C H A P T E R

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Between State Interests and Citizen Rights: Whither the Madrasah?[*]

MUKHLIS ABU BAKAR

INTRODUCTION

As with many other Southeast Asian countries in the immediate post-colonial era, Singapore had to apply itself to the task of building, out of a plural society, an integrated and forward-looking nation. The distrust and animosity between language and ethnic groups that once plagued Singapore had to be kept at bay and in its place, measures taken to bring about rapid economic and social development and social cohesion for its people. Indeed, the survival of the state was at stake if interethnic tensions were not properly addressed and steps taken to resolve them.

The political system that emerged in response to these challenges featured a government that relied on a centralisation of authority and one that was prepared to engage in extensive social engineering to bring about orderly social change. The strategy was to confine politics within the realms of technocratic problem-solving and limiting its concerns to issues pertaining to the economy (Jesudason 1989, 4), bring legitimacy to a non-particularistic and achievement-oriented elite, build new institutions and mechanisms to entrench supportive elements, and isolate those seen as overly committed to ethnic or religious-based loyalties (Gopinathan 1979, 395).

Education is one institution that has been the focus of sustained attention in post-independence Singapore. It is highly valued, both from the government perspective that stresses the development of human resources and maintenance of cultural and linguistic heritages, and from the individual's perspective of education as an invaluable avenue of social mobility. Education is also thought to be a key factor in building a national identity and social unity with state and state-sponsored schools[1]

providing a common experience for all citizens. The basic governing ingredients are consistently at play i.e., centralisation of authority, emphasis on rationalisation and cost-effective management, and the steady erosion of the legitimacy of subgroups such as clans and castes, among others (Gopinathan 1979, 394).

Religion is perhaps by far the one major social institution in Singapore that has been handled with much sensitivity. For a start, Singapore is constitutionally a secular state. However, religions are an acknowledged positive factor in Singapore society offering their followers valuable social ethos constructive to harmonious living. For this reason, religions are allowed room for expression and every Singaporean has the freedom to practise his/her faith, at least for as long as religions do not compete with each other and that religious beliefs do not contest the ideological and administrative practices of the government nor its ideological hold on the population (Chua 1995, 31). To underline this point, religions are openly told to separate themselves from state politics as evidenced by the institutionalisation of the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Bill in 1990.[2]

Precisely because of their ideological appeal, religions were never allowed to play a significant role in education. Their inclusion in the national curriculum in 1982 was short-lived. Under this scheme, a Religious Knowledge (RK) subject for all the major faiths was introduced as a component of a moral education programme in schools.[3] The rationale was that knowledge of religion would provide Singaporeans with the moral ballast to shield them from the supposedly decadent and morally corrosive values of the West.[4] This subject was, however, removed in 1990[5] shortly after the release of the findings of a government-commissioned, social scientific study of religion in Singapore which implicated RK programmes in promoting religious revivalism and intensifying religious polarisation among students which, if not contained, could trigger inter-religious conflicts (*Straits Times* 20 Apr 1989).[6] Henceforth, the teaching of morality reverted to a secular-oriented type of moral education devoid of any religious basis but with selected aspects of "Asian values" added.[7]

For the Malay-Muslim community, however, religion is more than the teaching of moral education and basic life values.[8] Islam literally means "submission", i.e., submission to the will of God. It is commonly understood to embody a comprehensive belief system rooted in *tauhid* (oneness of God), with something to say in the form of principle guidelines

about every aspect of a Muslim's life. For many Muslims then, education is about the parallel acquisition of both secular and religious knowledge,[9] a position that is invariably at odds with the national schools.

Since the mid-1990s or so, there has been a growth in the number of Malay parents looking to mosques and other private educational establishments for a piece of religious teaching for their children. More significantly, growing numbers were abandoning the conventional schools altogether in favour of the "Islamic" religious schools, the madrasah, where both secular and religious knowledge subjects are included in the curriculum. They turned to these madrasahs, confident that these schools offer a better education for their children (*Straits Times* 1 Mar 1998a).

The response to this growing trend among the Malays of opting out of national schools in favour of madrasah has been a mix of delight, concern, and suspicion (*Berita Harian* 15 May 1999). This chapter examines some of the issues and concerns that have surfaced from this trend. It discusses the main stakeholders of the madrasah, namely the state represented by the government, and the citizens represented by the community of parents of madrasah-going children and by madrasah elites and providers, with a view to illuminate the complex interplay between state interests and citizen rights in the context of nation building.

EDUCATION CHOICES FOR MALAY SINGAPOREANS

In Singapore, formal education for the Malays comes in two main forms of orientations – the "modern secular" schools (or national schools) and the "traditional religious" schools. The modern secular schools have a modern orientation aimed at the development of individuality. Knowledge is valued as a problem-solving tool and is obtained through empirical and deductive processes. Religion and religious subjects are not central to the curriculum. As government-regulated schools, they follow the national curriculum and their students sit for the national examinations, the major subjects being English, Mathematics, Science and the Humanities.[10] The majority of Malay students attend this type of school.

