

“The Point of Law – A Reflection on 200 years of Singapore’s Modern Legal System”

**37th Singapore Law Review Annual Lecture, by
Mr Murali Pillai SC, Senior Minister of State for Law and Transport,
At the National University of Singapore Auditorium 1, University Town
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A. Introduction

1. The Honourable Justice of the Court of Appeal Justice Ang Cheng Hock, The Honourable Judge of the Appellate Division Justice See Kee Oon, The Honourable Justices and the Judicial Commissioner of the Supreme Court, and other members of the judicial service; Professor Andrew Simester, Dean of the NUS Law School, and other esteemed members of the academia; Mr Daniel Chia, managing director of Prolegis LLC, and the head of litigation for Herbert Smith Freehills Kramer Prolegis FLA, the sponsor for tonight’s event, colleagues from the Bar and legal service, students from our universities and JC, special mention to Ms Mirella Ang, chief editor of the Singapore Law Review, and the organising committee of the 37th Singapore Law Review Lecture, ladies and gentlemen. We are now in the opening days of 2026.
2. This is a significant year in our legal history – and indeed the history of Singapore. It marks the 200th anniversary of Singapore’s modern legal system, which we will be commemorating as “SGLaw200”, tracing back to the Second Charter of Justice of 1826.
3. What is the Second Charter of Justice?
 - a. It is a set of rules that set up the Singapore Courts, which have evolved into the world-class institution that we recognise and take pride in today.
 - b. The Second Charter also introduced a common set of laws, which applied to all who lived in Singapore. It brought into existence a single jurisdiction, and with that, a basic homogeneity for all under its cover.
4. This marked a significant change in how law applied in Singapore.
 - a. Before the Second Charter, different communities had different laws.
 - b. The Chinese had their own laws, administered by the Chinese Kapitans. The Malays had separate rules, overseen by the Malay chiefs, and so on.
5. The Charter introduced a common legal system for all, regardless of race, culture, or religion.
 - a. That is the essence of the Rule of Law writ large in the Charter.
 - b. From that crucial moment on, there was no longer a multitude of definitions of what is right and wrong, what causes harm, what confers benefit, what grievances matter, what rights individuals have, what redress is available, and what entitlements are enforceable.
 - c. Instead, we created a common foundation for all – a law which applies equally to everyone and which no person is above.

- d. But this system did not arise from a single moment of creation, completed two centuries ago. The law, and our commitment to its rule, is an everyday labour, now, a modern undertaking, which all of us today must continue to make real.
- 6. This “everyday labour” is what I will speak about today.
- 7. The Rule of Law is a specific enterprise – universal in principle but particular in form. Every country has its own signature, and its signature evolves with time.
- 8. Singapore is no exception to this. Hence, I will examine how Singapore has developed our own concept of law, from inherited colonial legal institutions to our own distinctive approach, based on our circumstances and values.
- 9. And it is not enough that our laws evolve – we must demonstrate, test and continuously interrogate this process of development, not just amongst ourselves, as professional interpreters of the law, but amongst our countrymen and women.
- 10. For it is the nature of just laws that they must not only have force but that this force is accepted by all, that we bend to the rule of law but do so freely.
- 11. The better we understand our conceptualisation of the Rule of Law, and how it came to be, the better we can use it, to organise ourselves and to settle disputes today; and the better it can function, and to guide us in the future. That is to say, we must answer the question – *what is the law for?* What is the point of law?
- 12. The central argument I present to you today is Singapore’s answer to this question.

B. What is the Rule of Law?

- 13. Empirically, we know that the Rule of Law has come down to us through the crucible of centuries. It developed across civilisations as a shield against capricious exercise of power.
 - a. As far back as the 4th century BCE, Aristotle contrasted the Rule of Law with the rule of men. To him, it was a guard against arbitrary and unjust action of rulers.¹
 - b. Similar considerations can be found in ancient Chinese, Islamic, and Indian traditions.
 - i. In Ancient China, under the Qin dynasty, a predominant philosophy was *fajia* or legalism, which advocated that society must be governed by rules that are fair, transparent and which apply equally to every subject.
 - ii. In Islamic tradition, everyone, including the caliphs and the sultans, were subject to Shariah law.
 - iii. Likewise, Ancient Indian, Hindu, Buddhist and Jain traditions all held sophisticated legal doctrines which recognised that even kings were not above the law.

¹ Steve Wexler and Andrew Irvine, “Aristotle on the Rule of Law”, *Polis The Journal for Ancient Greek and Roman Political Thought* (Vol 23, No 1, January 2006); Theo J Angelis, Jonathan H Harrison, “History and Importance of the Rule of Law”, *World Justice Project Working Paper* (2003), available at <https://worldjusticeproject.org/our-work/publications/working-papers/history-and-importance-rule-law>

14. In the common law tradition, the Magna Carta of 1215 is often cited as a watershed moment in the development of the Rule of Law.

- The Magna Carta arose from a dispute between the English monarch, King John, and nobles who rebelled against his capricious exercise of power, particularly his raising of taxes.² The King had also immense power to arbitrarily detain individuals and seize property.
- Following the Magna Carta, the King's powers were limited, and he was required to submit to the authority of law.
- The Magna Carta also contained the seeds of what would now become *habeas corpus*: a clause which is still in England's statute books today.³
- However, the protections under the Magna Carta were limited to aristocrats and did not apply to the vast majority of the population.
 - Habeas corpus*, for example, applied only to Freemen, landowners, knights or barons – and not to serfs, which constituted the majority of the English population then.⁴
 - This is a theme to which I will return to later – that the Rule of Law has not always been employed for the benefit of society at large.

15. The Rule of Law, as we recognise it today, would only emerge centuries after the Magna Carta in 1215. Its principles evolved and coalesced over centuries of political upheavals, philosophical thought, as well as political theory.

16. Legal luminaries over the ages have attempted to distil the key principles of the Rule of Law. Today, we accept a few key elements as defining.

