

Publication: CNA Online

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Spectators at a grass field near Sengkang General Hospital, awaiting the arrival of the Red Lions on Singapore's National Day on 9 Aug, 2020. (Photo: Hanidah Amin)

I woke up this morning at 6am, and my husband and I went for our daily 10km walk. This is part of our new norm now. This period of working from home allowed us to prioritise our health and well-being.

We will be celebrating National Day with family, and we treasure this very much.

Since the circuit breaker in April, when so many daily activities we took for granted were off limits, we have come to appreciate social relations.

Family gatherings, the privilege of eating together with extended family, and just simply spending time with loved ones are now much valued.

The pandemic also rendered visible the inequalities in our community. The social isolation suffered by older adults living alone, and who are not digitally connected.

Students in unconducive home environments for whom home-based learning was extremely challenging.

While many of us had the privilege of working from home this period, not all have the resources to manage this productively. And not all were able to work from home because they are in essential services.

We were also alerted to the plight of our migrant workers, whose living conditions put them at higher risk for contracting infectious diseases.

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The stalled construction projects, long grass in our parks and neighbourhoods, and slowdown in some essential services all point to the significant roles these workers play in our communities.

It seems like suddenly, without warning, our world turned upside down.

REASONS TO BE OPTIMISTIC

So this National Day, when our country celebrates 55 years of independence, it is an opportunity to reflect how significant Aug 9 is for us this year.

In the midst of this global pandemic, I believe Singaporeans have much to be grateful for as we celebrate nationhood.

First, I imagine many of us will be grateful that, being in Singapore riding out the pandemic, we have sensible, compassionate and strong leaders to guide us as we struggled to comprehend this generational disruption.

When masks were scarce, we were all given disposable as well as reusable masks. Swift measures were announced to protect all in Singapore, and assurances were announced every night on the evening news – on our supply chains and how they are augmented, as well as the adequacy of our stockpile of essentials.

Most significant were the daily reminders that we must protect our older adults as they are more vulnerable to infectious diseases.

Then there were the government assistance schemes to help businesses, families and individuals tide over as well as protect jobs.



Residents get free face masks from a vending machine by scanning their identification card, set up by the government as part of the effort to halt the spread of the COVID-19 in Singapore
AFP/ROSLAN RAHMAN

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In addition to the national budget on Feb 18, Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat introduced the Resilience Budget on Mar 26, the Solidarity Budget on Apr 6, and the Fortitude Budget on May 26 amounting close to S\$100 billion drawn from our national reserves to provide some fiscal reprieve from the impact of COVID-19 on the economy.

Many Singaporeans will appreciate the hard work of those who came before us who ensured that we have sufficient in our national reserves to support us in these times of crisis.

CELEBRATING SINGAPOREANS AND NOT JUST SINGAPORE

But perhaps most important is the response from Singaporeans.

There were many Singaporeans who donated their S\$600 Solidarity Payment to those who needed it more. There are those who received much needed assistance, and pledged to help others because they were helped.

I was very touched when my favourite fruit stall propriety in Ghim Moh Market rounded down my bill one day because she was so grateful that her rental was waived. She felt that she should share the blessings she received with her customers. In addition, she donated fruits from her stock to the migrant workers' dorms.

We also learnt of the many acts of kindness of ordinary Singaporeans – delivering meals to the vulnerable in our community, reaching to neighbours in need, and simply encouraging each other on as we strive to overcome the challenges of this global crisis.

The pandemic made us realise how vulnerable a small nation state like Singapore is. COVID-19 does not discriminate and no country is spared its impact.

As I reflect on Singapore's response to the pandemic, I am very proud of my fellow citizens – how we rallied together, abided by the rules of social distancing and adorned masks to protect each other.

So on this National Day, while I am very proud to be a Singaporean, it is also important to remember that we shouldn't just celebrate Singapore but also Singaporeans – people from all walks of life that have defined our collective ethos.

As we celebrate 55 years of nation-building, and I see clearly the Singaporean core that stands together in the midst of a global pandemic.

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In our youth, I see grit and determination, as they adapt to the new norm of everyday life and also deal with the economic and job prospect uncertainty that lies ahead.

I see too the resilience of many Singaporeans, whose jobs are disrupted by the pandemic. They take on alternative assignments cheerfully, determined to stay economically engaged.

Among the older Singaporeans, I see courage and tenacity as many strived to embrace digitisation so that they will not be left behind.

The many front line professionals and service personnel embody the Spirit of Singapore. They suffered risks everyday in their respective jobs, so that the rest of us will be safe as we work from home.

A DEMOCRACY OF DEEDS

Due to COVID-19, this National Day is also different from others. There will be no central parade to display national pride and cohesion.

Instead, we will be celebrating in our own homes, with family and friends, and united in spirit.

To make up for the usual collective activities to celebrate this milestone, there are national efforts to get Singaporeans to recite the pledge and sing our national anthem at specified times, regardless of wherever we are then.

These efforts can be very powerful acts in reminding us that we are not alone and that together, as one people, we will overcome this crisis.

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Singaporeans reading the pledge at a National Day Parade.

Such exercises of solidarity also helps strengthen national cohesion and resilience as we remind ourselves of the wider purpose of nation and community that brings us together – a useful reminder in the middle of the pandemic.

But beyond such symbolic gestures of solidarity and a “thrust of the heart”, much more can be done to also strengthen our “hand thrust” as a society because, after all, we do aspire to be a democracy of deeds, as one of our founding leaders, S Rajaratnam, called for.

Therefore this National Day, I urge all Singaporeans to step up to play our part to ensure that Singapore will survive COVID-19. This pandemic has rendered visible inequalities that we must attend to if we want to strive forward as one Singapore.

The well-being of our vulnerable families, older adults who are socially isolated, and our migrant workers. The digital gap must be plugged, and we must encourage each other to embrace upskilling and reskilling to stay economically relevant.

While government interventions are important, it is equally important that ground-up initiatives continue to augment and inform policy.

As we celebrate Singapore, each of us must also pledge to play our part in protecting our fellow Singaporeans.

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