The traditional religious schools for the Malays are the madrasah. They are "religious" in the sense that their orientation is other worldly and is aimed at socializing students into Islam. They are also "traditional" in that the religious curricula follow a juristic methodology that has remained virtually unchanged since medieval times. Religious knowledge is accepted as revealed and unchallengeable and is mostly memorised. These madrasah

have significant autonomy given that they do not receive government funding and rely on donations from the Malay/Muslim community instead. Children enroll in the madrasah as full-time students.[11]

There are currently six full-time madrasah in Singapore (Al-Arabiah, Al Junied, Al-Irsyad, Al-Maarif, Alsagoff and Wak Tanjung). Among them, some focus primarily on religious education while others offer a relatively more balanced curriculum by incorporating secular subjects and preparing students for national examinations. The madrasah have little direct contact with the Ministry of Education (MOE). Instead, most cling to their traditional links with overseas Islamic institutions. For example, Madrasah Aljunied, the second oldest Islamic school here, has special ties with Cairo's prestigious Al-Azhar University, which enable its students to gain direct entry. KUSZA in Trengganu, JAIPETRA in Kelantan, and many other higher institutions in Malaysia, Indonesia and the countries in the Middle East, are additional educational establishments which madrasah students can choose for their higher religious education.

Islamic Religious Education in the Malay Peninsula and Singapore[12]

In the past, religious instruction for the Malays in Singapore, as elsewhere in the Malay peninsula and the surrounding islands, came in the form of the traditional Koranic schools.[13] Usually conducted in the homes of religious teachers or in the *surau*, these schools taught children the correct reading of the Koran and memorisation of some of its short chapters,[14] and the rudiments of Islam, particularly the prayers. The aim was for the children to grow up in the Islamic tradition.

A smaller number pursued *pondok* education, a residential version of the Koranic school. In the *pondok* school system, learning is characterized by a circle of students assembled around a teacher who is usually a well-known religious figure. Students live in small huts built around his house. A typical *pondok* curriculum includes the "uncomprehending recitation of the Koran, some elementary exegesis of the Koran and hadith, and Malay-Muslim ethical and behavioural precepts". Teaching is based on memorisation and copying of texts (Roff 1967, 84; Rosnani Hashim 1996, 22; Hasan Madmarn 1999, 21). *Pondok* institutions can be found throughout the Malay peninsula from the early nineteenth century.[15]

The turn of the twentieth century, however, was a time of growing discontentment over the Koranic and *pondok* school education, particularly

among those inflamed by the reformist ideas of the Middle East.[16] The narrow objectives and limited curricula content of these traditional schools were criticized for doing little to prepare youths for the socio-economic changes that were taking place in the region. More importantly, the blind acceptance of intermediary authority in understanding Islam and the unwillingness to use reason to determine the truth about the religion was blamed for the failure of the Malays to seize the compatibility between Islam, reason and modern science to accelerate and direct its social and economic advancement (Roff 1967, 77-78).

The reformist movement that swept the Malay Peninsula and the surrounding islands culminated in the establishment of the madrasah system of education which is characterised by its modern class organisation, timetable, and educational equipment. More importantly, it offered a 'purified' version of Islam integrated with modern secular education. The reformists chose Singapore for the setting up of their first school, Madrasah Al-Iqbal, in 1907. But the school was shut after only a year in operation due to lack of community support. It was a slap in the face for a movement that came up against the influential traditional *ulama* who held the reformist ideas as contradictory to Islam.[17]
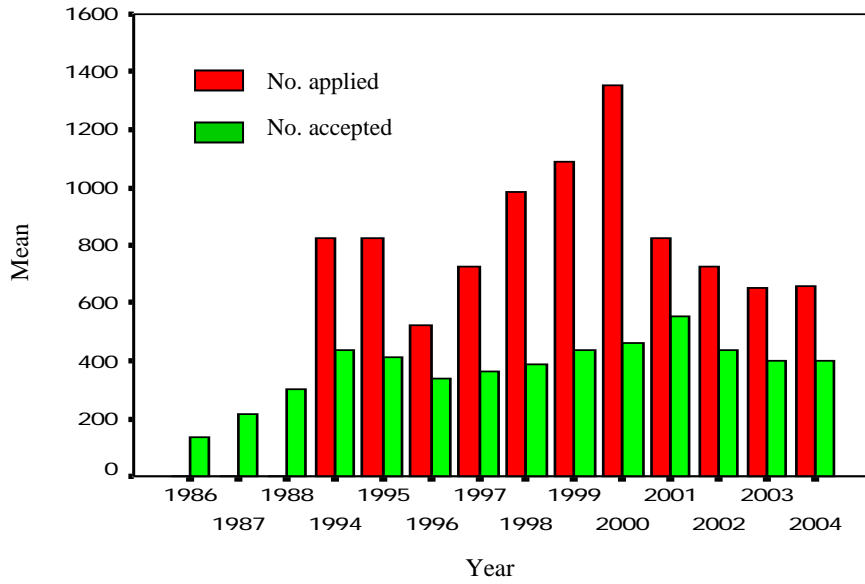
The quick demise of Madrasah Al-Iqbal epitomised the difficulty for the reformist ideas to take root in many areas of Malay society. It is unlikely that the later madrasah-type schools that eventually developed in Singapore and which survived till today had any ideological connection with the reform movement. In fact, there is a sort of continuity between the religious curricula of the earlier traditional system of education and that of the post-Iqbal madrasah in terms of the emphasis on rote learning and the authoritarian approach to teaching.

