

National Identity and Religious Harmony – Secularism the ‘Singaporean Way’:

The State and the Muslim Minority in Singapore

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Abstract

Singapore faces the challenges of being a mega-city as well as being one of the few city-states in the world.

Singapore comprises 707.1 km² accommodating about 4.8 million people. The multi-cultural nature of society in Singapore comprises Chinese, Malay, Indian and other – Eurasian, Caucasian, Arabs, Japanese etc. - ethnicities. This society is rather unique in Southeast Asia as about 77% of the population is Chinese and 42.5 % of the population adhere to Buddhism.¹ This paper will analyse the relationship between the state and the Muslim minority, which comprises about 14.9% percent of the population.²

This paper addresses the nature and role of the Singaporean state in producing and effecting social change. The creation of a national identity out of the plural ethnicities and religions has been at the forefront of politics. In this paper, it is argued that the Singaporean ruling party has taken centre stage in this process of social engineering. The Singaporean government has developed a particular notion of secularism, which prevents religion from taking active participation in politics. This conceptualisation of secularism is a ‘one-way’ relationship only placing limits on religion while the state takes an active role in policing the relationship.

Introduction

The Singaporean minority Muslims face the challenge of forging their identity among three decisive factors of being Malay, Muslim and Singaporean.

Issues of religion and ethnicity are alike as both are intrinsically linked in the Southeast Asian context; members of a certain ethnicity usually belong to a particular religious denomination. In Singapore most Muslims are Malay and most Malay are Muslims linking religious and ethnic matters.³ How these two identities are interacting with the Singaporean national identity is more complex as the

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¹ The dominant religion in the neighbouring countries of Indonesia and Malaysia is Islam with Indonesia possessing the largest Muslim population in the world. Furthermore, Chinese only constitute a minority population in these countries.

² See 2000 Census available at the Singapore Department of Statistics, <http://www.singstat.gov.sg/keystats/2000/religion.pdf>

³ Ibid.

understanding is negotiated within a political system actively participates in the discourse and, moreover, prescribes the outcome as well.

Muslim Singaporeans negotiate a careful balance between their religious obligations and their obligations as Singaporeans. This delineation is vigilantly policed by the Singaporean state and any transgression will result in the state taking action.

Islam and the State: Inherent Challenges of Secularism for Muslims

Islam accepts no authority higher than that of God proclaiming itself to be a complete and authoritative revelation for all time. For Muslims it is the source of absolute spiritual and temporal power. This is the reason for the often-assumed incompatibility of Islam with the basic unit of government virtually everywhere in the world, the nation state. The nation state concept is based on secularism or, at the very least, the notion that the state's authority is independent of religious authority.

Debate on Islamic governance, therefore, focuses on the relationship between the 'state' and 'the Mosque'. This is a political question as to whether the Muslims living as minorities can co-exist within secular societies or if they will destabilise these societies due to an incompatibility of values.⁴ This can give rise to two different approaches: Islamic and Muslim Politics.

Islamic politics at its most extreme is based on the idea that Islam cannot integrate with and adapt to a non-Muslim secular society⁵ potentially resulting in extremist tendencies. The only solution for the Muslim minority is therefore to strive for a state based on *shari'ah*⁶ and to overthrow the current political system in the process.

An alternative approach suggests formulating a synthesis of Islam and modernity in order to fit into Western/ secular societies.⁷ Muslims hold the same rights and obligations as other citizens but have to reconcile these with being an observant Muslim. Muslim politics distinguishes between the teachings of Islam and the ideas and actions of Muslims, which may or may not be Islamic. For a Singaporean Muslim the question is how their obligations as Muslim and Singaporean can be reconciled in a system that attentively monitors their religious activities.

Politics, Ethnicity and Religion in Singapore

It is essential for the Singaporean state to control Islam as it presents an alternative source of authority posing a political challenge. Singapore is ruled by the People's Action Party (PAP), which has dominated Singapore's politics since independence.⁸ The dominance of one party has led to a characterisation of Singapore as a "hybrid

⁴ Khaled Abou El Fadl (1994); Olivier Roy (2004).