- First, the Rule of Law is a powerful constraint on the capricious exercise of power, as outlined in AV Dicey's principles.⁵ They are:
 - Supremacy of law over arbitrary power, and that no man may be punished except by way of lawful judgment; and
 - Equality before the law. And by this, he was referring to two different but related concepts:
 - First, that no man is above the law; and
 - Second, that all classes are equally subject to the law, as administered by the ordinary law courts.
- Next, equality in application. To quote Lord Bingham:

² <https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/evolutionofparliament/originsofparliament/birthofparliament/overview/magnacarta/magnacarta-how/>

³ Clause 29, Magna Carta 1297, available at:

<https://safe.menlosecurity.com/https://www.legislation.gov.uk/aep/Edw1cc1929/25/9>

⁴ Simon Chesterman, "The Myth of the Magna Carta – Or, How a Failed Peace Treaty with French Aristocrats was Reinvented as the Foundation of English (and American) Liberty", NUS Law Working Paper Series, 2015/012, December 2015, https://law.nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/012_2015_Simon_Chesterman.pdf

⁵ AV Dicey, *Introduction to the Study of the Law of the Constitution* (8th Edition) (1915), at pp 183 – 192

“all persons and authorities within the state, whether public or private, should be bound by and entitled to the benefit of laws publicly and prospectively promulgated and publicly administered by the courts.”⁶

- c. Third, specific characteristics such as certainty, transparency and independence.
- d. Chief Justice Sundaresh Menon captured these key principles pithily in his 2024 speech entitled “Reimagining the Rule of Law”. They are:⁷
 - i. accountability, meaning that the power of the state is subject to legal limits, and can be held to account before the courts;
 - ii. equality before the law and equal protection of the law;
 - iii. clear, consistent and predictable laws; and
 - iv. transparency and open justice.
- e. He explained that these principles rest on the foundation of an independent and impartial judiciary.

17. Even as we define the Rule of Law, we must confront a deeper question - what is the Rule of Law *for*?

18. For the Rule of Law was not a good in itself. It always had a purpose.

C. Evolution of Rule of Law in Singapore

- 19. Singapore received our modern legal system from the English, through the Second Charter of Justice in 1826. And with this, we also inherited the Rule of Law principles – as informed by the common law tradition.
- 20. However, there is a wide gulf between how the Rule of Law was wielded, pre- and post-independence.
- 21. Pre-independence, the Rule of Law and legal system served a specific function.
 - a. It was originally wielded by the British as a tool — not necessarily for the benefit of Singaporeans, but to further the interests of the British Empire.
 - i. Its main purpose was to grow revenue for the colonial power.
 - 1. One person who was acutely aware of this is Professor S Jayakumar, our former Deputy Prime Minister and an eminent jurist.
 - 2. When the Government appointed me as the Chairman of the interagency Bicentennial Anniversary Committee, I approached Prof Jaya to be the Committee’s adviser.
 - 3. The first question he asked me was, “How did the Second Charter of Justice get its name?”
 - 4. I instinctively thought it must have been from the title of the statutory instrument.
 - 5. I was wrong. The actual title was rather unimaginative: “Letters Patent Establishing the Court of Judicature of the Prince of Wales’ Island,

⁶ Lord Thomas Bingham, “The Rule of Law”, speech at the 6th Sir David Williams Lecture (16 November 2006), transcript available at <https://safe.menlosecurity.com/https://www.cpl.law.cam.ac.uk/sir-david-williams-lectures2006-rule-of-law/rule-of-law-text-transcript> (accessed: 5 January 2026)

⁷ Chief Justice Sundaresh Menon, “Reimagining the Rule of Law: A Renewed Conception”, Speech delivered at Conversations with the Community, 20 September 2024

Singapore and Malacca, in the East-Indies". The title, Second Charter of Justice, was later given by legal historians and scholars.

6. Now Prof Jaya, of course, he already knew this. His intent was to make me think whose "justice" the colonial masters had in mind when they enacted the statutory instrument in 1826, and it worked.
7. The purpose of the legal system, for the British, was not necessarily to achieve justice *for the local population*. Rather, it was to benefit the British empire, including advancing the interests of the East India Company.

- ii. Having the Rule of Law was vital to pre-independence trade too, and the building of Singapore as a port.
- iii. Singapore's reception of English law through the Charter, particularly English commercial law, gave businesses the legal certainty needed for trade and commerce to flourish.⁸
- iv. But access to justice for the common man was not a priority. Most of the local populace had limited access to the Courts, which were the preserve of businessmen and the wealthy.
- v. Further, social services were thin.⁹ The police force was understaffed. And in any case it was distrusted as an instrument of suppression by the British colonial administration.¹⁰ Hence, the police had limited ability to enforce laws and maintain stability for the population.

- b. There was also no strong commitment to the separation of powers and judicial independence – both core principles of the Rule of Law.
 - i. Under the Second Charter, there was only one professional, independent Judge (the Recorder), the other judges were part of the executive. They were the Governor and Resident Counsellor.¹¹
 - ii. Effectively, this meant that it was possible for the Executive to overrule the Judiciary.
 - iii. It was only in 1867 that the Governor and Resident Counsellor ceased to exercise judicial powers.¹²

22. The Rule of Law really only began to benefit Singaporeans, after we gained our independence.

⁸ Murali Pillai SC, "Six Decades of Independence, Two Centuries of Legal History", Law Gazette (August 2025), available at <https://lawgazette.com.sg/feature/six-decades-of-independence-two-centuries-of-legal-history/>

⁹ Professor Tommy Koh, "The British Rule of Singapore: An Evaluation", Law Gazette (July 2019), available at <https://lawgazette.com.sg/feature/the-british-rule-of-singapore-an-evaluation/>

¹⁰ Ang Seow Leng, "A History of the Singapore Police Force: Men in Blue", Biblioasia (Oct – Dec 2015), pp 26 – 31

¹¹ Second Charter of Justice at p 10 (To consist of the Governor and the Resident Counsellor, and one other Judge, to be called the Recorder of Prince of Wales Island)

¹² Mavis Chionh (2005) The Development of the Court System, in Kevin YL Tan (ed) Essays in Singapore Legal History, Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Academic for the Singapore Academy of Law, pp 93 – 137 at 98, 102 – 104

23. Our founding fathers recognised the importance of this basic foundation, but also the ways we needed to evolve.

- a. The late Mr Lee Kuan Yew, our founding Prime Minister, was himself a lawyer. He regarded the Rule of Law as a valuable legacy from the British, even as he recognised the limitations of the British system.¹³
- b. In particular, he recognised the benefits of the legal landscape shaped by the Charter – from many communities, it created one jurisdiction – and in a sense, one people.
- c. He also understood that the law could transform Singapore into a “first world oasis” in what was then a third world region.