The oldest of the surviving present-day madrasahs, Madrasah Alsagoff, was built in 1913, four years after the closure of the Iqbal school, and began as an Arabic school to cater to the increasing number of Arabs and Muslims coming into Singapore from Arabia. The next oldest madrasah, Madrasah Al Junied, was established in 1927. Both madrasah hired teachers from the Middle East to teach the traditional religious subjects and Arabic while local teachers from Singapore taught English and Malay. The rote nature of education and the view of knowledge as unchallengeable, typical of the traditional schools remained intact in these modern-day madrasah. These and other madrasah carved a niche as institutions that produce religious teachers and scholars.
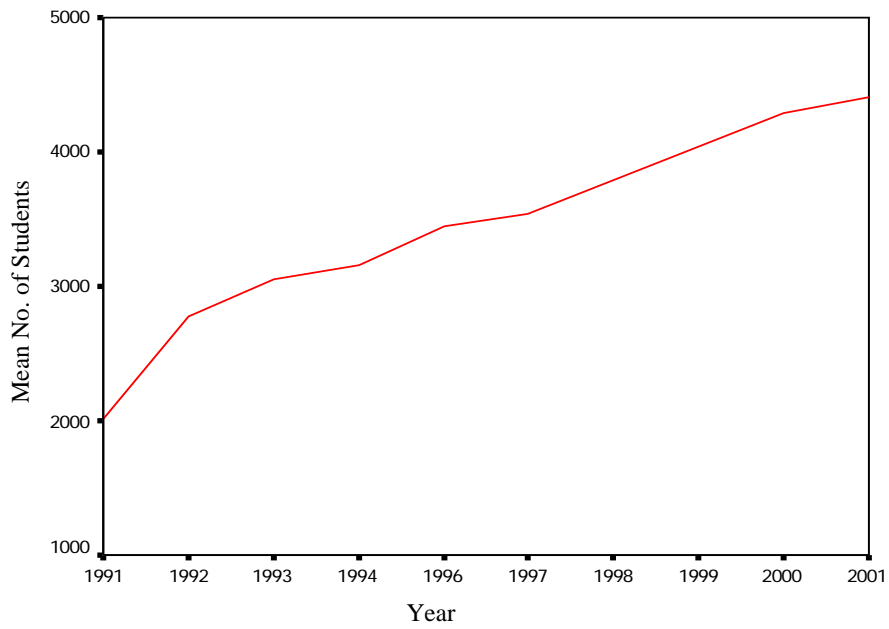
Between 1930s and 1960s, there were on record at least 50 madrasah-type schools, many run as informal village seminaries with just one or two teachers teaching basic religious knowledge (*Straits Times* 1 Mar 1998a). They were all set up by philanthropists and managed as private institutions, and dependent on fees and charity. The 1930s and 1940s was the so-called golden period, particularly in the case of Madrasah Al Junied which attracted students from all over Southeast Asia, some of whom later assumed high office as religious officials such as *mufti* in their respective countries.

In contrast, the 1960s was a downturn for the madrasah as the pace of industrialisation quickened and employment became dependent on educational qualifications. The effect was a declining enrolment in favour of national schools, both English and Malay medium ones. The expansion of the national education system and the resettlement of villagers into high-rise Housing and Development Board (HDB) flats in new towns coincided with the further decline of the madrasah. With more parents preferring to send their boys to the national schools, many madrasah were forced to take in more girls. At their lowest point in the 1970s, the madrasah were not just the preferred schools for parents who wanted a religious education for their children but also a place of last resort for

FIGURE 1 Summary of P1 Registration in the Madrasah

SOURCE: Madrasah Strategic Unit, MUIS.
FIGURE 2 Total Student Population in the Madrasah

SOURCE: Madrasah Strategic Unit, MUIS.

those who did not make it through the streaming system in the national schools (Zubaidah Ghani & Fauziah Soeratman 1975, 45; *Straits Times* 1 Mar 1998a).[18]

There has been a strong revival of the madrasah since the late 1980s, aided not least by the high profile of Islam since the late 1970s, due to the revivalist Islamic trend in North Africa and the Middle East (Monshipouri 2002, 94). All the six surviving madrasah reported record enrolments. In 1986, there were 135 Primary 1 (P1) pupils enrolled in the various madrasah. By 1994 and beyond, the figure hovered above the 400 mark with the year 2000 registering a record of 464 pupils, the number limited only by the logistical and physical constraints of the madrasahs (Figure 1).[19] Every year there were many more applicants[20] than there were places available[21] (*Berita Harian* 18 Mar 1999).

The increasing P1 enrolment over the years accounts for the gradual increase in student population in the six madrasah: from just over 2,000 pupils in 1991, it more than doubled that number in the year 2001 (Figure 2).

The growing community support for the madrasah has also added new pressures. The Malay community may have become more conscious of their identity as Muslims, but the economic realities and demands of the day generally do not escape them. There was a new expectation that the madrasahs provide not only religious education but also academic skills like mathematics, Science and English. However, it can be argued that this seemingly rational desire for a balanced education is quite unlike the kind which the earlier reformist advocators were striving for. In the present context, the acquiring of secular knowledge is mostly for utilitarian ends, rather than regarded as intrinsic to man's rational nature. This is apparent in comments that ascribed academic skills as necessary for living in this world but religious knowledge as the real knowledge that ultimately determines one's fate in the hereafter.[22]

Such a utilitarian view easily strikes a chord with the madrasah, itself built on this ideological position. Keen to harness the growing support for the institution, all six madrasah responded by juggling both religious and secular subjects but in differentiated ways and with varying degrees of success. Madrasah Alsagoff and Madrasah Al Junied, riding on their reputation as excellent centres of religious education, have kept as much as seventy percent of the curriculum time for religious subjects, including Arabic, while English, Malay and Mathematics remain at the periphery.

