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Nominated Member of Parliament and Roses of Peace founder Mohamed Irshad. (PHOTO: Dhany Osman / Yahoo News Singapore)

When Mohamed Irshad started the Roses Of Peace inter-faith group as a student society back in 2012, he saw it as a way to promote social cohesion and religious harmony in Singapore.

However, Irshad found that many were sceptical about what the group could achieve through handing out roses to members of the public.

He realised that his critics had failed to understand that the roses given out by the movement's volunteers were a means to connect with others, regardless of their religion, and to spread the message of peace.

"When we give out 3,000 roses, 5,000 roses, 7,000 roses, you're reaching 7,000 individuals... They're going to share (the rose and its message) with three or four people.

"They're going to share it with their family members, so that ripple effect is there. It doesn't just stop at one (person)," said the 29-year-old entrepreneur, who is involved in business-to-business services and is also a consultant.

Roses Of Peace gets young people from diverse faith backgrounds to come together through an annual distribution of roses – each of which comes with a greeting card promoting inter-faith harmony. Since its inception, the group has engaged over 2,000 volunteers and has distributed more than 40,000 roses.

For his work in promoting inter-religious harmony, Irshad was one of the nine people appointed as Nominated Members of Parliament (NMPs) on Wednesday (26 September).

"I see it as an opportunity to share some of the (youth's) challenges in Parliament, and also to stand and root for a more cohesive society in Singapore," he told Yahoo News Singapore during a 90-minute interview at the Singapore Management University's (SMU) Alumni Association Lounge on Monday.

Turning a crisis into something positive

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Roses Of Peace was started by Irshad in 2012 following the online release of the anti-Islamic short film "Innocence Of Muslims", which sparked deadly protests in many Arab and Muslim nations as well as in some western countries.

As Irshad was heading both SMU's Islamic Business and Finance Society (IBFS) and the Muslim Society at the time, he was approached by a Muslim senior who asked him to lead a sit-in silent protest on campus.

Irshad felt that such a protest was not the wisest way to express one's displeasure or to show that Islam is a peaceful religion. Instead, he thought of a way to "channel that negative energy, that angst and frustration into something more positive".

"That's how I came up with the idea of giving out roses with an attached greeting card with a saying of peace from Prophet Muhammad..."

"In fact, all the religions preach peace and harmony, so we included quotes of all the religious figures, such as Jesus Christ, Gautama Buddha (and) Prophet Muhammad," Irshad said.

Following that first event in November that year, Irshad found that the volunteers involved were eager to continue spreading the message of inter-faith harmony.

Since then, Roses Of Peace has expanded beyond its annual signature event to include the organising of youth forums and inter-faith conferences.

Established as a non-profit organisation last year, Irshad said that the movement places emphasis on its volunteers getting to know one another so as to remove any prejudices that they may have towards those from other religions.

In February, the group also held its first faith-in-leadership symposium, during which international speakers were invited to talk mainly on the topic of youth leadership.

With about 400 active volunteers, Roses Of Peace also introduced its new Ambassador Programme earlier this year, which will see some 30 young persons be given training and assistance in setting up their own initiatives to "foster peace and harmony in Singapore".

On why he believes so strongly in the cause, Irshad said that Singapore's "cohesive society" has been painstakingly built up and that it should not be allowed to "break down or crumble".

"This country is like a bubble, literally, where everyone lives peacefully. So, if we don't preserve that... we might just spiral into something that we can't control anymore," Irshad noted.

Engaged from a young age

Irshad's involvement in social causes started during his time as an SMU business management undergraduate. One of the student societies that he became involved in was the Apolitical Society, which was aimed at tackling political apathy among the university's students.

While he noted that many SMU students are "driven by the dollar sign", he said there were also a fair number who were interested in issues of governance and policymaking but did not have a space in which they could engage with others on these subjects.

For Irshad, who helped to officially start the society in 2011 and was elected its president, the group represents a platform to connect civil societies, political officeholders, policymakers and community leaders with students so that both sides are able to better understand each other.

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"We wanted to bring about more awareness in terms of some of the policies that affect (the students) to get them engaged with officeholders; to know some of the concerns that are there; and for (the students) to raise their concerns and seek clarifications," Irshad said, who was also involved in the Muslim Society, IBFS and SMU Ventures – an entrepreneurship society – during his time at SMU, all of which he founded.