24. To truly harness the value of the Rule of Law, we had to render to it a meaningful purpose for Singapore.

- a. As Mr Lee said, we had to “*bridge the gulf between the ideal principle [of the Rule of Law,] and its practice in our given sociological and economic milieu.*”¹⁴

25. This teleological exercise lay in the hands of Singaporeans. We had to devise our own concept of the Rule of Law.

26. Then-Chief Justice Chan Sek Keong, who worked closely with Mr Lee as Attorney-General, summarised Mr Lee’s approach to the Rule of Law as set out in this slide.¹⁵

- a. First, the State may only exercise power in accordance with the law.
- b. Second, everyone is equal before the law, and equally subject to the law.
- c. Third, the purpose of the Rule of Law is to produce order and justice in the relationships between man and man, and between man and the state.
- d. Fourth, the Rule of Law is an economic asset as it provides a stable and safe environment for foreign investments.
- e. Fifth, the Rule of Law is essential to the international order as it will prevent aggression against small and vulnerable states and there will be peaceful co-existence and stability in the international order.

27. Again, we see similar themes emerging – safeguards against arbitrary exercise of state power, equality before the law, and an independent judiciary to adjudicate on disputes impartially.

¹³ Chan Sek Keong, “Lee Kuan Yew and the Rule of Law” in *The Big Ideas of Lee Kuan Yew* (Shashi Jayakumar, Rahul Sagar, Chan Sek Keong and Kishore Mahbubani, comps/eds) (Straits Times Press, 2014) ch 2 at p 58: “Mr Lee has stated in an interview that he regarded the rule of law as the most valuable legacy that the British left to Singapore.”

¹⁴ Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore Prime Minister’s Speech to the University of Singapore Law Society Annual Dinner at Rosee D’or on 18th January 1962 at 8:30 pm

¹⁵ Chan Sek Keong, “Lee Kuan Yew and the Rule of Law” in *The Big Ideas of Lee Kuan Yew* (Shashi Jayakumar, Rahul Sagar, Chan Sek Keong and Kishore Mahbubani, comps/eds) (Straits Times Press, 2014) ch 2 at p57

28. But I want to focus on the third point. This captures the essence of Singapore's concept of the Rule of Law.
29. Mr Lee recognised that the purpose of the Rule of Law was to produce order and justice in the relationships between man and man, and between man and the state.
 - a. And to achieve this purpose, there are several requirements to be met.
30. In essence, these requirements reflect the key principle that law must prevail over disorder. The best laws are futile when a culture of impunity prevails.
 - a. This is why a country must enact and enforce laws that can protect itself and its people. This includes laws that:
 - i. deter harmful acts like corruption and drug trafficking; and
 - ii. advance the people's welfare.
 - b. Only through such laws can a country secure the stability to flourish economically, and socially.
31. Thus, at the core of Singapore's approach to the Rule of Law are two key elements:
 - a. First, over the past 60 years, we have seen the evolution of law within Singapore as a **practical tool to achieve specific goals**. In the Singapore model, the rule of law is not just a shield to guard against caprice; but it is also a sword to advance the common good and to benefit society.
 - b. Second, a focus on **pragmatism and outcomes**. The Rule of Law must create tangible results and be part of the lived experience of the daily lives of ordinary Singaporeans – good jobs, social harmony, and public safety.
32. In line with these, our legal landscape may be seen by some as departing from traditional Western ideals, as it evolved to suit our unique context and circumstances, being a small, densely populated, and multiracial society.

D. Role of the Rule of Law in Singapore's development

33. To illustrate Singapore's approach to the Rule of Law, the next section of my lecture will zoom in on three specific areas where the Rule of Law has been integral to Singapore's development and success:
 - a. Economic progress
 - i. Including the legal innovations that we developed to deal with the unprecedented economic crisis prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic;
 - b. Racial and religious harmony; and
 - c. Access to justice

Economic progress

34. I start with the role of the Rule of Law in underwriting our economic progress. When Singapore left the Federation of Malaysia in 1965, the Government adopted two key strategic decisions:¹⁶

- Prioritise export-led industrialisation over import-substitution; and
- Promote foreign direct investment by attracting global multinational corporations to come to Singapore.

35. These decisions were not in keeping with the conventional economic strategy of that time. But in standing out, Singapore was able to add value to the global economy and secure progress for our people.

36. To secure this advantage though was not easy. We relied heavily on our Rule of Law at the time. Particularly by:

- Ensuring that laws were clear, publicly promulgated, and enforced fairly by an independent judiciary. This created a safe, stable environment which investors could trust in the long term.
- We also demonstrated a willingness to commit to an international rules-based order. This facilitated free trade.

Safe, stable environment for Investors

37. Investors could rest assured, knowing that their assets would not be stripped from them arbitrarily. Instead, their rights – be they contractual, property or other rights – would be upheld. And if disputes arose, these investors know that the disputes would be resolved in Court impartially and efficiently.

38. In this way, the Rule of Law enabled our own legal industry to become another engine of economic growth. We see evidence of this today.

39. Singapore is a thriving international dispute resolution hub, trusted for its fair and impartial adjudication of disputes.

40. We harnessed this reputation by establishing three key dispute resolution institutions, to provide different – but complementary – dispute-resolution options.

- Singapore International Commercial Court (SICC);
- Singapore International Arbitration Centre (SIAC); and
- Singapore International Mediation Centre (SIMC).