In contrast, madrasah such as Wak Tanjong, Al-Maarif and Al-Irsyad give roughly equal emphasis to religious and secular subjects including the natural sciences.[23]

Students who successfully complete the primary-level continue to the secondary-level; those with exceptionally good results continue their studies abroad (Abu Bakar Hashim 1989, 27). When they return, most end up as religious teachers at the full-time or part-time madrasah (Ahmad Mohd Ibrahim 1967, 13). Others find jobs that deal with Muslim affairs in government institutions such as the *Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura* (MUIS)[24] and the Syariah Court.[25] A handful of them, mainly from Madrasah Al-Maarif, attend the local universities and polytechnics from where they obtain a career in the professional fields. Others who leave prematurely with only a primary or secondary education find themselves neither prepared for skilled jobs in the knowledge-based economy nor qualified to be religious instructors.

THE GOVERNMENT: CHECKING THE RISING TIDE

The increasing popularity of the madrasah and the inadequacy of its educational system did not go unnoticed by the Government. At a Malay community event in December 1997, the then Minister for Education, Rear-Admiral Teo Chee Hean, referred to it obliquely when he noted that more Malays were opting out of the mainstream schools. Based on his ministry's estimate, 500 Malay P1 pupils or five to six percent of the cohort opted out of the national school system every year.[26] This compared with 1.5 percent and 4.5 percent among the Chinese and the Indians respectively. Those who opted out, he cautioned, would not receive the quality education necessary for good jobs, and would not be able to integrate well into the social and economic system (*Straits Times* 28 Dec 1997).

The Government's interest on the issue sparked a deluge of letters from the community to the local press, with many reading murky meanings into the ministers' statements. Some suggested that the Government was hinting at the impending change to the madrasah system, while others entertained the possibility that the madrasah could be shut down.

The issue of the madrasah surfaced again in 1999 through letters from the Press Secretary to Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew which were released to the press (*Straits Times* 24 April 1999) in the midst of the debate on the relevance and impact of the Special Assistance Plan

(SAP) schools[27] on Singapore's multi-racial fabric. The contention of the Senior Minister's Press Secretary was that because the madrasah concentrate on religious education, with Islamic Theology, Islamic Jurisprudence, and Arabic as major subjects, the students would not be able to acquire the critical foundation skills like English, Mathematics, Science and Information Technology that are necessary in an economy that favours knowledge workers. The students' identification with their fellow Singaporeans would also be weak because they would not have shared a common experience in the national schools. Unable to be full participants in Singapore's economy nor fit into Singapore's mainstream society where English is the common language, it is feared that they will be disadvantaged and become a "problem", like the old Chinese school students. The madrasah of today were thus likened to the private-funded Chinese schools of the bygone era, whose students could not fit into the economy and secure good jobs.[28] Many became disaffected and rebellious, with some falling to the influence of radical social reformists, namely the communists. As a solution, the Press Secretary suggested that Muslim students attend mainstream schools in the morning and madrasah in the afternoon.

Once again these official statements created anxiety among the general public with some writers to the local newspapers questioning the intention of comparing madrasah students with those of the Chinese schools of the past (*Straits Times* 14, 17 & 28 Apr 1999). Yet others suggested that the government should consider giving financial assistance to the madrasah if it was genuinely concerned about the future of madrasah students, in the same way it had provided for the Chinese schools in line with its stand on keeping ethnic components in Singapore intact (*Berita Harian* 24 Apr 1999). Underlying these anxieties was the fear that the madrasah might suffer the same debilitating demise of the Malay-medium schools in the 1980s if they succumb to the government's pressure.[29]

The political leadership's interest in the madrasahs continued to be articulated in the late 1990s and early 2000s. In his 1999 National Day Rally speech in August, the then Prime Minister Goh forewarned about the impending change to the Government policy on the madrasah when he repeated the Government's concern about the plight of dropouts and school leavers (*Berita Harian* 23 Aug 1999). When addressing Parliament in October the same year, he proposed that education be made compulsory in Singapore (*Straits Times* 14 Oct 1999). The legislation was enacted a

year later and compulsory education was implemented in January 2003, a move that would have wide ramifications for the madrasah.

At its core, compulsory education is defined as education in national schools for a duration of six years (from Primary One to Primary Six) for Singapore citizens residing in Singapore. It is meant to give Singaporeans "a common core of knowledge" to prepare them for the Information Age and to build a sense of national identity. A range of penalties is provided in the law to deal with cases of non-compliance, including fines and, in the extreme case, a jail term. It was obvious from the beginning that the madrasah would run foul of the compulsory education policy.[30] A way out was for the madrasah to cease operating at the primary level. But such a suggestion only prompted fierce rumblings of discontent within the Malay community who perceived the proposed policy as infringing on their right and freedom to educate their children in a manner they see fit. Many within the madrasah community were genuinely concerned that there would be insufficient number of students who would be motivated to switch to the madrasah after having spent six years in the national schools. This was a possibility that some claim would spell the end of the madrasah system and the future supply of the community's religious elites. Moreover, they disputed claims that religious training would be just as effective even if it were to start later at the secondary level (*Berita Harian* 22, 30 Oct 1999).

