

**SPEECH BY MINISTER-IN-CHARGE OF MUSLIM AFFAIRS, DR YAACOB IBRAHIM, ON
INTEGRATED RESORT ON MONDAY, 18 APR 2005 AT PARLIAMENT HOUSE**

1 I would first like to thank the Prime Minister for his detailed explanation on Government's decision on the integrated resort, and the rationale for having a casino as part of the resort. I have met various groups in the Malay/Muslim community and have heard many views on this issue. Taking into account these views, I would like to respond on what this decision means for our Muslim community, going forward.

2 The Singapore Muslim community has built up our way of life founded on Islamic beliefs and principles, and the Singapore system has provided opportunities for all. We have worked diligently over the years to contribute to Singapore's success. We have striven to preserve our values and, at the same time, made practical adjustments amidst changing social circumstances. Our approach, which is true to our religion and yet pragmatic in its outlook, has enabled us to live as good Muslims in a multi-racial and multi-religious society, and contribute to Singapore's economic and social development over the years.

3 The idea of having a casino in Singapore has met with considerable concerns within the Muslim community. As Muslims, we are against gambling. Many respected members of the community have rightly expressed concerns on a possible casino because Islam prohibits gambling. Others have also pointed to the possible social ills that this proposal could potentially bring about, and have therefore opposed the proposal.

4 Hence, having raised our concerns, many in our Muslim community will be disappointed with the decision to proceed with the proposal. Nevertheless, there are many things that exist around us which we do not agree with as Muslims, but accept as part of the larger landscape. Gambling, drinking, and other activities that Muslims consider vices are not banned in Singapore. We understand that in our multi-ethnic and multi-religious society, it is not tenable for government policies to be dictated by the views of any one group or groups. If we go down that road, then should we ban abortion or the use of condoms because some religious groups are against them? Or should we ban the sale of meat in line with the convictions of groups who believe that animals should not be slaughtered for food? It is in the interest of all Singaporeans that policies are not dictated by the views of any group.

5 Along these lines, the way we approach the casino issue should be consistent with the way we have approached similar issues, such as the consumption of alcohol. We recognize that it is haram or forbidden, socially undesirable, but nonetheless an accepted social practice in some communities. Is it tenable, therefore, for the Government to go all out and ban such vices? No. Does Government limit access to and educate us against such vices? Yes. Does it protect vulnerable members of society from such vices? The answer again is yes. In the case of alcohol, for example, licensing requirements and age requirements restrict access to alcohol consumption. Likewise, regulatory provisions will apply to casinos. Age requirements, provisions for the exclusion of vulnerable individuals and other measures will restrict access to the casino and protect vulnerable members of society. As with other addictions, the Government will also provide social services and rehabilitation support to gambling addicts and their families.

6 In examining the casino issue, we must also be mindful of the realities on the ground. Gambling - be it 4D, soccer betting or mahjong games - has been part and parcel of life in Singapore for many years. Hence, the argument that the casino will radically erode moral values is quite debatable. People who currently do not engage in gambling activities due to firmly held moral or religious convictions, will not suddenly decide to gamble even if there is a casino. On the other hand, those who enjoy gambling are already doing so, in Singapore and offshore. They will continue to do so, whether or not we have a casino.

7 As for the Malay/Muslim community, we know that we have the choice both as a community and as individuals not to engage in gambling. We will continue with our efforts to educate and inculcate in our community sound spiritual and moral values through the various Malay/Muslim community organizations. MUIS has, for instance, been enhancing its religious education programmes to guide our children and youth to live as good Muslims and integral members of society. It will continue to address various social challenges through its Friday sermons or khutbahs. At the same time, Muslims as individuals have a choice and a duty to shun all activities we consider as vices including gambling. We can and should live according to sound principles and values, derived from our religion as our spiritual and moral ballast amidst changes around us.

8 While the casino debate is important, we should keep the big picture in view. The casino targets tourists and those who can afford it. MCYS's survey shows that, in comparison to the other communities, the vast majority of Malays are not involved in gambling. The community's priorities lie in addressing issues such as education and employment, and social issues such as youth development and drug addiction. Just as many Malay/Muslim organizations have raised strong concerns against the casino, I hope we can be equally passionate about lending support towards our on-going efforts to deal with critical challenges such as divorce and youth disengagement. These pose a much more tangible and greater danger to our community.

9 In recent weeks, Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong has welcomed the voices of concern raised against the casino project, saying that this shows that Singapore has citizens with values that will provide moral ballast to the country. Deputy Prime Minister Tony Tan has expressed confidence that the Muslim community's religious values and practices are an asset to the nation. These are signals to the Muslim community that we have a role to play in shaping the moral and cultural landscape of our country, and that the role is respected. In the coming months, there will be many opportunities for Singaporeans to contribute to efforts to minimise the social costs of the proposed casino. The Malay/Muslim community will do its part. Our values have a place as Singapore moves ahead. But we must distinguish between personal and public morality. What we believe is good and right for the society, we should share with others in a gracious and respectful way through dialogue and education, without imposing on them.

10 It was not easy for the Government to come to its decision on the casino issue. And in arriving at this decision to proceed with the integrated resort, our Government has been mindful of the potential social effects the casino can have on Singaporeans and our families. Deliberations have been long and thorough. The Government is putting in social safeguards primarily because it recognises its duty to protect the vulnerable in our society. The Government does not intend to promote gambling, and is in fact fully aware of the possible social costs of having a casino. It is not about to sacrifice 40 years of achievements in nation-building. But it recognises that there are changes in the social and economic landscape that require a difficult decision to be made now. There are new economic imperatives that have compelled it to revisit assumptions. The integrated resort with a gaming facility will create new opportunities for Singapore, along with a new set of challenges that need to be addressed squarely.

11 The Muslim community cannot agree to gambling, but it will also not stand in the way of the Government's decision. The integrated resort involves creative, worthwhile offerings for the whole family, and the casino is just one small part. We will not reject the integrated resort, just because of the presence of the casino. The community will have to take responsibility and ownership of this new challenge, and ensure that members of the community are educated on the social ills associated with gambling. With our collective efforts, we can be confident that we can maintain our values and our way of life as a community. We can be confident of the ability of Muslims to make the right choices and be good Muslims at all times, in any environment. More than that, we can be confident that the community will continue to be a positive influence on, and a contributor to, the wider society. The presence of a casino will not change this. Our resilience as a community has seen us through many challenges over the past decades. I am confident it will see us through this challenge as well.

12 There is a Malay proverb that says "Usul menunjukkan asal". What this means is that the Muslim community's response on this issue will go to show our own unique identity as a community.

13 Thank you.