41. The SICC deals with transnational commercial disputes through litigation. Its judiciary comprises a panel of experienced judges, including specialist commercial judges from Singapore, and international judges from both civil law and common law jurisdictions.¹⁷

42. The SIAC is an internationally recognised global arbitral institution, comprising over 700 expert arbitrators from more than 40 jurisdictions, with deep expertise in various areas

¹⁶ Ravi Menon, “An Economic History of Singapore: 1965-2065*”, Keynote Address at the Singapore Economic Review Conference 2015

¹⁷ Judiciary website, at: <https://www.judiciary.gov.sg/singapore-international-commercial-court>; <https://www.judiciary.gov.sg/singapore-international-commercial-court/about-the-sicc/overview-of-the-sicc>; <https://www.judiciary.gov.sg/singapore-international-commercial-court/about-the-sicc/establishment-of-the-sicc>

such as energy, construction, finance, technology, shipping, and life sciences¹⁸. Today, it is one of the top arbitral institutions in the world¹⁹ - the SIAC has served users from more than 100 jurisdictions, and its arbitral awards have been enforced in many jurisdictions.²⁰

43. Mediation at the SIMC provides a non-adversarial and flexible mode of dispute resolution. From its inception in 2014, to a decade later in 2024, SIMC has mediated over 430 cases, with a combined dispute value of US\$18 billion. Its reach extends globally to over 60 jurisdictions.²¹

Commitment to an international rules-based order

44. All the while, our commitment to the Rule of Law drives the success of these institutions.
 - a. We demonstrated our willingness to participate in an international rules-based order by playing a key role in the development of international conventions, including:
 - i. The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea or UNCLOS. Singaporeans played a significant role in UNCLOS, including: Professor Tommy Koh, who was the President of the Third UN Conference on the Law of the Sea in 1982; Professor Jayakumar, who later became our Law Minister; and Mr Chao Hick Tin, who later became one of our most eminent Judges.
 - ii. We also played a key role in the development of the UN Convention on International Settlement Agreements Resulting from Mediation – also known as the Singapore Convention of Mediation. Singapore built consensus among member states and ensured that diverse interests were accommodated by exercising thought leadership on various issues.²²
 - iii. Most recently, Ambassador Rena Lee, as President of the United Nations Intergovernmental Conference on Marine Biodiversity of Areas Beyond National Jurisdiction or BBNJ, led five years of complex negotiations which led to the adoption of the landmark BBNJ Agreement by consensus.
45. We also walked the talk, by incorporating these international obligations into our domestic laws, for instance, by introducing the Mediation Act 2017.
46. Now, this focus on economic vitality provided a crucial compass for the legal innovations which helped us overcome the immense stress brought by the COVID-19 pandemic:
 - a. Businesses could not fulfil their contracts, and tenants could not pay rent. Ordinary Singaporeans and small businesses were the most impacted.

¹⁸ SIAC's website, at: <https://siac.org.sg/about-us>

¹⁹ 2021 Queen Mary University of London and White & Case International Arbitration Survey: Adapting Arbitration to a Changing World

²⁰ SIAC's website, at: <https://siac.org.sg/about-us>

²¹ SIMC's website, at: <https://simc.com.sg/why-mediate>; <https://simc.com.sg/news/singapore-international-mediation-centre-celebrates-decade-of-growth-unveils-ai-powered-tool>

²² Written PQ by Minister for Law, K Shanmugam, on Singapore Convention on Mediation (6 August 2018)

47. To deal with the crisis, we acted decisively and passed the COVID-19 (Temporary Measures) Act within 9 days from conception.²³ The Act imposed a moratorium on the enforcement of rights and obligations under a wide range of contracts including construction contracts, event contracts, tourism-related contracts, and lease/licensing agreements.
48. This was not an easy decision, or one that was taken lightly. It was a radical step, to alter people's contractual rights and obligations.
 - a. The Second Reading speech by then-Minister for Law, Mr K Shanmugam, was most instructive.
 - i. In a normal situation, sanctity of contract is a fundamental value. It provides trust and certainty in human dealings. Therefore, the Government does not intervene in agreements voluntarily entered between willing parties. Adherence to this principle is foundational to our economic success.
 - ii. But do these principles still hold true, when "the normal assumptions of business are gone", and when "the bottom of the market has literally fallen off"?
 - iii. As Minister Shanmugam astutely identified: If we insisted on the letter of the law (of contracts), we would be undermining the spirit of the law – trust. If we doggedly held people to contractual obligations undertaken while the pandemic – with its unprecedented supply chain disruptions and movement restrictions were not reasonably on anyone's radar – we would be doing so at the expense of the economy itself, and of the "life and spirit" of Singapore.
49. But this was not to say that Singapore abandoned the sanctity of contract completely or in an arbitrary manner.
50. The Government incorporated numerous safeguards, to balance the protection of individuals' contractual rights, against the wider public good of preserving "some structure of the economy".
 - a. For example, to qualify for relief, the non-performance of contracts must have been materially caused by a COVID-19 event.
 - b. There were also sunset provisions to make clear that the measures in the Act were temporary. This ensured that the Government's intervention was targeted and proportionate, to situations arising from the pandemic.
 - c. We strove to protect natural justice rights, especially the opportunity to be heard.
 - i. The affected party had to serve a notification for relief on the other contracting party. This notification for relief may be challenged.
 - ii. To ensure that parties could resolve disputes speedily, we created an innovative dispute resolution mechanism, and appointed assessors to determine challenges, without the formality of court proceedings. This also made the process accessible to thousands of laypersons.

²³ Speech by Minister for Law Mr K Shanmugam, during the Second Reading of the Covid-19 Temporary Measures) Bill (7 April 2020), Vol 94

- iii. This approach allowed Singaporeans to weather the storm. About 21% of applications²⁴ were presented through the assessor system, while the majority of cases were resolved expeditiously and amicably.

51. Our COVID-19 response showed that our pragmatic approach to the Rule of Law, focused on serving the common good, allowed us to respond effectively to unprecedented challenges.