Compulsory education was therefore viewed as a potent threat and reaction from the community was intense and mostly negative. The issue was discussed at closed-door meetings and open forums, in mosques and in the media by a whole spectrum of the Malay population.[31] The six madrash, frustrated with MUIS for its perceived inability to represent their interests to the Government, formed the Joint-Committee of Madrasah (JCM) to work out a collective response to the government's concerns (*Berita Harian* 24 Dec 1999). The influential Persatuan Ulama dan Guru Agama Islam Singapura (PERGAS), an organisation of Islamic religious scholars and teachers, quickly dismissed the Government's assurance that the madrasah will not face closure under the compulsory education policy (*Straits Times* 8 Jan 2000; *Berita Harian* 1 Apr 2000).[32] Such an open and unprecedented protest was a test of the Government's resolve to bring madrasah education into the mainstream.

In response, the Government offered a temporary solution through a legislation enacted in 2000 which exempted madrasah students from compulsory attendance in national schools.[33] However, the madrasah were

given eight years from the time that the law went into effect in 2003 to achieve the minimum passing standard in the core subjects, namely Science, Mathematics, and English in the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE), failing which they will no longer be allowed to teach these subjects and their students will no longer be exempted from compulsory attendance in national schools. This "compromise" appeared to have eased tensions, but perhaps only temporarily until the eight-year period is up when the madrasah's fate will again be the subject of contention.[34]

THE PARENTS: STRIVING FOR A BALANCED LIFE

The madrasah is clearly the natural choice for those parents who genuinely want their children to be schooled in the religious disciplines with the hope of making them the future religious teachers (*asatizah*) or scholars (*ulama*) (*Berita Harian* 16 Jan 1998a). Children of these parents have formed the traditional market for the madrasah. It is not clear, however, if they are the majority at the present time.

What is increasingly audible are the voices of parents who look to the madrasah for an all-encompassing Islamic education that not only offers both secular and religious knowledge but also the freedom to perform religious rituals, namely the *solat* (prayers), and to practice a particular code on modesty, namely putting on an attire that covers the *aurat* (parts of the body that can only be seen by immediate family members and other specific categories of individuals).[35] They believe that religious knowledge should not be excluded from the school curriculum and that Islam as a way of life should not be separated from the rest of the child's education (Zainah Alias 1998, 35). Indeed, the madrasah are attracting more well-educated and vocal parents who are genuinely convinced of the type of education that madrasah schools provide.[36]

The madrasah's appeal may also stem from the need to combat the encroachment of "undesirable" and "foreign" values that come with the capitalist developments and modernisation in Singapore. In one study, almost half of parents interviewed see the need to equip their children with religious values in the face of modernisation, with many citing the madrasah school culture as offering the environment in which their children can be insulated from the influence of negative social values associated with modernisation, such as drug abuse, sexual permissiveness, youth gangsterism and consumerism, among others (Zainah Alias 1998, 36; *Berita Harian* 16 Jan 1998b). One can therefore interpret

parents' interest in madrasah education as a reaction to the problems of modernisation, relying on religion as a moral check and on the madrasah as a security for their children.

The renewed interest in madrasah education may also be related to the government's emphasis on reviving traditional values and returning to the cultural roots of the respective communities in order to counter individualism – an emphasis on individual selves and unwillingness to make self-sacrifice for the social good – which no doubt springs from the increasingly consumerist orientation of Singapore society. While the government has carefully steered the Chinese to accept Mandarin and through this medium appreciate Confucian ethics (a non-religious set of values), in order for them to regain the moral and philosophical strength that have galvanised them into a strong and vibrant society that they are today, the Malays have been relatively left to their own devices until now. Islam, very much entrenched in Malay culture and society and which has enjoyed a worldwide resurgence in the recent years, seems a natural source from which the Malay/Muslims can seek moral strength and carve their own cultural identity (Mukhlis Abu Bakar 1997, 27). One manifestation of this identity is the increasing willingness among, and demand for, Muslim women to cover the *aurat*.

It is also useful to note that the Muslims have stood at the lower end of the socio-economic ladder[37] despite more than two decades of self-help efforts to improve their long-term prospects.[38] The constant public reminder in the media of the Malays' "worrisome" state in the midst of strides made by the other communities may draw them closer, if they are not already, to the religion into which they are born and socialised as children. As often, for the Muslims, Islam acts as an anchor in times of uncertainty, a "security blanket" that alleviates their fears, and provides solace, stability, direction and hope (Mir Zohair Husain 1997, 108).

Furthermore, the tendency to search for strength, security and a wholesome education within Islam should not be detached from the preeminent place that the *ummah* (Islamic community) occupies in Islamic theory and belief. Both the Islamic notion of *ummah* and the Western secular notion of territorial nationalism involve a peoples' sense of "we-ness", togetherness, group identity and group loyalty due to shared heritage. But while "nationalism" attempts to engender solidarity among people living within the territorial boundaries of a particular nation-state, the Islamic *ummah* rises above narrow national interests and is concerned with improving the welfare of, and forging a sense of solidarity and strength

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among, Muslims all over the world. While this pan-Islamic vision seems utopian and difficult to achieve today (Chubin 1997, 30), it nevertheless figures prominently in the minds of many Muslims in Singapore (*Straits Times* 14 Mar 1998).

