dropped dead. I had done what I needed to do.”<sup>8</sup>

Even in the face of threats by her colleagues in the international medical volunteer team and loss of support from her Lebanese sponsors, Dr Ang remained steadfast in her decision to testify what she saw during the 1982 massacre in the camps to the Kahan Commission, a commission of inquiry that was set up by the Israeli government to look into the events at the refugee camps in Beirut. This commission was the result of local and international pressure on the Israeli government to take account of what happened in the camps.

True to the spirit of liberation theology, these incidents point to the clarity of her thoughts in identifying the barriers to justice for Palestinians. Dr Ang was able to distinguish between good-hearted Israelis who were supportive of and fought for Palestinian liberation, and who had pressured their government to take accountability. In her account, there had been large demonstrations in Tel Aviv, where “400,000 Israeli citizens protested against the invasion of Lebanon and the massacre in refugee camps”. In addition, a significant number of Israeli soldiers had been put in prison for refusing to serve in Lebanon. While doing some “soul-searching” – as she puts it – she said she “had to be careful not to confuse the war-mongering and aggressive state of Israel... and the 400,000 Israelis” who protested the war.<sup>9</sup>

In a separate encounter with an Israeli professor who opposed the war, Dr Ang reflected that “not all Israelis wanted to see the Palestinians persecuted and slaughtered”, adding that “it must be cruel for Jews who had suffered so much under the Nazis to see their own people inflict

suffering on others”.<sup>10</sup> As a result of her clarity of mind on who was and is doing the act of injustice, Dr Ang never once spoke ill of or held stereotypes about Jews or Israelis, even as she had much contempt against the Israeli government. Her intact humanity despite all that she had seen and gone through is an important lesson, that the Israeli government’s actions have never and will never justify any form of anti-semitism or prejudice against people of the Jewish faith.

### **JUSTICE IS A JOURNEY WITHOUT AN END, AND SO IS HOPE**

Above all, Dr Ang’s book is a testament to the enduring human spirit and hope. Despite having witnessed numerous massacres, wars and attacks against the Palestinians, she is still hopeful for the Palestinians and continues to rally support for them in various ways, whether through MAP or in her own capacity.

On March 27 2024, Dr Ang delivered a talk on her experiences at the Sabra-Shatila refugee camps, at the Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine, National University of Singapore. Still as fierce as ever, she reminded the audience that we must not forget about the Palestinians and their right to return. Drawing from her Christian faith, Dr Ang said: “They (Palestinians) are the children of God. They are our brothers and sisters too.”

Personally, Dr Ang’s perseverance is a wake-up call – in the face of tragedies, it is too easy to resign to hopelessness and numbness. But as she said in the talk, we must not underestimate our ability to change things and be brave in speaking up for justice.

I end with the following quote from Dr Ang’s letter to her husband, the late human rights lawyer and co-founder of MAP, Francis Khoo.

*“... we are just two tiny individuals in this tide of historical liberation... we know where the tide will flow, and nothing can stop it.... I laugh, laugh victoriously, for I know that there are millions that would carry on the struggle after me.*

*I looked into the face of death and have seen its power and ugliness, but I have also looked into its eyes, and seen fear. For our children are coming, and they are not afraid.” ■*

**Above all, Dr Ang’s book is a testament to the enduring human spirit and hope. Despite having witnessed numerous massacres, wars and attacks against the Palestinians, she is still hopeful for the Palestinians and continues to rally support for them in various ways, whether through MAP or in her own capacity.**

Nur Hikmah Md Ali is a writer who has published poems, book reviews, commentaries and book chapter in various publications including Karyawan and Berita Mediacorp.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 74.  
<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 103.  
<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 131.



# THE KARYAWAN FORUM

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Letters should be no longer than 300 words.

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Please provide us with your real names and contact details (mobile number and email address). Published letters will state the contributor's name. Pseudonyms will not be accepted. Apart from your name, your personal details will remain confidential and will only be released with your permission.

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Contributions across these areas are welcome, with particular attention given to the following: Community, Politics, Social, Education, Economy, Finance, Entrepreneurship, Arts &

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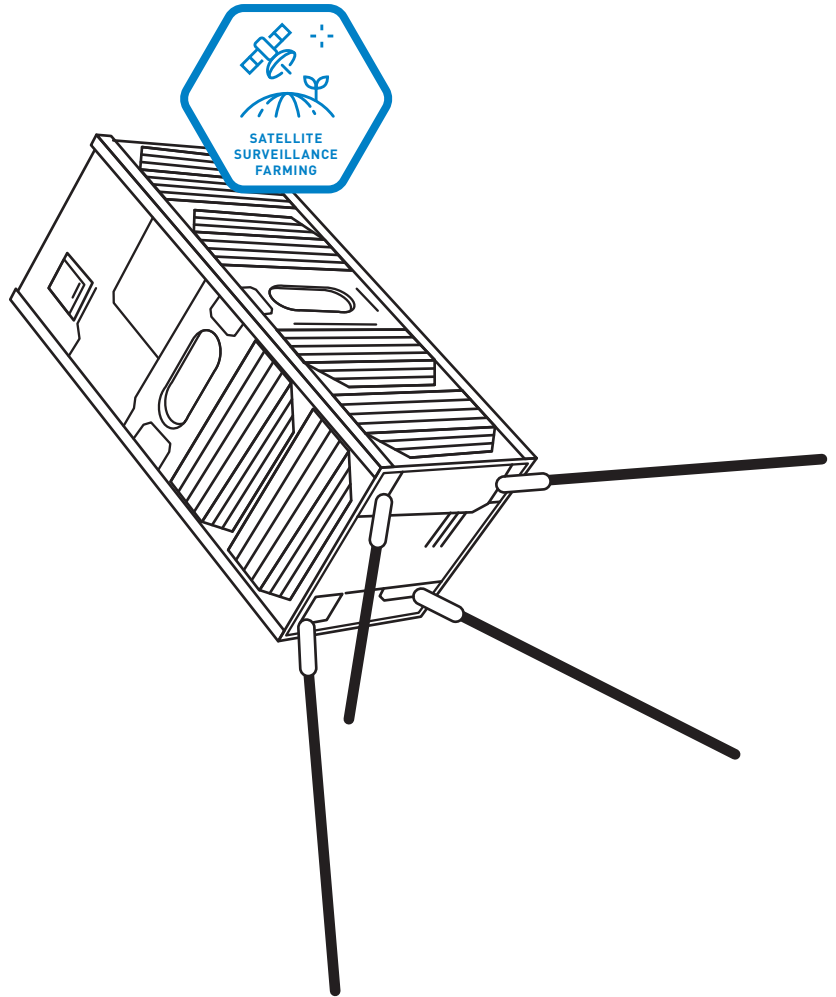
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