52. This approach will remain crucial as we face new economic headwinds in today's global climate. Internationally, faith in multilateralism and a rules-based order is being eroded as people question if international treaties and organisations are effective, relevant or even fair.²⁵ Economic nationalism is taking, no, has taken, root.²⁶ The WTO's dispute settlement mechanism is paralysed, and core WTO principles like the "Most Favoured Nation" principle are at risk of being eroded by unilateral tariffs and tit-for-tat responses.²⁷

53. This strikes at the basis of Singapore's success, as an open economy, deeply integrated in global trade networks.²⁸

54. But even in these troubled times, our commitment to the Rule of Law continues to allow Singapore to position ourselves as an "oasis of calm" in choppy waters – a safe and stable environment for businesses.²⁹

Racial and Religious Harmony

55. I move to the next area which demonstrates the Rule of Law's tangible impact: our racial and religious harmony.

56. In the 1960s, racial and religious harmony seemed to be a distant, unattainable goal. Singapore was plagued by racial riots. There were two major riots in 1964 and subsequent clashes in 1969. Altogether, 40 people lost their lives, and more than 630 people were injured.³⁰

57. To address this upheaval and prevent further unrest, the Government made a firm and public commitment to racial equality, allowing Singaporeans to forge a shared "Singaporean" identity.

a. In 2017, the National Archives launched the Community-Driven Oral History Project, to record and preserve the diverse experiences and memories of ordinary

²⁴ Out of 10,341 notifications submitted via FormSG for relief, 2,237 assessor determinations were sought: MinLaw records, *Review of Mechanisms under the COVID-19 (Temporary Measures) Act*, (2022)

²⁵ Speech by Minister Chan Chun Sing at the 10th Singapore-China Forum on Leadership (18 November 2025), at: <https://www.psd.gov.sg/newsroom/speech-by-minister-chan-chun-sing-at-the-10th-singapore-china-forum-on-leadership/>

²⁶ Speech by Prime Minister Lawrence Wong at the World Economic Forum Annual Meeting of the New Champions in Tianjin, China (25 June 2025), at: <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/singapore-pm-lawrence-wong-wef-dialogue-multilateralism-5199611>

²⁷ Speech by DPM Gan Kim Yong at the Future China Global Forum (19 September 2025), available at: <https://www.mti.gov.sg/newsroom/keynote-speech-by-dpm-and-minti-gan-kim-yong-at-the-futurechina-global-forum/>

²⁸ Speech by Minister for Foreign Affairs Dr Vivian Balakrishnan at COS 2025 (3 March 2025)

²⁹ Straits Times, "Global uncertainty over security will affect jobs, wages and prices in S'pore: Chan Chun Sing", 27 June 2025, at

³⁰ <https://www.sg101.gov.sg/society/examples/racialriots/>

Singaporeans from different communities.³¹ A member of the pioneer generation, Mr Johari bin Mohd Rais, was asked about his feelings as a Malay person in the aftermath of the riots and separation.

- b. He replied: "At first we were quite apprehensive, what was going to happen next? But then Mr Lee Kuan Yew went – appeared on TV, he was telling that we are not going to build a Malay country, we are not going to build a Chinese country, we are not going to build an Indian country. We are going to build a country, multi-racial country of Singaporeans. So, for that, we are quite convinced it's ok to stay."³² Now, I thought this was significant, coming from a member of our Malay community, which was the majority race pre-independence and then became a minority race upon independence.
- 58. We also enacted laws, which entrenched the principle of equality and non-discrimination in our Constitution.³³ The Presidential Council for Minority Rights scrutinises every Bill for provisions that are or are likely to be unequally disadvantageous to any racial or religious community. This duty is so essential, it is enshrined in Article 78 of our Constitution.
- 59. The fundamental principle was that all races were equal. This was, as I mentioned earlier, a core tenet of the Rule of Law.
- 60. At the same time:
 - a. We recognised that equality is served not by ignoring differences in race, but by designing rules that respected each community, and allowed them the space to flourish. We do not aim for a homogeneous culture. We respect and celebrate the diversity of each community.
 - b. For instance, our Constitution recognises four official languages: Malay, Mandarin, Tamil and English with Malay being our National language.³⁴
 - c. We recognised the special position of Malays, as the indigenous people of Singapore. The Constitution therefore expressly sets out the Government's responsibility to safeguard Malay interests and the Malay language.³⁵
- 61. We also enacted unique policies to proactively manage racial and religious relations and maintain public order.
- 62. Take the Ethnic Integration Policy ("EIP").
 - a. In the late 1980s, the Government observed a disturbing trend: the re-emergence of communal enclaves, which had been broken up through the massive public

³¹ [Looking Back, Looking Forward; Browse by Interviewee - Oral History Interviews](#)

³² Oral History Interview with Mr Johari bin Mohd Rais, Community-Driven Oral History Project, Accession Number 004125, Reel/Disc 3 of 12, Recording Date 9 Jun 2017, transcript available at https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/flipviewer/publish/d/daba7fa7-522e-11ea-a865-001a4a5ba61b-OHC004125_003/web/html5/index.html?launchlogo=tablet/OralHistoryInterviews_brandingLogo_.png&pn=7; Interview available at https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/oral_history_interviews/record-details/daba7fa7-522e-11ea-a865-001a4a5ba61b?keywords=sepoy%20mutiny&keywords-type=all

³³ See Arts 12, 16 and 15 of the Constitution.

³⁴ Art 153A(1).

³⁵ Art 152(2) Constitution

housing effort in the 1960s and 1970s. Different HDB estates attracted residents of different races.³⁶

- i. Between September 1987 and September 1988, Malays formed more than half of the applicants for resale units in the Bedok/Tampines region.
- ii. Whereas Chinese applicants preferred Ang Mo Kio or Hougang. There were neighbourhoods in Hougang New Town, where Chinese households exceeded 90%.

b. This trend was of serious concern. If left unchecked, it would have led to racial segregation. MPs and community leaders might develop narrow views of society's interests and problems. And this would undermine efforts to foster integration.³⁷

c. So, in 1989, the ethnic integration policy was introduced. The Government capped the proportion of flats in each HDB block and neighbourhood, that can be owned by households from each ethnic group.

63. The policy was criticised by some as intrusive social engineering. But as then-Deputy Prime Minister Tharman noted, it turned out to be one of the most important social policies.³⁸

- a. When people live together, they walk the corridors together, their children go to the same school together, we will be able to foster an equality between people.
- b. The policy itself was applied openly, fairly and transparently. The quotas were publicly announced. And prospective buyers and sellers may use an e-service to check if they are affected by a quota for a particular block.³⁹
- c. Safeguards were also employed to mitigate any unfairness. The Government introduced buyback assistance for EIP-constrained flat owners who face genuine difficulties selling their flats at a reasonable price. They may sell their flats back to HDB at a fair price, based on the prevailing market conditions.