Thus, parents who send their children to the madrasah do so for a variety of reasons. While some want to see their children grow up as religious teachers or scholars, others simply want their children to acquire a "balanced" education without needing to forgo either secular or religious knowledge. In fact, they hope for their children to be equally successful, if not very successful, in their secular subjects as in their religious subjects so as to allow them to enter into professional courses at the university.[39] But whichever category they belong to, they hold on to the belief that success for their children is defined as happiness not only in this world but primarily in the world hereafter, and that the madrasah offer a conducive environment in which to acquire that perspective.

THE MADRASAH PROVIDERS: MEETING THE CHALLENGE

Over recent years, the madrasah have instituted changes in the orientation of their curriculum in response to changing realities and demands of a modern society. Apart from the religious subjects, some have incorporated English, Malay and Mathematics into the curriculum while others have topped these with the natural sciences. Such improvements in the students' knowledge repertoire have added to the attractiveness of madrasah education (Zainah Alias 1998, 51).

It is clear, however, that different madrasah respond to these demands and expectations differently; there are no uniform approaches or common curriculum. For instance, Madrasah Al Junied, which jealously guards its reputation as a centre for the training of future religious teachers and scholars, views the introduction of English, Malay and Mathematics as enriching its religious curriculum, and cites literacy in the English Language and improved numeracy as a means to better appreciate modern technology and to reach out to a more sophisticated society (ibid, 25-26; Abu Bakar Hashim 1989, 30). Yet, the time and resources devoted towards the teaching and learning of these subjects are very limited and, by national standards, insufficient to prepare students adequately for the national examinations. Other

madrasah, while retaining their core competency in teaching religious subjects, place increasing importance on secular subjects such as English language, Mathematics and natural sciences. Their aim has shifted from primarily producing religious teachers and scholars to producing workers and professionals who can participate actively in the economy and at the same time are morally attuned to their religious obligations. What has become an important undertaking is the preparation of Muslim students with sufficient qualification for successful enrolment into higher education and useful participation in the modern economy (*Warita Irsyad* Dec 1997).[40] However, it can again be argued that the time and resources devoted to these disciplines are severely limited.

It would appear that the hopes and expectations of parents are being partly met by the madrasah as they redefine their roles and responsibilities. It is due to these changes instituted in the madrasah since the late 1980s, coupled with the perceived moral security that they provide in the face of modernisation, that have made the madrasah become a popular choice of education for a small but significant segment of the Malay community. There are, however, problems inherent in the madrasah system which many of the parents are willing to ignore.

One major problem is that of funding and resources. The shifting of the traditional role of the madrasah, from being an institution for the training and development of *ulama* to one that trains its students beyond "religious" subjects to include those that would suit the demands of modern society, took place as recently as a decade ago. Such role expansion of the madrasah is the result of two major considerations: meeting parental expectation for an alternative education for their children that pivots around Islam, and fulfilling the national expectation to maintain its relevance in the face of an economy that values skilled and knowledge workers. But the increase in infrastructural development and allocation of funds and resources expected in any role expansion has been minimal.

Other major obstacles include the low economic value of madrasah graduates, the difficulty of recruiting qualified teachers, high dropout rates, the lack of standardisation of syllabi, and financial problems. These problems have persisted despite the fact that the madrasah in Singapore, especially Madrasah Al Junied, have been the centres of Islamic education in the Southeast Asian region during much of their early days. Nor are these issues new; in fact they have been noted as early as 1966 by paper writers of a seminar organised by the University of

Singapore Muslim Society (USMS) (Muhammad Hussin Mutalib 1989, 2). They were again highlighted thirty years later in 1989 in another seminar organised by MUIS and the Singapore Malay Teachers Union (KGMS). The issues seem to have persisted and lingered on without being adequately resolved.

One of the key weaknesses of the madrasah is the lack of funds, and hence resources and qualified teachers; most teachers receive little training in pedagogy, making standards rather patchy. In the case of one madrasah, more than S$800,000 was required to finance its annual operations in the late 1990s but only 50 percent of this was met through fees and miscellaneous grants disbursed by MUIS; the other 50 percent had to be met through fund raising efforts.[41] Recruiting teachers trained in pedagogy and at competitive salaries was almost impossible and would only divert more valuable scarce resources into fund raising.[42]

A related issue of much concern is the dropout rate which can be traced partly to poor pedagogical skills. A reported 50 to 65 percent of each cohort of madrasah students do not make it to Secondary 4.[43] Those who succeeded admitted that they required tremendous outside help to survive and succeed in the system. This high dropout rate can in turn be traced to the insufficient time allotted for the teaching and learning of a subject. A typical primary-level madrasah, for instance, allocates about 50 percent of curriculum time for the teaching and learning of secular subjects. Any more than this would mean sacrificing the religious subjects and threatening the madrasah's identity as a religious institution. In contrast, in the national schools, the teaching and learning of these subjects would have taken up almost the entire time available. This is one dilemma which the madrasah have to resolve soon, for the implementation of compulsory education would mean that they must allocate as much time to the secular subjects as is reasonably required to ensure that students perform well in the PSLE and thus ensure that their primary-level classes remain open under CE.