⁵ Michael Humphrey (2001).

⁶ Islamic law based on the tenets of the *Qur'an* (the word of God) and the *sunna* (the practice of the Prophet Muhammad). Alternative spellings include *syariah*, *syariat*, *syariaa*, *syariah* etc. The Arabic spelling is used here.

⁷ See for example, Abdullah Saeed (2003).

⁸ PAP has been the dominating party of Singapore since 1959, ruling Singapore since independence. Chinese ethnicity dominates its cadre and elected parliamentary members. Compare the list of parliamentary members from the official website of PAP available at <http://www.pap.org.sg/about.shtml>

The Chinese dominance in PAP however, was a contributing factor to Singapore leaving the Malaysian Federation in 1965. At federal level, the ruling party UMNO perceived PAP as pro-Chinese and Anti-Malay. Shee Poon Kim (1987), 9, 10.

regime”; a “stable semi-democracy”⁹; or, less ‘flattering’¹⁰, as a “semi-authoritarian”¹¹ or “soft-authoritarian”¹² regime. This depiction as a ‘controlling regime’ is also evident in the manner PAP interacts with religion.

The multi-ethnic and multi-religious nature of Singapore’s society means that the relationship between the different ethnicities, religions and the state is intricate. Ethnic and religious pluralism can impede on the development of a cohesive/collective society that, arguably, is essential for nation-building. In the process of nation-building, ethnic/religious tensions and conflicts are then at the centre of politics.¹³ The Singaporean government tries to shape the influence of religion in a manner that is attuned with its overarching political objectives. This requires a careful monitoring of religion by the state.¹⁴ In the Singaporean context, the state, which is synonymous with PAP, has been the primary actor in determining the relationship between the state and the different ethnicities and religion.

The attitude of PAP towards religion is characterised by suspicion and careful policing. At best, this approach can be described as pragmatic¹⁵ with a “tolerantly neutral stance [...and] occasional patronage of certain religious institutions or occasional action to control religious excess where necessary”.¹⁶ This pragmatism is coupled with a deep-rooted fear that religious sentiments can be politicised thereby threatening the political, social and economical stability of Singapore. The origin of this fear can be traced back to the early days of nation building in Singapore when racial-religious conflicts were contributing to the formation of an independent Singapore.¹⁷

⁹ William Case (2002).

¹⁰ Less flattering as it analyses more critically the activities of PAP undertaken in order to stay in power. PAP did allow elections and in fact utilised them in order to obtain political legitimacy. However, political dissidence voiced by political opponents and the media, national and international was heavily curtailed. This was accompanied by the increasing use of administrative law and associated legislation to indirectly narrow the grounds and avenues for political contest, and to empower bureaucrats to greatly complicate lawful political competition.

¹¹ Kanishka Jayasuriya (1999).

¹² Gordon P. Means (1996).

¹³ David Brown (1994); Donald Horowitz (1985).

¹⁴ J.S. Mill, for example, argued that

[f]ree institutions are next to impossible in a country made up of different nationalities. Among a people without fellow-feeling, especially if they read and speak different languages, the united public opinion, necessary to the working of representative government, cannot exist.

John S. Mill (1958), 230.

¹⁵ Charlene Tan (2007), 30. This pragmatic ideology by the Singaporean government has been noted by various authors in different contexts, compare B.L. Chua (1985); K.L. Ho (2000); W.K. Ho and S. Gopinathan (1999); Raj K. Vasil (1984).

¹⁶ T.O. Ling (1987), 2.

¹⁷ The early history of an independent Singapore is intrinsically linked to racial-religious conflicts of the 1950s and 1960s. In December 1950, violent riots were sparked over a custody dispute involving Maria Hertogh, a young girl of Dutch-Eurasian background who had been brought up as a Muslim by a Muslim family during the Japanese occupation of Singapore in WWII. 18 people were killed, 173 people were injured and substantial property damage was caused. At the end, the military had to be brought in to restore order. Chee Kiong Tong (2007), 233.

