



INCLUSIVE SOCIETY INSTITUTE

Op-ed

WEAVING A NATION: LESSONS FROM SINGAPORE FOR SOUTH AFRICA'S COHESION JOURNEY

By Daryl Swanepoel

From 24 to 26 June 2025, I attended the *International Conference for Cohesive Societies (ICCS)* in Singapore, a global gathering of policymakers, civil society leaders and thinkers committed to the idea that diversity, if carefully nurtured, can be a nation's greatest strength. Held in a city-state widely recognised for its success in managing multiculturalism, the conference offered profound insights, not only into global best practices, but also into the quiet struggles and aspirations of nations grappling with identity, cohesion and belonging.

The address by His Excellency Tharman Shanmugaratnam, the President of Singapore, was particularly arresting. He spoke of diverse nations as being like quilts, composed of many distinct patches, each representing a different community, sewn together to create something both beautiful and meaningful. Yet, he cautioned, when storms rage, be they economic, political or social, the quilt may fray, its seams come apart, its integrity tested. Perhaps, he mused, we must begin to weave new cloth, stronger, more resilient, where the threads of our many identities are not merely stitched side by side, but entwined in a shared fabric of common purpose.

It was a metaphor that struck deep, not just for its elegance, but for its resonance with the South African condition.

South Africa, too, is a patchwork nation. We are Black, White, Coloured, Indian and many other shades in between. We are Zulu, Xhosa, Afrikaans, English, Tswana, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, Christian, African traditionalist and secular. Our diversity is immense. It is beautiful. But it is also the source of some of our deepest tensions.

The fundamental question we face is this: Are we, first and foremost, *South Africans*, a single people forged in shared destiny or are we, still, primarily members of our separate communities who just happen to coexist within the same borders? Put another way, are we one nation *regardless* of race and culture or are we still proud White, Black, Coloured and Indian South Africans, united, working together to forge a nation for all that live in it?

This is not merely a question of semantics. It is the central challenge of our democratic project. The Freedom Charter's enduring promise that *South Africa belongs to all who live in it, united in our diversity*, is an aspiration that has yet to be realised.

In Singapore, I observed a nation that has answered this question with quiet determination. Rather than erasing cultural identity, it has built systems, policies and symbols that reinforce shared citizenship while celebrating difference. Civic identity takes precedence, but not at the expense of personal heritage. They have found, in many ways, a formula for unity without uniformity.

For South Africa, the road is more complex. Our history is more painful, our inequalities more entrenched, our wounds more recent. Yet that does not absolve us from the responsibility to forge a stronger social compact, one where we weave new cloth rather than simply mending the old quilt. What might that cloth look like?

It would be woven from threads of shared values, non-racialism, mutual respect, ubuntu and justice. It would draw strength from the fibres of local languages, customs, histories and rituals, but bind them into a fabric of common purpose. It would move us beyond co-existence into co-creation. Beyond tolerance into solidarity.

Importantly, this new cloth does not require us to shed our cultural identities. Rather, it asks that we bring them to the loom, consciously, willingly and in the spirit of building something that transcends each of us individually. In this way, we do not become less Coloured, less African, less Indian, less White, we become more South African *together*.

Of course, weaving new fabric requires leadership, trust and a willingness to act with moral courage. It demands that we interrogate our education system, our media, our political discourse+ and our civic rituals. It means asking difficult questions: Why do so many still feel excluded from the national story? Why do young people in townships and suburbs grow up worlds apart? Why do we default to racial categories rather than civic ones?

At the ICCS, I saw nations grappling with these same questions, each in their own context. Yet the most successful examples, Singapore among them, demonstrated one truth repeatedly: cohesion is not an accidental by-product of democracy. It is a deliberate act of national imagination and political will.

For South Africa, the time has come to reimagine our social fabric. The old quilt, stitched together in 1994, was a powerful start. But it has been weathered by time, torn by inequality, frayed by neglect. Now, we must begin to weave anew.

Let us not be afraid to dream of a cloth that is stronger, more resilient, more inclusive. A cloth where every thread matters, but where what binds us is even stronger than what differentiates us. A cloth we can call South Africa, not as a collection of patches, but as a single, purposeful, living nation.

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