The madrasah also offer a singular type of curriculum that does not adequately address the needs of the weaker students. In the national schools, less academically-inclined students would be placed in a "technical" stream in which students are taught vocational skills. They can move on to a technical institute where they go through further training to equip themselves for blue-collar jobs. This alternative route is yet to be made available to madrasah students. This prompted a Muslim MP to consider as significant the amount of "wastage" in terms of not equipping

madrasah students with the necessary skills to compete in the job market and contribute to society.

MUIS: THE HOT SEAT IN THE MIDDLE

Each madrasah has its own history, aims and orientation, adopts and organises its curriculum differently and has never been part of the government machinery. They are generally therefore fiercely independent both of the government and of each other. Indeed, MUIS, which on paper is empowered under the Administration of Muslim Law Act to control the conduct of the madrasah (Ahmad Mohd Ibrahim 1967, 16), has faced much resistance from the latter.[44] Partly because of this, attempts by MUIS to standardise the curriculum and the administration of the madrasah have been difficult.

It is only in recent years that MUIS has made some headway with some of the madrasah, after much convincing and persuasion. Since stepping into the picture, MUIS has provided teacher-training courses, tried to coordinate the madrasah's systems, and provided common examinations for the religious subjects at Secondary 4 (*Sijil Thanawi Empat* or STE). Since 1998, all the full-time madrasah, except one, has taken part in a common enrolment exercise. Certain common subjects are taught as part of the syllabus and common textbooks have been introduced. Some madrasah have also set up a common self-appraisal system, similar to that of government secondary schools. In 1999, MUIS launched an ambitious plan to equip all the madrasah with computer and IT (information technology) facilities each with their own individual servers through the Madrasah IT Plan (MITP) (*Straits Times* 6 Feb 1999). And when compulsory education became official policy in 2001, there was an initial resolve by the madrasah to cooperate with MUIS for the purpose of fulfilling the PSLE requirement.

Notwithstanding the efforts made, these measures may be regarded as ephemeral unless consistently pursued and sustained. The successful coordination of these programmes may be taken as a measure of MUIS' leadership, credibility and reliability, given that its legitimacy over the madrasah and the type of government resources and infrastructure available at its disposal to successfully manage the madrasah are unlike that of the MOE. There have been numerous instances where certain madrasah turned back on their commitment after having initially agreed to cooperate

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in one project or another. Unless MUIS' leadership and wisdom are proven and acknowledged, even simple coordination can prove futile.

The major issues of funding and curriculum remain difficult to manage. Badly needed financial injection, particularly towards the payroll of teachers and staff, would make a significant impact on the madrasah. But it is unlikely that MUIS has the capacity to make a full financial commitment to all the madrasah. The financial assistance which MUIS provides to all the madrasah itself come from a limited pool dependent on the Muslim community's contribution such as the *zakat* (tithe). The prudent use of financial incentives via the *zakat* and other Muslim public funds cannot be ruled out if MUIS was to carry enough weight and influence. Where the madrasah's curriculum and overall direction are concerned, MUIS will have little recourse but to obtain a firmer grip, particularly those over which it has greater authority such as Madrasah Al Junied and Madrasah Al-Irsyad.[45] On the whole, much will also depend on how able and reliable a leadership MUIS can provide for the madrasah community and win over their confidence.

WHAT OF THE FUTURE?

The Government has repeatedly mentioned in Parliament and elsewhere that it has no intention of closing down the madrasahs. Instead, it has suggested that changes be made to the system to ensure that all those who pass through them, including those who drop out, can get jobs (*Straits Times* 20 Mar 1998 & 31 Oct 1999). But to improve the employability of madrasah graduates and dropouts by relying on the existing resources of the madrasah will be an uphill task, unless perhaps the madrasah apply to invoke the Grant-in-Aid Regulations (1957) (Ahmad Mohd Ibrahim 1967, 16) and assimilate into the national educational structure, much in the way of the Christian mission and the former Chinese-medium schools. Under such a system, the madrasah may have their own board of governors, are guaranteed of funding and assured of quality in the teaching of secular subjects. The catch is they will have to follow the MOE's guidelines closely, which means time devoted to the religious subjects will not form part of the main curriculum time which is used for the teaching of secular subjects.

The government-aided school idea is seen by the madrasah community as entailing too great a dilution of the religious component and a loss of their

independence. Moreover, the desired integration of religious and secular education is seen to have to take a step back because the school curriculum must assume a neutral perspective in accordance with the requirements of the MOE.[46] Together, these two perspectives have formed much of the reason for the madrasah's objectíon to the receipt of government grant-in-aid since the '60s (Ahmad Mohd Ibrahim 1967, 17).[47]

There is reason to believe that a Muslim government-aided school idea may have been rejected on other grounds as well. In the heat of a separate debate on whether to open up an-all Malay Special Assistance Plan school for top Malay students, Malay/Muslim MPs have been quoted as not favouring the establishment of schools which might attract a high concentration of Malay students. Their argument is that these students will not push themselves when segregated in their own classes and denied the chance to interact with top students of all races (*Straits Times* 28 Jan 1999).[48] One may conclude on this basis that a Muslim-run government-aided school will even be less desirable to the political leaders.