Shortly after independence from Britain, the new government had to tackle racial tensions when a small group of Malay extremist, the *Angkatan Tentara Islam Singapura*, plotted to overthrow the government by inciting racial animosity between the Malay and Chinese population.

When Singapore became a republic on 9th August 1965, the task of creating harmony between the different ethnic and religious groups that constitute Singapore's population was pivotal.¹⁸

Let us create one nation for all Singaporeans. We are a young country, and we share one future together. Let us build among ourselves a sense of belonging, a feeling of commonality with one another than with any other people in the world. Even though we belong to different races and worship different religions, let us feel instinctively that we are, first and foremost, Singaporeans. This is our home and here we belong.¹⁹

The Singaporean government considers it of particular importance that Singaporeans “must have core values to bond the various ethnic groups”²⁰ in order “to forge the basis of an overarching national identity”²¹ which is decisive in whether “a multi racial society will not be or become a nation”.²²

[T]he future really depends upon how we, in Singapore, are able to see our long term interest, not as Chinese people, not as an Indian people, not as Malay people – First as Singaporeans [...]²³

This necessitates that the state has the power “to attenuate and sanitize the cultural values of each component ethnic community in Singapore so as to make them compatible with each other and with the ideological preference of the governing elite”.²⁴ This is based on the assumption that some religious believers will not necessarily conduct their activities in a manner that would guarantee religious harmony. Therefore legal, political and social engineering was initiated that would ensure that communal tensions would be removed. The resulting policies are supported by a legal framework designed to provide the legitimacy of the state's policing of religion.

Instruments for Policing Religion in Singapore

The legal framework²⁵ to secure racial and religious harmony is provided through several legislations: the most important being the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act (MRHA) 1989.²⁶ The rationale of this act was to conceptualise certain actions as

On 9 July 1963, Singapore merged with the Federation of Malaya and British Borneo (not including Brunei) to form the Federation of Malaysia. This merger was, however, short lived partially due to political and ideological differences between the political elite in Singapore and Malaysia. The political tensions were to some extent caused by racial/ religious sentiments. The Singaporean Malay minority expected to be granted special rights as enshrined for Malays by the Constitution of the Federation of Malaya in 1957. When these rights were not granted, violence erupted with 22 people killed, about 454 people injured, 256 people arrested for unlawful assembly and rioting and 1,579 people arrested for breaking the imposed curfew. Chee Kiong Tong (2007), 233, 234.

¹⁸ In the 1957 Census the racial make-up of Singapore was 75% Chinese, 14% Malay, 9% Indian and 2% others. Chiew Seen Kong (1983), 49. It was obvious that the neighbouring states with predominant Malay/ Muslim populations would not accept another ‘China’ at their doorstep and might intervene on behalf of the Malay Muslim minority if considered necessary.

¹⁹ Goh Chok Tong (1988).

²⁰ Chan Sek Keong (2000), 23.

²¹ Li-Ann Thio (2006), 179.

²² Chan Sek Keong (2000), 25.

²³ Lee Kuan Yew (1966).

²⁴ David Brown (1995), 156.

²⁵ All legislation mentioned in this part is available from <http://statutes.agc.gov.sg/>.

²⁶ Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act, Chapter 167A, 1989.