64. This is one example of how a policy underpinned by the Rule of Law, but tailored to our unique circumstances, can deliver concrete results to benefit Singaporeans.

- a. Our public housing estates continue to remain inclusive and diverse, where residents of all races live in harmony.⁴⁰

65. Another example is our laws against hate speech and conduct inciting violence or ill-will.

³⁶ Speech by Mr S Dhanabalan, Minister for National Development, at the 1989 New Year Gathering for Community Leaders at the People's Association Auditorium (6 January 1989)

³⁷ Speech by Mr S Dhanabalan, Minister for National Development, at the 1989 New Year Gathering for Community Leaders at the People's Association Auditorium (6 January 1989)

³⁸ An Investigative Interview: Singapore 50 years after independence – 45th St. Gallen Symposium, transcript available at <https://singjupost.com/transcript-an-investigative-interview-singapore-50-years-after-independence-45th-st-gallen-symposium/>

³⁹ <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/st-explains-what-is-the-ethnic-integration-policy-and-how-does-it-work>

⁴⁰ Oral Answer by Ministry of National Development on the Ethnic Integration Policy (5 July 2021), available at <https://www.mnd.gov.sg/newsroom/speeches/view/oral-answer-by-ministry-of-national-development-on-the-ethnic-integration-policy>

- a. Singapore enacted and enforced laws targeting acts which incite hatred or ill-will between different races or religious groups through the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act and, more recently, the Maintenance of Racial Harmony Act, which was passed in 2025.⁴¹
- b. Besides criminalising hate speech and conduct, the legislation also empowers the Minister for Home Affairs to issue Restriction Orders against persons involved in the communication, production or distribution of content that prejudices the maintenance of religious or racial harmony in Singapore.
- c. The Government also has legal powers under the Internal Security Act to detain individuals before they have committed any acts of violence in exceptional cases where Singapore's security, and public order may be threatened.⁴²

66. Such laws have opened Singapore to criticism. But our experience has shown that they are necessary to maintain the safety of Singaporeans.

- a. Hate speech normalises or legitimises unacceptable behaviour and creates an environment that is more prone to violence.⁴³
 - i. We see this in other countries, and even in recent news.
 - ii. Most recently, a father-son duo inspired by ISIS opened fire at a Hanukkah celebration at Bondi Beach. This was a clear, targeted attack on Australia's Jewish community. 15 people were killed.
 - iii. You will also recall the Christchurch mosque shootings in 2019, which took the lives of 51 Muslim worshippers.
- b. Such incidents have the potential to cause irreversible social fissures, and destroy trust between communities built over decades. So, we are unapologetic about our strong laws against hate speech and radicalisation, to protect all communities in Singapore.

67. At the same time, these laws also reflect Rule of Law principles.

- a. The laws are clear, transparent and apply equally to all persons.
- b. Safeguards are in place to prevent the arbitrary exercise of power.
 - i. All Restriction Orders must be reviewed by the Presidential Council for Religious Harmony, and are subject to confirmation by the President.⁴⁴ Persons issued with a Restriction Order are also able to make representations to the Council.⁴⁵ The President may act in his discretion to cancel, vary, confirm or refuse to confirm a restraining order, where the advice of the Cabinet is contrary to the recommendation of the Council.⁴⁶

⁴¹ See e.g. s 40 Maintenance of Racial Harmony Act and s 17F Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act

⁴² Under the Internal Security Act

⁴³ Minister for Home Affairs and Law K Shanmugam, Ministerial Statement on Restricting Hate Speech to Maintain Racial and Religious Harmony in Singapore (1 April 2019)

⁴⁴ S 12(1) Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act 1990

⁴⁵ S 12(1) Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act 1990

⁴⁶ Art 22I Constitution

- ii. Under the Internal Security Act, detainees similarly have a right to be heard and can make representations to an independent advisory board, chaired by a Supreme Court judge.
- c. We also recognise that punitive legal levers are insufficient, on their own.
- d. Hence, one of the legal measures available under the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act and the Maintenance of Racial Harmony Act is the Community Remedial Initiative or CRI. The CRI is for less egregious cases. It gives those who have wounded the feelings of another racial or religious community, the opportunity to take remedial actions to mend ties with the affected community in lieu of prosecution. Examples include a private or public apology, or participation in multicultural events.
- e. Even for more egregious cases where detention is warranted, we put in considerable resources to rehabilitate detainees so they can be reintegrated back into society. Detainees undergo psychological, social and religious rehabilitation. The Internal Security Department partners with volunteers from the Religious Rehabilitation Group and Interagency Aftercare Group, to provide continued support for detainees. Since 2002, almost 85% of Singaporeans detained under the Internal Security Act have been released after making good progress in their rehabilitation. They contribute to society, engaging in fruitful, pro-social pursuits.⁴⁷

68. The balance we have struck has ensured that Singapore's racial and religious harmony has been maintained, even as other societies have been rocked by identity politics, factionalism and, even violence, driven by hate speech and radicalisation.

Access to Justice

69. The third area I wish to speak about is access to justice.

- a. Access to Justice is essential in preserving our social fabric and social harmony. It is a key pillar that ensures our laws and justice system are not just the province of the wealthy.
- b. It is vital that people have access to common, neutral and trusted platforms to work through their disputes, when frictions arise⁴⁸.
- c. This is why we have sought to reduce barriers to the Courts – whether by establishing specialist courts, improving court processes, or enhancing legal aid.
- d. We established the Small Claims Tribunals and Community Disputes Resolution Tribunal, as well as specialised tribunals such as the Employment Claims Tribunal – where legal procedures are simplified and judge-led, fees are affordable, and parties can be self-represented. Having such tribunals ensures that people can obtain redress for small value claims and community disputes, as a last resort, without facing prohibitive costs.

