

TRANSCRIPT OF OPENING REMARKS BY
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REVIEW WORKING GROUP MEETING,
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Madam President,

Members of the Troika,

Honourable Council members,

Distinguished representatives of Observer States,

A very good afternoon to all of you from Singapore.

My delegation and I are honoured to address you today for Singapore's third Universal Periodic Review (UPR).

We are meeting in extraordinary times. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacted a huge toll in human and economic costs. It has also accelerated profound, longer-term transformations in the way we live, work and organise ourselves as societies. For example, technological advances have brought many benefits to society, but also exacerbated inequality, social divisions, misinformation, as well as a digital divide.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also created new challenges in fulfilling the pledge of the UN Agenda for Sustainable Development to leave no one behind. We need to do more to support the most vulnerable members of our societies.

Like the rest of the world, Singapore is not immune. The pandemic led to the worst recession since our independence, with severe impact on every part of our society.

Singapore took swift measures to cushion our population, especially the low-income and most vulnerable, from the worst impact. This is not to say that our response has been perfect. We have been doing our utmost to implement a human-centric approach to the pandemic that safeguards the well-being of our population.

Given the long-term, structural challenges, we are taking measures to emerge stronger and better in the post-COVID-19 world – by strengthening our social compact, and building a more resilient and sustainable home for our people.

Singapore is not new to crises. We had independence thrust upon us in 1965 during a period of great turbulence and intercommunal strife. We are a small island nation with no hinterland or natural resources. We had a low-skilled population, and a per capita GDP of just about US\$500. Many did not expect Singapore to survive. Despite the progress we have made over 56 years, we do not – we cannot – take that survival for granted. That is why we have not wavered in our commitment to build a democratic, fair and inclusive society, where every Singaporean is valued, and can lead a fulfilling life.

Let me outline Singapore's approach towards promoting and protecting human rights.

We strive to achieve better outcomes for our people in a manner that reflects our national context and realities.

Singapore is a unique country. As a small, densely populated, city state – one of the very few in the world. We are a multi-racial and multi-religious society. We are in fact one of the most religiously diverse countries in the world.

Forging a common national identity while maintaining racial and social harmony is therefore of paramount importance.

This has required us to take difficult policy decisions sometimes, to counter social divisions and balance competing rights.

Our approach towards promoting human rights is therefore a pragmatic one. We focus on outcomes and a strong adherence to the rule of law. Our goal is to achieve the necessary balance between the interests of the individual and the broader needs of society.

This has worked for us.

Singapore has been ranked:

- 12th in the UN 2020 Human Development Index;
- 1st in Save the Children's 2020 End of Childhood Index; and
- 12th for gender equality in the 2020 UN Gender Inequality Index

However, there is always room for improvement. We therefore continue to have rigorous domestic debates, both in parliament and the community, on how we can adapt as circumstances evolve.

In preparing for Singapore's third UPR, the Government held three rounds of consultations with civil society on top of our regular and ongoing engagement with civil society in the context of human rights. Allow me to take this opportunity to recognise the contributions of civil society towards protecting and promoting human rights. We are grateful for their engagement in the UPR process.

Madam President,

Following our engagement with Member States during Singapore's second UPR in 2016, Singapore has implemented several policies to advance the well-being of our citizens and make our society more inclusive, cohesive and resilient. I will highlight a few and members of my delegation will elaborate later.

Singapore ratified the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination in 2017, which was a

recommendation made at our 2nd UPR. This underscores Singapore's unwavering commitment to work towards a society free from racial discrimination, and in line with SDG 10 on reducing inequality. While Singapore's multiracial social fabric has been strong, we must not be complacent.

Home ownership remains a key national policy to ensure that our people enjoy a decent standard of living underpinned by an asset whose value rises with economic growth. In the last three years, we have increased grants to help more Singaporeans acquire their own homes, paying special attention to low-income families. Today, over 80% of Singapore's resident population live in public housing, and over 90% own their homes.

We have invested significantly in early childhood education, which promotes the right to education. This is also aligned with SDG 4 on inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all. We want to give every child a good start. We also regularly review bursaries for higher education. We will continue to work hard to preserve social mobility, so that every Singaporean has a good education and a fair shot at success, regardless of their background. This is fundamental to our meritocratic society. We also recognise the importance of lifelong learning and the need to prepare Singaporeans to cope with structural economic shifts. Through the SkillsFuture programme, we are helping Singaporeans of all ages upgrade and learn new skills to better seize emerging opportunities.

At the same time, we have improved social services and introduced greater social protections to ensure that the more vulnerable members of society continue to get the support they need. For instance, we continue to disburse cash supplements to lower wage workers and the elderly through initiatives such as the Workfare Income Supplement, Workfare Skills Support and Silver Support. As more daily activities migrate online, we are mindful of a widening digital divide. We have subsidies to ensure that lower-income groups can afford digital devices and internet connection. The SG Digital Office was also launched last year to drive the Government's concerted push to accelerate digital

adoption, and to equip groups, including older persons, who face challenges going digital, with the necessary digital skills.

We have also enhanced access to quality and affordable care for older persons, including measures that enable them to age comfortably within their communities. Ensuring healthy lives and promoting well-being for all enables us to better protect the rights of our older persons and in line with SDG 3.

Lastly, our work to eliminate discrimination against women and to enhance equality between men and women never stops. We started a national conversation series last year – last September to get feedback from our people on issues concerning our women at home, at workplaces, in schools, and in the community. These conversations will result in a White Paper with recommendations to enhance women’s development, which will be submitted to Parliament.

Madam President,

Singapore is a country with no natural resources. No water, no minerals, no energy, very limited land. But we have one important resource – our people. Our independence was proclaimed on the promise that Singapore would forever be a sovereign democratic and independent nation founded on the principles of liberty and justice, ever seeking the welfare and happiness of our people in a more just and equal society. These words remain as true today as they did 56 years ago. We strive to provide the best outcomes for our people and to build a fair, just and caring community where they can thrive. We will continue to do so and adapt, as we address the evolving needs of our society.

It is our longstanding view that there can be no one-size-fits-all approach to development and the realisation of human rights. Each society has its own unique circumstances. Singapore’s approach to governance and achieving human rights may differ from others. But

this does not mean that we cannot learn from each other, especially as we navigate a more complex and volatile post-COVID world.

We look forward to engaging with States to share good practices on how to better human rights outcomes for our people. Thank you.

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