

## **‘We must make meritocracy inclusive & one that doesn’t inhibit social mobility’: President Halimah**

**She affirmed that social mobility is part of the Singapore Dream, and we need to keep that hope alive.**

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"We must make meritocracy inclusive and one that does not inhibit social mobility", President Halimah said, in a speech at the Institute of Policy Studies' (IPS) 35th anniversary gala dinner on Jun. 26, 2023.

She was revisiting the shared values of multiracialism, meritocracy, and stewardship that she first outlined when she was sworn in as President.

In reflecting on where Singapore is today, President Halimah highlighted the rise of identity politics as a growing threat to multiracialism, and shared examples of how Singapore as a nation "left no one behind" despite the challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic.

### **Making meritocracy inclusive**

President Halimah said that while meritocracy has contributed to social mobility in Singapore, she noted that the "very conditions that contributed to meritocracy" can also result in inequality.

For instance, parents who had risen along meritocratic lines through the education system had the means to provide the very best opportunities for their children to succeed, she pointed out.

This could lead to a vicious cycle of inequality.

As such, President Halimah affirmed that there is a need to go beyond academic qualifications alone, as it represents a narrow definition of success and disadvantages those who are less academically inclined, or those from poorer families with less resources.

Instead, opportunities should be provided to late-bloomers or those who excel in non-academic areas to give them a leg up, she explained.

"We must make meritocracy inclusive and one that does not inhibit social mobility," she said.

### **Social mobility at the heart of the Singapore Dream**

For instance, she noted that there are already initiatives in place to level the playing field in education, such as reserving one-fifth of places in secondary schools for students not from affiliated primary schools.

And in the workplace, she added that more efforts have been introduced to better recognise and reward skilled workers who may lack academic qualifications.

However, she said that employers need to play their part as well, in ensuring such workers have access to good jobs, better pay and careers.

Ultimately, social mobility is at the heart of Singapore's model of growth and nation-building, President Halimah emphasised.

She said,

"It is part of the Singapore Dream where you strive for a good education, work hard and are rewarded with a good life. We need to keep that hope alive"

### **Identity politics a threat to multiracialism**

President Halimah highlighted multiracialism as a key component of Singapore's identity, that has ensured the nation can enjoy relative harmony and cohesion today.

However, she noted that identity politics are on the rise across the world, and pose a very real threat to multiracialism and societies.

This happens when people subordinate their discretion and thoughts to the identity of the group that they belong, and place little restraint on behaviour that is offensive to other communities.

One effect, she said, was the rise of radicalism and extremist behaviour, such as white supremacy in the US.

President Halimah also acknowledged that Singapore has had its own cases of extremism, with the cases that involve youth particularly worrying.

She pointed out that within Singapore's peaceful social fabric, racial and religious conflicts could be particularly damaging.

"We must safeguard and protect our society from such dangerous and damaging influences," she concluded.

### **Need to ensure new migrants integrate into community**

President Halimah also affirmed that we must be cognisant to subtler threats to multiracialism, such as when newer migrants face difficulties integrating into the local community.

She noted that Singapore has always been open to foreign talent, and drew references to Singapore's origin as a migrant society.

She said,

"Everyone pitched in to grow this country from a low base to what it is today. In the process, people of different races and religions gelled together and integrated with each other, forging common hopes and dreams for the future."

However, she highlighted a growing concern that not all of the new migrants consider it necessary to integrate with Singaporeans, and instead remain comfortable in their own exclusive social circles.

President Halimah warned that this could foster sentiments among Singaporeans that foreign talents play by different rules, and stick to their own.

If the polarisation worsened, she said, this could lead to more disaffection and disrupt Singapore's social harmony.

As such, she affirmed the need to examine the effectiveness of existing structures in integrating migrants, and to identify what can be done to improve the situation.

These efforts should focus on schools, workplaces and community spaces occupied by foreign talents, she added.

### **Being accountable and leaving no one behind**

Lastly, President Halimah emphasised the importance of stewardship, or being accountable to one another and to our future.

To this end, she said Singapore was greatly tested by the Covid-19 pandemic, which disproportionately impacted disadvantaged groups that had fewer resources to buffer against its effects.

However, she affirmed that Singapore "left no one behind".

This included the efforts of ordinary Singaporeans, who stepped up to help those in need by distributing groceries and cooked food, she said.

Additionally, President Halimah highlighted organisations which provided temporary shelter spaces during the Circuit Breaker.

"Overall, I am glad to have witnessed the strong spirit of care and togetherness among Singaporeans in the face of [these] tough challenges," she said.

Another example of good stewardship she raised was the Forward Singapore exercise launched in 2022, that seeks to engage Singaporeans through a series of conversations to revisit Singapore's social compact.

She emphasised that these allow Singaporeans, especially the younger generation, to share their aspirations and build consensus on the nation's priorities moving forward.

### **Congratulated IPS on 35 years of robust research**

President Halimah also took the opportunity to congratulate IPS on its 35th anniversary.

Through the efforts of the think-tank, she said, policy makers have been provided with useful insights and discussion platforms to refine policies for the benefit of Singaporeans.

"Public policy must be grounded in good data so that we can be responsive to the challenges that Singapore will face in the coming years," she said.

"Let us commit to strengthening our shared values of multiracialism, meritocracy, and stewardship."