⁴⁷ Speech by Minister for Home Affairs and Law K Shanmugam at the Judicial Executive Programme 2022 (21 November 2022); ISD, Singapore Terrorism Threat Risk Assessment Report 2025, 29 July 2025, at p 22-24

⁴⁸ Speech by Second Minister for Law Edwin Tong at the MinLaw COS 2025

- e. We move with technology, by allowing counsel and witnesses to give evidence via video-link in some cases. This makes the legal process more user-friendly, and reduces the time and cost involved in court hearings.
- f. We continue to enhance our legal aid programmes. The Legal Aid Bureau (LAB) will be 68 years old this year. Over the past 68 years, the LAB provided access to justice in civil matters to less privileged Singaporeans and PRs, who otherwise would not be able to afford a lawyer.
- g. One of those who benefited from LAB's assistance was Mdm Liew Thye Moi, LAB's oldest applicant. She was 103 years old in 2024. She could only speak Hokkien, and had mobility issues. She sought help from LAB as her youngest daughter had taken her monies on the pretext of protecting her interests. Someone like Mdm Liew could have easily fallen through the cracks. Yet, with the LAB's help, she managed to take the stand in a one-day trial, and obtained a favourable judgment after which her daughter returned Mdm Liew's life savings to her.⁴⁹ Her story highlights our commitment to ensure that no one is left behind, and that access to justice is part of the lived experience of Singaporeans.
- h. In 2022, to further enhance access to justice, MinLaw established the Public Defender's Office, which institutionalised criminal defence aid within the criminal justice system. To benefit more accused persons, we also expanded the income coverage from the bottom 25th to the bottom 35th percentile by per capita resident household income.
- i. Beyond Government legal aid schemes, we partner with external stakeholders such as Pro Bono SG, an independent charity, to strengthen our eco-system of legal help. For example, MinLaw provides funding to Pro Bono SG for the co-delivery of criminal defence aid, alongside PDO. MinLaw also provides funding for the two Community Law Centres at Tian De Temple and the Realm of Tranquillity. As these centres are located in the heartlands, residents can more easily access legal help when needed.⁵⁰ MinLaw will continue to work with the legal fraternity and other stakeholders to expand partnerships and explore further initiatives to deliver holistic socio-legal support to Singapore citizens and permanent residents in need, and hence ensure access to justice.
- j. Here, I wish to make special mention of the efforts by lawyers and the Law Society, through Pro Bono SG, to promote access to justice through pro bono work. This is critical and I would like to thank all the practitioners in the audience today who have sacrificed your time and energy to provide legal aid to the vulnerable in our society.

⁴⁹ Interview accessible at Ministry of Law, Singapore's Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/minlawsg/videos/1050092279754186/?rdid=sFcF29geXUySyLym#> (accessed 30 December 2025).

⁵⁰ SUSS, "Pro Bono SG launches Community Law Centre to deliver integrated legal care in the North East" (31 January 2023), available at: <https://www.probono.sg/news/community-law-centre-launch-january-2023/>; Pro Bono SG, "Pro Bono SG launches Community Law Centre to deliver integrated legal care in the North-East together with community partners" (31 January 2023); <https://www.suss.edu.sg/about-suss/media-centres/media-releases/pro-bono-sg-launches-community-law-centre-to-deliver-integrated-legal-care-in-the-north-east>; Lianne Chia, Liew Zhi Xin and Tang Hui Huan, "Last line of defence": Meet the '\$1 lawyers' who provide justice for all", CNA (14 September 2024), available at: <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/cna-insider/young-pro-bono-lawyers-defence-justice-free-charity-temple-4604626>

E. Looking Forward – How can we continue to evolve the Rule of Law?

70. I next move to another area which has required us to evolve our legal frameworks: the regulation of online harms.
71. Today, more of our lives are lived online. The Internet has brought many benefits, and improved our lives in various spheres, from online communication, banking and e-commerce. However, it has also facilitated new forms of harm. Singaporeans do not feel as safe online, as they do in the physical sphere.
 - a. In 2023, a study on Online Harms by the non-profit SG Her Empowerment, or SHE, showed that 58% of respondents personally experienced or knew people who faced online harms. 76% feared expressing their personal views online.⁵¹
72. Offline, the norms on how we treat each other are well-established. We know we will be in trouble if we harass or harm one another. However, these basic social norms do not always translate online.
 - a. Among other reasons, we have differing standards used by different service providers, such as social media companies.
 - b. And unfortunately, these standards are also not always enforced. An IMDA study conducted in 2025 showed that more than half the legitimate user complaints about online harm were not addressed in the first instance by social media companies.⁵²
73. Left unchecked, online harm will continue to occur and may even be normalised. The online space will only get more dangerous, and people may censor themselves or choose to stay offline. As a result, online discourse will suffer and may even become dominated by people with hateful fringe views. We already see this trend leading to real-life harm.
 - a. The Bondi Beach shooters were inspired by Islamic State ideology which was proliferated online.⁵³
 - b. The Christchurch shooter professed belief in far-right online conspiracy theories like the “Great Replacement theory” and “White Genocide”.⁵⁴
 - c. The attacks against racial and religious communities do not take place in a vacuum. They were the result of sustained exposure to hateful online content.
 - d. In addition to such hateful content, we must also grapple with other forms of online harms like scams, doxxing, harassment, the circulation of child abuse material, disinformation, and deepfakes – at a scale and severity that was unimaginable before the Internet.