The relevance of religious harmony was reiterated in 2003 with the Declaration of Religious Harmony stating that “religious harmony is vital for peace, progress and prosperity in our multi-racial and multi-

threats to the national harmony.²⁷ The MRHA addressed two main issues: to legally frame the separation of politics and religion and, secondly, to curtail the area of influence of religion.²⁸

Professor S. Jayakumar, then Minister of Home Affairs, stated that

followers of different religions must exercise moderation and tolerance and not instigate religious enmity and hatred. [...] Religion and politics must be kept separate because religious leaders are seen to have a special status and their pronouncement will have an emotional effect on their people.²⁹

While the MRHA allows for legal sanctions such as restraining order preventing people from speaking, writing, publishing or distributing material these measures have not been used since its enactment. However, several ‘warnings’ have been issued. Mr Wong Kan Seng, Minister of Home Affairs, reported that the government “came close to invoking the Act on several occasions to stop local religious leaders from mixing religion with politics and putting down other faiths” and that after warning by the Internal Security Department (ISD) these activities stopped.³⁰ This illustrates the latent power of the MRHA: threatening with its use is sufficient to deter religiously motivated political activities.

The MRHA is not the only legal instrument that is used to police religiously motivated political activities. It is complemented by the Internal Security Act (ISA) 1985³¹ and the Sedition Act³².

The MRHA and the Sedition Act are to a certain degree very similar in their terminology. Section 8 (1)(a) MRHA contains terms such as “causing feelings of

religious nations” and the appeal to “ensure that religions will not be used to create conflict and disharmony in Singapore”. Youth and Sports Ministry of Community Development (2003).

²⁷ In the late 1980s, there were several developments that gave rise to a perceived threat to the religious harmony in Singapore. In the background paper on the MRHA it was expressed that

in recent years there has been a definite increase in religious fervour, missionary zeal and assertiveness among Christians, Muslims and Buddhists and other religious groups in Singapore. Competition for followers and converts is becoming sharper and more intense. More Singaporeans of many religions are inclining towards strongly held exclusive beliefs, rather than the relaxed, tolerant acceptance of and coexistence with other faiths.

Government of Singapore (1989), 10.

²⁸ Sections 8 and 9 of the Act prohibited four particular behaviours:

1. causing feeling of enmity, hatred, ill-will or hostility between different religious groups;
2. carrying out activities to promote a political cause, or a cause of any political party, while, or under the guise of, propagating or practising any religious belief;
3. carrying out subversive activities under the guise of propagating or practising any religious belief; and
4. exciting disaffection against the President or the government while, or under the guise of, propagating or practising any religious belief.

²⁹ Professor S. Jayakumar, then Minister of Home Affairs, *Singapore Parliamentary Debates*, Vol 56, col. 325, 18th July 1990.

³⁰ Mr Wong Kan Seng, Minister of Home Affairs, *Singapore Parliamentary Debates*, Vol. 82, 12th February 2007. There are three instances in which Mr Wong Kan Seng considered evoking the MRHA; one relates to the 1991 General Election in which a Muslim leader urged Muslims to vote for a Muslim candidate; and two further instances were religious leaders criticised other religious beliefs. Nirmala (2001).

³¹ Internal Security Act, Chapter 143, rev.ed. 1985. The ISA is based on a set of 'Emergency Regulations' passed in 1948 when Singapore was under colonial administration. While Singapore was part of the Federation of Malaya, the ISA was passed in 1960 and Singapore retained the ISA upon gaining independence.

³² Sedition Act, Chapter 290, rev.ed. 1985.

enmity, hatred, ill-will or hostility between different religious groups” which echo the phrasing of section 3 of the Sedition Act defining seditious tendency includes a tendency to “bring into **hatred** or **contempt** or to excite disaffection against the Government”, “to raise **discontent** amongst citizens or the residents in Singapore”, or “to promote feelings of **ill-will** and **hostility** between different races or classes of Singapore”. There is one noteworthy difference; the Sedition Act does not explicitly refer to religion. Nonetheless, this does not mean that the Sedition Act is not applied in cases of religious activities. In *Public Prosecutor v Koh Song Huat Benjamin and Anor*³³ the seditious tendencies were internet postings; one posting made anti-Malay and anti-Muslim remarks while the other one only made anti-Muslim comments. Interestingly both accused were charged (and convicted) under the Sedition Act and no charges were laid under the MRHA, maybe because this would have given them the opportunity to retract before criminal charges were laid.³⁴