Championing social cohesion in Parliament

Regarding his recent appointment as an NMP, Irshad shared that he had already been given a glimpse into the amount of work involved at the parliamentary level of government.

"It's not easy. It's a tedious, long-drawn meticulous process, for which a lot of man hours go into it. A lot of work gets put in, and that's when you realise that running a country is not that easy," he said.

Irshad also responded to the criticisms made by many Singaporeans over the years regarding the seeming lack of impact that NMPs have had in Parliament and on policymaking.

He said that Singaporeans have to manage their expectations as NMPs do not generally speak on "anything under the sun".

"For example, tomorrow, there's a Bill on something to do with trade. I can't speak on trade. That's not my area of expertise. Perhaps, the NMP that is supposed to represent the business federation, he can speak on trade as it is related to his area," Irshad explained.

"But he can't be speaking on social cohesion or religious harmony, that's my area. Not to say that (he cannot speak about it), but just that I don't think he'll be comfortable in taking on a field which he is not familiar with," he added.

Irshad said that as an NMP, he will be focusing on social cohesion as well as religious and racial harmony in Singapore.

"That's something I want to champion, so as to build a community where people can live without (facing) prejudices and can live harmoniously," he said, adding that he also wants to be a voice for "youth issues" in Parliament.

"I'm looking forward to it. It's quite an experience, let's see how it goes," he added.

On fake news, 377A and countering terrorism

Irshad also shared his views on current trending news topics, including the ongoing debate over Section 377A of the Penal Code and the threat of fake news.

Regarding 377A, which criminalises sex between men, he said that the law has become politicised and that Singaporeans should not let it be a reason to divide society.

"As much as there's a (movement) to repeal 377A, if there's a pushback by the religious communities... then it's just going to drive wedges in our community and to split opinions," he said.

"When the time comes, when the youngsters are in power in the future and they feel that things are better now and we don't have to live under the past of our colonial masters who made 377A, then let things take its course," he added.

On the threat posed by fake news, Irshad said that it is not something to be taken lightly as it has the potential to drive communities apart, especially when it touches on religion or other sensitive topics.

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He said that the government's use of the term "deliberate online falsehoods" is more accurate as it shows the intentional malice that goes behind the creation of such disinformation.

Irshad also noted how Singaporeans have to be extra vigilant now that such falsehoods are no longer confined to a single region.

"Someone can be from a different part of the world but they can target their messaging for (a particular) country, for that people, just to split them, just to drive a discord in the community," he said.

"You see it happening in Malaysia, you see it happening in Indonesia... It's across the board. In Sri Lanka, the recent unrest where fake news was spread against Muslims... It can even kill people," he cautioned.

On Singapore's counter-terrorism efforts, Irshad said that Singapore has done a "fantastic job" of keeping the country safe.

"For instance, the Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG) is unique (to Singapore) in how you rehabilitate people who have been radicalised. A lot of countries come and study our model and try to implement it back home as well," he said.

Irshad warned, however, that the nation's efforts to combat terrorism will never be done and are a "work in progress".

"It's an evolving thing. You have to keep up with times, to ensure that we are able to mitigate some of these problems and stay on top of things.

"But I have full confidence in what the government has done to make sure that none of these threats reach our shore. Even if it does, they nip it in the bud," he remarked.

'Very easy' to drive people apart

Through his social work, Irshad said he has picked up a number of valuable lessons.

"Myself, having promoted peace and harmony in Singapore, I've found that it's very difficult to bring people together but very easy to drive them apart," he said.

On a more positive note, however, he said that he has also seen numerous people from diverse backgrounds coming forward to contribute to Roses Of Peace's cause.

"One of the main takeaways has been that people do genuinely want to get to know each other, but they don't have platforms where they can (discuss sensitive issues)," he said.

"We have been brought up in an environment where race and religion are deemed as sensitive topics, which are not discussed openly."

Noting that many people he has met "just need an avenue for them to help out", Irshad added that he hopes more young Singaporeans will step up to start movements of their own.

"If you believe in a cause and if your convictions are strong enough, there's no right time or wrong time. Just go ahead and do it," he said.