⁵¹ SHE Study, “Study on Online Harms in Singapore 2023” (2023), pp 9, 15

⁵² <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/more-than-half-of-reports-of-harm-not-dealt-with-in-the-first-instance-imda-audit-of-social-media>

⁵³ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2025-12-20/why-islamic-state-back-in-news-link-to-bondi-2026-attack/106165328>; <https://www.nbcnews.com/world/australia/bondi-beach-attack-suspects-father-son-rcna249258>

⁵⁴ <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/australianz/new-zealand-mosque-gunner-published-manifesto-livestreamed-shooting>; <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-47579243>

74. To prevent this, we decided to take decisive action to regulate the online space.

- a. In 2014, the Government enacted the Protection from Harassment Act (POHA) to give victims a right to civil remedies through damages and protection orders.
- b. In 2019, we strengthened the protections under POHA by covering doxxing and falsehoods. We also established the Protection from Harassment Court to offer victims quicker relief.
- c. In 2019, we also enacted the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act or POFMA, which allowed the Government to issue directions against online falsehoods which affected public interest. The Act provides for appeals to the General Division of the High Court against a direction.
- d. In 2023, we passed the Online Criminal Harms Act (OCHA), which enabled the Government to issue directions where there is a suspicion of online activity carried out in furtherance of an offence.⁵⁵ OCHA covers a broad scope of criminal harm including illegal moneylending and unlawful gambling.⁵⁶ An appeal framework was also put in place for a recipient of a direction.
- e. However, the online landscape develops rapidly, and as new forms of harm surface, like online impersonation and intimate image abuse, we needed to address these gaps and offer victims effective relief.
- f. In 2025, we passed the Online Safety (Relief and Accountability) Act 2025 (OSRA). As Minister Josephine Teo noted at the Second Reading of OSRA, the Act introduces many new features in our online safety ecosystem. Amongst other things, the Act:
 - i. Establishes the Office of the Commissioner for Online Safety. An agency – the Online Safety Commission (OSC) – will be set up to support the Commissioner's Office.
 - ii. The OSC will be empowered to issue directions to communicators of harmful content, administrators, and platforms.
 - iii. Safeguards will also be available through a two-step appeal process. Eligible persons may apply to the Commissioner to seek a reconsideration of the OSC's decision. A reconsidered decision may also be appealed to an independent appeal panel.

75. Such measures show that we are not afraid to take bold steps for the common good. Each step taken adheres to the Rule of Law - we enact clear laws, which apply equally, with safeguards to prevent the arbitrary exercise of power.

76. In this way, we endeavour to ensure that Singaporeans can feel as safe online, as they do offline.

F. Concluding Remarks

77. Singapore has come a long way since the Second Charter of Justice.

⁵⁵ [Commencement of the Online Criminal Harms Act \(OCHA\) on 1 February 2024](#)

⁵⁶ [New law passed to remove online content that is criminal or harmful | The Straits Times](#)

78. We have used the Rule of Law to achieve economic progress and good governance – but Singapore’s concept of the rule of law is not about theoretical grandeur, but about improving lives and livelihoods of Singaporeans. At the end of the day, much depends on the mettle of our leaders.

- a. If within five years of independence, Singapore had collapsed with high levels of crime and corruption, with leaders squandering away its monies, the international community would likely have said: “Well, we never expected that little place to survive anyway”. That’s the norm.
- b. Rules of law would not have helped. Instead, together with a few generations of leaders with steel and a clear focus on what mattered – including I must add, observation of the rule of law – we built Singapore. A country of US\$500 GNI per capita in 1965 to over US\$75,000 in 2024.⁵⁷
- c. The same can be said about the safety and security we enjoy today. In the 1950s, before we became independent, Singapore was crime-ridden, plagued by secret societies, triads and high rates of gangsterism, violence and drug addiction.
- d. Today, as reported in the 2024 Gallup Poll, Singapore is one of the safest cities in the world. To quote: “In 2024, 98% of men and 97% of women said they feel safe walking alone at night, reflecting consistently low crime, effective law enforcement and strong public order. These conditions have contributed to Singapore’s unique status as the safest country in Gallup’s global trend”. This remarkable transformation over the past six decades was only possible due to our approach to the Rule of Law, which has focused on achieving concrete outcomes to ensure public safety.
- e. This is the chapter we have written up till now. Writing the next chapter is the responsibility of the younger persons in the audience today, and they will inherit this responsibility.

79. To help you exercise this duty, and to commemorate SGLaw200, the key stakeholders in the legal system – including MinLaw, the Judiciary, the Attorney-General’s Chambers, the Law Society, Pro Bono SG, the Singapore Academy of Law, the law schools, and many others – have put together a few events in this coming year, on the role of law in shaping modern Singapore.

80. For example:

- a. The SGLaw200 Youth Forum in May 2026, an event created with, and for, youths.
- b. We will also launch a guided heritage trail and roving exhibition in the heartlands in the second half of 2026, on the key institutions in our legal ecosystem, our legal heritage, and how the law undergirds the welfare of ordinary Singaporeans.
- c. We will also launch a commemorative book, and a documentary.

81. The Honourable The Chief Justice will also be speaking at the Opening of the Legal Year next Monday on the Judiciary’s plans to commemorate this significant milestone in the heritage of our Courts.

⁵⁷ Data.gov.sg, “Per Capita GNI and Per Capita GDP at Current Prices, Annual”, available at: https://data.gov.sg/datasets/d_cce7d88c668273bb8c1291027e63325a/view (accessed 5 January 2026)

82. I invite all of you to participate in these events.
83. Finally, I would like to thank the twelve student research assistants who were nominated by the Universities to help with the research for the Bicentennial anniversary. They have helped us uncover historical anecdotes and human-interest stories that will be featured in the various Bicentennial events and programmes this year. In fact, you've heard some of these stories in my speech today. Please join me in thanking them.
84. Ladies and Gentlemen, and future colleagues in service of the law, my task today is to argue that the "Point of Law", in the Singaporean model, is a means to achieve specific ends.
85. These include economic growth, but not growth for growth's sake; social order, but not order for order itself. Rather all these are means too, towards a higher public and moral goal, a goal which is a common dream shared by all of us who live, work and make our personal histories here – that's the Singapore Dream.
86. And as I have said, even though the Charter was written 200 years ago, law is not a creation at a moment of time. It is an everyday labour, to serve justice and our common good. We have done this over 60 years as an independent nation. And we continue to labour today, to use the law to help every Singaporean flourish in his particular ambition and purpose, and to do so in practical palpable ways.
87. If the Rule of Law is not just a shield to guard against caprice, if it is also a sword to advance the common good, then today, in an age of war and uncertainty, of technological upheavals and a new world order, it must be wielded with more dexterity, more imagination than it had been for the decades past; but with the same understanding of its purpose and its power.
88. This power, and the ability to evolve to fit new circumstances, must come from you, the future leaders of Singapore. I wish you every success, not just for your sake, but for Singapore's too.
89. Thank you.