The Internal Security Act (ISA) 1985 provides the state with even more powers in regards to policing activities that were threatening the state. In regards to religiously, or to be more precise extreme Islamic, motivated actions, it has been involved in the case of Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) and its alleged terrorist activities. JI is a terrorist group whose network spans all of Southeast Asia. JI’s political agenda seeks the creation of a *Daulah Islamiyah Nusantara* (Islamic state or archipelago) comprising Malaysia, Indonesia and Mindanao, into which Singapore and Brunei would be incorporated.³⁵ Following investigation, 15 persons were arrested in December 2001 and an additional 21 persons in August 2002. While several people have since been released there are still a number of them being detained. In this case, detention was deliberately used in order to avoid public trials as the “spectacle of public trial against alleged Malay Muslims accused of extremism and terrorism might polarize the different communities in Singapore to an unacceptable degree. People are bound to take sides and the side that they take is likely to follow the racial and religious divide”.³⁶ The ISA is therefore used by the government to avoid religious conflicts.

This means that the state has a variety of instruments with which to police religious activities and to ensure that they are not interfering with politics.

Separation of Religion from Politics: Fashion National Integration of Muslims?

This legal framework encapsulates the notion that religion has no place in the political landscape. Politics in Singapore are therefore conducted as strictly secular activities without any affiliation to religion.

Referring back to the issue of Islam and secularism, this policing of religion means that Islamic politics in Singapore cannot exist. As soon as notions of perceived Islamism appear they have been swiftly suppressed.³⁷ This means that to-date there

³³ *Public Prosecutor v Koh Song Huat Benjamin and Anor* [2005] SGDC 272.

³⁴ Tey Tsun Hang (2008), 132.

³⁵ Government of Singapore (2003), 8.

³⁶ Michael Hor (2002), 43.

³⁷ The Ministry of Home Affairs has identified several of these threats and summarised them in a booklet. Under the heading “Are racial and religious conflicts still possible in Singapore?” it refers to two threats that have close links to Islamic politics.

In the 1960s, *Angkatan Revolusi Tentara Islam Singapura* (ARTIS), a Malay extremist group, planned to create an Islamic state of Singapore by allegedly instigated social tension by spreading rumours of race riots.

are no Syariah-based politics in Singapore as the Singaporean government would consider them as unacceptable and incompatible with Singapore's social, political, economic, religious and cultural construct.

This leaves the question open as to whether other forms of Muslim politics are feasible in the Singaporean context. The RMHA excludes religion from politics, due to the close nexus between race and ethnicity it is, arguably, possible to perceive Muslim politics through a racial focus and look at it under the notion of Malay politics. In this area there have been several attempts to include the interests of the Malay/ Muslim minority in Singapore: most notable the Malay nationalist PKMS³⁸ (*Partai Kebangsaan Melayu Singapura* – Singapore Malay National Organisation) and the SNF³⁹ (*Barisan Nasional Singapura* - Singapore National Front). However, the political success of these parties has been rather limited as none of them have a member in Parliament.⁴⁰

This means that the interests of the Malay/ Muslim population in regards to political, socio-economic and cultural integration are not addressed through a political party but are filtered through the PAP agenda and apparatus.

In 1988, the Singaporean government tried to ensure Malay political representation by establishing 39 Group Representative Constituency Scheme (GRCS). In these GRCS, parties had to nominate candidates who run as a multi-ethnic team with at least one representative of Malay origin. The evaluation of this program is ambivalent as officials claim that the scheme is providing more opportunities for the nomination of minority candidates yet numerical the increase of minority MPS is marginal at best.⁴¹ Due to this rather insignificant improvement of minority representation, there have been strong calls to abolish this scheme altogether.⁴² There are therefore strong reservations about this scheme with accusations that the unofficial objective was to “block the formation of ethnically based parties and create a greater electoral hurdle

The second example mentions the Singapore People's Liberation Organisation (SPLO). In the 1980s, this group planned to cause communal unrest in Singapore by exploiting religious and racial issues. The objective of the group was to overthrow the Government by violent means. They planned to create communal unrest by distributing subversive pamphlets and carrying out acts of arson or planting bombs at public places. Ministry of Home Affairs (2002).

