

RSIS Commentary is a platform to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy-relevant commentary and analysis of topical and contemporary issues. The authors' views are their own and do not represent the official position of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced with prior permission from RSIS and due credit to the author(s) and RSIS. Please email to Editor RSIS Commentary at RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg.

Towards ICCS 2025

Is Interfaith Dialogue in Southeast Asia Losing Its Relevance? A Call for Renewal

By Nazhath Faheema

SYNOPSIS

As society changes digitally, generationally, and demographically, older interreligious dialogue models struggle to be effective, and a renewal is arguably needed.

COMMENTARY

Interreligious dialogue (IRD), also known as interfaith dialogue, has been crucial in fostering understanding and relationships among religious communities in Southeast Asia. From post-independence nation-building to contemporary peacebuilding, IRD has played a role in maintaining social cohesion and symbolising pluralistic aspirations.

Yet interfaith efforts appear to be losing momentum. The traditional frameworks and formats of IRD are struggling to keep pace with shifting generational values, social realities, and global influences. This does not imply IRD has outlived its usefulness. Rather, it signals the urgency of renewal. For IRD to remain relevant, it must evolve in purpose and posture.

Regional Trends

Across Southeast Asia, IRD is undergoing a quiet but significant transformation, as observed by academic studies and interfaith dialogue facilitators on the ground. There is a growing disconnect between long-standing models of IRD and today's dynamic realities. While contexts vary, common trends, including generational engagement,

representational gaps, digital shifts, and responsiveness to lived complexity, have surfaced.

In [Malaysia](#), platforms such as the Malaysian Interfaith Network have become inactive amid rising sensitivities over issues like conversion, apostasy, and the use of Islamic terms by non-Muslims. Public discomfort with open religious discourse has narrowed the scope of engagement, making dialogue feel more symbolic than substantive.

In [Indonesia](#), the passing of influential pluralist leaders such as Abdurrahman Wahid has left a moral leadership vacuum. Combined with rising conservatism and identity politics, this has fragmented once-vibrant interfaith landscapes. These developments are not failures specific to any country but part of a broader challenge to traditional IRD frameworks, often grounded in institutional representation, consensus-building, and formal ceremony.

Today's Dynamics: Youth

A significant shift is generational. Young people are less drawn to institutional narratives of harmony and more engaged with justice, inclusion, and lived experience issues. While many are less involved in organised religion, they remain deeply invested in ethical communities and inclusive values.

This generational divergence is not unique to Southeast Asia. A [2021 London School of Economics report](#) found that young people increasingly view interfaith collaboration as a vehicle for social and political action, whereas older generations tend to focus more on dialogue and theological discussion.

We see a widening gap in expectations around what interfaith work is for. Unless IRD frameworks adapt to the priorities of the younger generation, they risk becoming disconnected from those who will shape the future.

Today's Dynamics: Digital

Much interreligious conversation occurs online today, shaped by social media dynamics, anonymity, and polarisation. Unlike face-to-face interactions, digital communication often lacks civility and emotional intimacy. This diminishes meaningful connection and presents a "[potential obstacle to interfaith dialogue](#)".

Many IRD initiatives rely on in-person panels and curated events, often lacking the digital fluency to attract younger audiences. Interfaith dialogues risk becoming invisible or ineffective for those whose moral and spiritual worlds are formed primarily in virtual spaces.

Today's Dynamics: Pluralisation

Representation is a persistent concern among interfaith dialogue facilitators. The growing "spiritual but not religious" demographic, interfaith families and agnostic perspectives reflect a pluralisation of belief. But many IRD platforms continue to be centred on dominant religious institutions, inadvertently excluding smaller faith

communities, agnostics, secular voices, and those whose identities do not align neatly with official categories.

As identities become more fluid and diverse, this gap between lived reality and formal recognition becomes harder to ignore.

Today's Dynamics: Globalism

Global religious tensions increasingly affect local interfaith ecosystems. Religious conflicts or persecutions elsewhere, such as the Middle East, Europe, India, and Myanmar, swiftly shape interfaith relations and discourse across Southeast Asia. For instance, the ongoing Israel-Palestine war has sparked strong reactions in parts of the region, [placing additional pressure on those seeking to maintain domestic cohesion](#).

Many IRD initiatives remain ill-equipped to respond meaningfully to these global-local spillovers, especially when political conflicts carry religious undertones. Too often, they default to ceremonial neutrality rather than fostering dialogical responsiveness that can hold space for diverse stances while safeguarding social cohesion.

Implications for Singapore: Continuity or Complacency?

Singapore, too, must ask whether its current IRD model is equipped to adapt to the evolving expectations of a society that is becoming more diverse, digitally immersed, and generationally divided.

Younger Singaporeans increasingly seek more authentic spaces where ethical and religious differences can be explored honestly, rather than managed through polite consensus. This was reflected in the [2019 Youth Conversations](#), where participants strongly expressed a need for “honest conversations” on real-life challenges. In response to such shifts, there has been growing interest in creating interfaith and inter-belief platforms that support these deeper, more inclusive forms of engagement.

Creating New Spaces

The [Dialogue Centre](#), part of whose work involves IRD. It has explicitly adopted the “brave space” model, encouraging participants to embrace discomfort and complexity as pathways to deeper understanding. There is also [The Whitehatters](#), which is “committed to creating safe spaces” for dialogues on topics often absent from traditional interfaith forums. Youth groups like [hash.peace](#), founded by the author, have initiated dialogues as a bridge between religious and non-religious youths by anchoring dialogue on religion’s good and bad lived experiences.

These initiatives reflect a generational shift toward dialogue rooted in relationships and lived experiences. While promising, they often remain on the margins of more established interfaith spaces, which are still centred on traditional models. A more inclusive approach would blend institutional strengths with ground-up movements in meaningful partnerships.

Conclusion

Interfaith dialogue in Southeast Asia is at a crossroads. Traditional models rooted in consensus and ceremony served important roles in earlier eras. We now live in increasingly diverse, digitally connected, and justice-oriented societies. Renewal is not only timely but also necessary.

To remain relevant, IRD must become more inclusive, responsive, and grounded in real-life experiences. Emerging voices and platforms need to be supported, and cross-border collaboration fostered. Regional interreligious exchanges can strengthen fragile IRD ecosystems, expand shared learning, and build collective resilience in navigating differences across Southeast Asia.

Nazhath Faheema is an interfaith dialogue practitioner who promotes interfaith relations, charity, and volunteerism. She is the Director of Development and Community Relations at Hope Initiative Alliance, where she leads the Sowing Care Together movement. She is also the founder of hash.peace, and Bayt & Bayit. This commentary is part of a series leading up to the International Conference on Cohesive Societies 2025.

S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU Singapore
Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798