

Islam no barrier to integration: Muis

Council responds to queries from Muslims over MM Lee's remarks

By Rachel Chang, January 28, 2011

THE highest authority on Muslim affairs said yesterday that the teachings of Islam do not hinder Muslims from integrating fully into Singapore society.

In fact, the true teachings of Islam obligate believers to live harmoniously in a multi-religious and multi-racial society, the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (Muis) said.

The statement on its website was in response to questions from the public about whether Islamic practices were a barrier to the integration of Muslims in Singapore's plural society.

These questions were prompted by Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew's comments in the book, *Lee Kuan Yew: Hard Truths To Keep Singapore Going*, that Muslims in Singapore tend to be 'distinct and separate'.

Muis said the Muslim community here is deeply aware that Islam's teachings exhort believers to live together harmoniously in a plural society like Singapore's.

'An ethos in the Singapore Muslim identity elucidates clearly that a good Muslim who is true to his religion, is also one who is a good citizen,' it said.

Mr Lee's comments have drawn reactions from Muslims here and overseas.

In the book, Mr Lee, when asked to assess the progress of multi-racialism in Singapore, said: 'I have to speak candidly to be of value, but I do not want to offend the Muslim community.'

'I think we were progressing very nicely until the surge of Islam came, and if you asked me for my observations, the other communities have easier integration - friends, intermarriages and so on, Indians with Chinese, Chinese with Indians - than Muslims. That's the result of the surge from the Arab states.'

He added: 'I would say, today, we can integrate all religions and races except Islam.' He also said: 'I think the Muslims socially do not cause any trouble, but they are distinct and separate.'

His remarks have been criticised by some leaders, officials and readers in Malaysia and Indonesia after they were reported in local newspapers.

Muslims and other Singaporeans have also written to The Straits Times Forum page on the issue.

Muis said yesterday the Muslim community has always played a role in national development:

'The integration process is readily accepted by the Muslim community as an integral part of the nation's development and progress, which is a shared aspiration of every Singaporean.

'This can be seen through the active participation of Muslims in mainstream society and also through the various multi-racial and multi-religious activities, be they at the individual or at the institution levels.'

Muis said that Muslim Singaporeans' commitment to integration is motivated by two factors:

First, by the aspiration to live up to the country's tenets, as laid out in the pledge to live 'as one united people, regardless of language, race and religion'.

Second, by the teachings of Islam, which obligate Muslims to live harmoniously with those of other races and religions.

'This is reaffirmed by the teachings of Prophet Muhammad through the hadith (the sayings of the Prophet) and his life journey,' the statement said.

It recalled that in 2005, Muis launched the Singapore Muslim Identity project to bring home the point that Muslims can stay true to their religion comfortably while being active citizens in a secular, multi-racial state.

'The fact is, this set of ethos has been an integral part and practice of the Singapore Muslim community for many years. It has been well-received by the Singapore Muslim community because it is not a new construct in the Islamic faith. It is in fact derived from the tenets of the religion.'

Muis added that it was confident that this better understanding of the true teachings of Islam has led Singaporean Muslims to take a progressive outlook and become very much part of the mainstream.