Please note that the above-mentioned activities of JI were just being unearthed at the time when the booklet was published. The JI incidents, however, gave new credibility to this perceived threat and the justification of oppressing Islamic politics.

³⁸ PKMS used to be part of UMNO (United Malays National Party) while Singapore was still a part of the Federation of Malaysia. It contested unsuccessfully in all general elections between 1968 to 1991 without winning any seats. The party did not participate in the 1997 general elections and since 2001 it is a member of the Singapore Democratic Alliance which is a multi-ethnic alliance comprising the Singapore People's Party and Singapore Justice Party. It has currently one member in parliament who is a member of the Singapore People's Party.

³⁹ The SNF was established in 1991 comprising former members of the PKMS which felt that PKMS was not fulfilling its objectives and hence the Malays in Singapore needed another party to represent and advocate for their rights. So far it has not contested in any elections.

⁴⁰ For a list of members of parliament and their political affiliation see <http://www.parliament.gov.sg/AboutUs/Org-MP-PastMP10.htm>.

⁴¹ The number of Malay MP increased from 9 to 10 while the number of Indian MPs remained at 6 and the number of Eurasian MPs decreased from 1 to 0. Gordon P. Means (1996), 107.

⁴² Lai Ah Eng (2002), 5.

for opposition parties".⁴³ Furthermore, the community they are supposedly presenting often questions the alliance of these Malay MPs.

While many Malays are prepared to work with PAP Malay MPs for the benefit of the community, many find it difficult to regard them as overall leaders of the community for various reasons. Malays do not have any say over who among them should become PAP MPs, and the Malay MPs, in turn, have hardly any say as to who should be their leader. These are the prerogatives of the Prime Minister.⁴⁴

Arguably, complete political participation and integration includes the possibility of this minority to achieve the highest political office. Speculating on the success of a minority candidate, current Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said

Can we one day have a non-Chinese, a Malay-Muslim Prime Minister? It's possible. Will it happen soon? I don't think so because finally you have to win votes and these sentiments. Who votes for whom and what makes him identify with that person? These are sentiments that do not disappear completely for a long time, even if people did not talk about it or even if people wish they did not feel it.⁴⁵

This illustrates that the social acceptance of diversity between the different ethnicities and religions in Singapore is still work in progress. The *tudong* (Muslim headscarf) controversy in 2002 aptly illustrates this point.⁴⁶ Singaporean Muslims still have compromise their religious identity if they want to participate in society.⁴⁷ Several primary school girls were asked to leave their schools for donning the *tudung*. Singapore's public schools require pupils to wear a school uniform as showing uniformity and community, thereby discounting racial and religious differences.⁴⁸ By wearing the *tudung*, Muslim schoolgirls, arguably, distinguish themselves from their fellow pupils by wearing a different school uniform. This can open up the possibilities of religious disharmony and undermines the idea of creating a uniform national identity.⁴⁹

⁴³ Gordon P. Means (1996), 107.

⁴⁴ Ismail Kassim (2000).

⁴⁵ Lee Hsien Loong (2008).

Please note that the first President of Singapore, Yusoff Ishak, was Malay. Between 1965 and 1993 the Presidents of Singapore were chronologically Malay, Eurasian, Indian and Chinese. However, the possibility for rotation was abandoned with the introduction of an elected Presidency in 1991. Furthermore, effective power lies with the Prime Minister, and it therefore appears to be nothing more than a compromise that was discontinued.

⁴⁶ The historical context of this event most likely contributed to the significant attributed to the whole affair. The protest of the girls occurred shortly after several arrests of suspected members of JI had been made with the relationship between Malay/Muslims and other Singaporean ethnicities being strained.

⁴⁷ I am assuming here that the wearing of the *tudung* is based on religious convention. There is, however, a significant debate over the 'symbolism' of wearing of the headscarf by Muslim women and whether it is a religious obligation or social expectation.

⁴⁸ Then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong stated that

[i]f we insist that our children dress differently on account of our religion, we must allow other communities to do likewise for their children, based on religious as well as cultural practices. Then, our schools will become polarised along racial and religious lines, as children will tend to mix with those who look and dress similarly. The common space in schools will be reduced, and we will go back in time when many schools were run along ethnic and religious lines. Our efforts to build a nation will be severely set back. This is not a theoretical fear. It has happened.

Goh Chok Tong (2002).

⁴⁹ The Singaporean government, of course, is not alone in this fear of religious differences fragmenting a nation. Several Western governments have made similar policies such as France and Britain, where

The necessity of a common identity and educational policy saw the PAP in confrontation with the Muslim population on several occasions. In the late 1990s, Islamic schools (*madrasahs*) were very popular among the Muslim population but were criticised, in particular by the government, for their underperformance.⁵⁰ This gave rise to the compulsory education debate and the place of private religious schools in the national school system.⁵¹ In 1993, for example, Brigadier-General George Yeo, then Minister for Information and Arts, expressed that “the concern was whether those who were educated in Muslim religious school all along, from Primary One⁵² would later share a common outlook and attitude with other Singaporeans”.⁵³ According to PAP, the alternative would therefore be compulsory education. Then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong elaborated that compulsory education would reduce the “fault line” dividing Singapore’s pluralistic society across religious ethnic lines to mere “hairline cracks”.

It is partly with this in mind that I had asked the Ministry of Education to consider introducing compulsory education, up to at least Primary Four. In addition to having all Singaporeans at the same starting point, we also have them in the same common playing field for at least four years. This will have beneficial long-term results on building the Singapore nation.⁵⁴

The compulsory education debate quickly became hotly-contested between the government and the Malay-Muslim community in open and closed forums.⁵⁵ At the

school children are banned from wearing religious dress and displaying religious symbols. In March 2006, the House of Lords overruled a decision, which stated that a teenager’s human rights were violated after she was banned from school for wearing a *jilbab* (full length Islamic dress covering the entire body, except for hands, feet, face, and head). The school uniform policy of the school had allowed for a *shalwar Kamezz* (trousers and tunic). Philippe Naughton and Alex Spence (2006). Germany has taken a slightly different approach, banning teachers from displaying or wearing religious symbols and dress, as school uniforms are not compulsory in Germany. The case of two Muslim students wearing a *burka* (full length Islamic dress covering the entire body including the head and face) to school has rekindled the discussion as to whether school uniform should be introduced. School Uniform Row grips Germany (2006).

⁵⁰ Noor Aisha Abdul Rahman (2006), 77.

The Muslim minority in Singapore is perceived as falling behind in their educational achievements resulting in them being disadvantaged socially, economically and politically. This issue is not only taken up by the Singaporean government but others have commented that while Singapore has the highest living standard in Asia and a “relatively equitable” income distribution pattern, the income gap between the different ethnic groups, in particular, for Singaporean Malays, is widening. Compare the CRC Initial Report, CRC/C/51/Add.8, Paragraph 3.3. and CRC Initial Report, CRC/C/133.

The Muslim community, despite the obvious problems with the *madrasahs*, continued to be “convinced of the value of a sound religious education”. Chee Min Fui (1999/2000), 57. According to a national survey on religion in 1989, 95% of the Muslim population stated that religion and religious education is important. This was the highest percentage among the religious groups in Singapore. Charlene Tan (2007), 26.

⁵¹ At that time *madrasahs* were exempted from compulsory education. This special status was, however, not only granted to *madrasahs*. Pupils from San Yu Adventist School were also exempted from taking the PSLE test. See Ministry of Education information available at <http://www.moe.gov.sg/initiatives/compulsory-education/exemptions/>

⁵² Primary Education in Singapore consists of a 4-year foundation stage from Primary 1 to 4 and a 2-year orientation stage from Primary 5 to 6.

⁵³ Noor Aisha Abdul Rahman (2006), 76 .

⁵⁴ Goh Chok Tong (1999).

⁵⁵ Mukhlis Abu Bakar (2006), 36.

end a compromise was forged in the Compulsory Education Act 2000.⁵⁶ While *madrasahs* seem to have avoided being sidelined in primary education for the moment, it still remains to be seen if *madrasahs* will be able to fulfil their obligations under the Compulsory Education Act.⁵⁷ Moreover, it will be interesting to see how the Muslim population will perceive a failure and the resulting consequences. It appears highly likely that the Muslim population will face off the state again in a heated debate as it is unlikely that either party will change their attitude.

Whether the PAP's policy in creating a national identity has been successful in regards to the integration of Malay/ Muslims is a matter of debate. There have been several surveys conducted with rather contradictory findings⁵⁸ illustrating that Malay/ Muslims are still finding it difficult to reconcile their identities within a strictly state controlled framework that is eliminating their religious concerns from politics. It is, however, highly unlikely that the Singaporean government will adopt a different approach and allow religion to play a part in the state's politics.

For instance, the fear of being brought under government control was made clear by one *madrasah* principal.

We must keep the madrasah! Throughout the 1990s, the demand for madrasah has been going up. There were 200 applicants for 64 places in Primary 1 in this school! Other schools are facing the same situation. Parents are calling us [the madrasah administrator] and begging us to accept their children, especially the girls. These parents are learning that it is safer for their children to come to school here. They are worried about co-eds and secular values in the secular schools.

[...] Also we have a duty to pray five times a day, we allow pupils to pray together at 1.00 pm and 4.00 pm each day. The parents [by sending their children here] fulfil the requirements of giving their children religious teaching. Values are inculcated here – patience, cleanliness, respect, honesty, witness, and Godliness – we promote excellence in living based on Islam. The compulsory education proposal in Singapore is defined by the Government. But here, we teach our pupils values, and that could guide them through life!

Interview with a principal in 2000 as cited in Tan Tay Keong (2006), 155.

⁵⁶ Children already enrolled in *madrasahs* were exempted from the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE). Students admitted after the Compulsory Education Act 2000 came into effect, that is from the 2003 cohort onwards, were required to take the PSLE and pass a certain benchmark.

Alternative suggestions made by Muslims were that *madrasahs* should be exempted from compulsory education and teach subjects that were required by Ministry of Education with Islamic elements or that a *madrasah* that was forced to close could continue if it converted to a government-aided school under the management of the Islamic Council of Singapore or a Board of Governors preparing students that wish to revert to *madrasah* education after the 6 years of compulsory education. Noor Aisha Abdul Rahman (2006), 78.

⁵⁷ In 2008, *madrasah* students were required to sit the test for the PSLE for the first time. While a most students passed the test, in fact 98% compared to the 97.1% national average, these students did overall not achieve the higher marks as their counterparts. Furthermore two of the four *madrasahs* did not pass the benchmark and face losing their licenses if performance does not improve within the next two years.

Even prior to the test being taken, one of the *madrasahs* that failed to make the benchmark had already announced that it would cease offering primary education and instead will focus on secondary education from 2009 onwards.

⁵⁸ Several surveys indicated that the different ethnicities started to identify as Singaporeans. In 1970, a national survey, 90% of respondents identified themselves as Singaporeans rather than as Chinese, Malay or Indian. More than a decade later, this finding was confirmed by the results of another national survey, in which 90% of the respondents called themselves Singaporeans. Hussin Mutalib (2004), 79.

However, in a more recent survey conducted by Gallup in 2000, Malays mostly identified themselves through their religion while, for example, the Chinese community identified itself by ethnicity and neighbourhood. Charlene Tan (2007), 26.

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