The outcome of the compulsory education policy may ironically force the madrasah to reduce their religious content in order to allow more time for the secular subjects. This is a situation they have been trying to avoid but one which they now may have to embrace, given that the penalty for failing to fulfill the minimum PSLE requirement is no less than closure of the primary level madrasah. The compulsory education policy has thus indirectly imposed on the madrasah a new aim for its primary level education and at a cost far greater than embracing the government-aided idea, for not only do the madrasah now have to meet the PSLE benchmark but they have to bear the cost entirely by themselves without assistance from the government.[49] The compulsory education policy is indeed the firmest step the government has ever taken to rein in the madrasah to ensure it fulfills the state's educational goals. Although the status-quo is maintained for the time being, the end of the eight year period will prove to be another trying time when it would be known if any of the madrasah has to shut its primary classes.

The Government has not closed the matter on the madrasah. It remains a disquieting issue both for its economic and social ramifications, not least for the potential threat of religious parochialism emerging and undermining efforts at nationbuilding. It has long been recognised that the ultimate values and goals to which a society aspires are to be found in the manner by which it educates its young. The madrasah, which

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advocates a religion-oriented model of educational philosophy with distinct goals and methods, has stood out as an ideological thorn in the path of a government intent on preparing its people for the demands of the competitive global knowledge economy and consolidating the progress made in national integration.[50]

This contest between state interests and citizen rights will continue to dominate the government's relationship with the Malay community in as far as the madrasah issue is concerned. Any government-inspired change to the madrasah system has and may continue to be viewed with suspicion by the general Malay community, not to mention the psychological stress and a sense of loss that will bear upon the community should the madrasah be sacrificed.[51] Ground sentiments will continue to dictate how the political leaders and MUIS will act in implementing changes to the madrasah education. The religious elite, many of whom are the product of the madrasah system and whose opinion, by and large, are respected by the general Malay/Muslim population in Singapore, will partly influence how the madrasah issue is to be settled. The exemption of the madrasah from compulsory education, albeit temporarily pending certain conditions being met, is testimony of their strong voice.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The madrasah is one issue that is cared about passionately within Singapore's Malay/Muslim community. This is in contrast to the mood surrounding the issue of the former Malay-medium school in which doubts on the economic utility of Malay-educated graduates have led to its decline and eventual closure. In the case of the madrasah, considerations about their graduates' economic utility remain strong but these pale in comparison with the more powerful constant – Islam and religious socialisation.

Additionally, for many Malays, be they madrasah supporters or otherwise, the madrasah is an important symbol of the rights and religious freedom that they enjoy as Singapore citizens and should continue to play its role in the Malay/Muslim community. In the words of Haji Maarof Salleh, the former President of MUIS:

> The Muslim community wants the madrasah to remain. ...Madrasah education should continue to exist as it is our heritage of the past. It is also Singapore's pride as it epitomises religious tolerance by preserving the unique features and identity of each religion. The question now is what kind of madrasah education we should promote

to meet our needs and to address the government's concern" (*Berita Harian* 17 Jan 1998).

The Government's concern in turn, as inferred to in this chapter, stems from the pragmatic considerations of personnel, social integration and ideological maintenance. These three features mark the way the state manages the sensitive issues of religion and religious education and against which the madrasah will continue to be evaluated.

NOTES
*An earlier draft of this chapter appeared as a Malay Studies Department, National University of Singapore Working Paper no. 26 titled "Islamic Religious Schools in Singapore: Recent Trends and Issues" (1999/2000).

[1]   These will henceforth be referred to as "national" or "mainstream" schools.

[2]   Under this bill, religious leaders commenting on social and political issues in their capacity as preachers are not allowed. Prior to the passing of this bill, the Christian Conference of Asia, which professed to be religious but found to be involved in politics, was de-registered in December 1987. This bill was also passed at a time of religious revivalism and competition, mainly involving Christian proselitisation that had caused much concern among non-Christian quarters as well as that of Islamic revivalism.

[3]   A compulsory moral education subject, it offers students at Secondary 3 and 4 levels a choice of one of the following: Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Sikhism, Confucian ethics, and a course on world religions.

[4]   These same grounds were also used to justify the state promotion of Asian values and Confucianism.

[5]   Students, however, may still read the RK subjects on their own or by engaging a private tutor outside school hours and sit for these subjects at the GCE 'O' level examinations.

[6]   Chua (1995, 31) read the termination of RK as partly aimed at eliminating potential counter-ideologies; Lily Zubaidah Rahim (1998, 161-162) viewed the very introduction of the Religious Knowledge subject and its abrupt termination as politically motivated.

[7]   These appear to possess a Confucianist orientation as a basis including unquestioning reverence for higher authority such as respect for elders, teachers, scholars, parents, the state, and family.

[8]   Based on the 1990 Census of Population, almost all Malays (99.6 percent) profess Islam as their religion and that Malays form the biggest number of Muslims in Singapore (85.2 percent) followed by Indians (12.2 percent) (Kuo & Tong 1995).

[9]   There have been different renderings of what these terms mean. Ashraf (1985, 96) classifies both secular and religious knowledge in terms of the

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sciences: 'acquired' and 'revealed' respectively; *cf.*, Al-attas (1980, 42) who distinguishes between the 'religious sciences' and the "rational, intellectual, and philosophical sciences". Yet others question the usefulness of dichotomising knowledge between secular and religious in the first place (see Alatas 1979, 63-64).

[10] The category of "secular" government schools include Malay-medium schools which used to represent another option for Malay students, but these schools began to lose their appeal in the 1970s due to the limited career prospects of Malay-educated graduates compared to that of their English-educated counterparts. Due to declining enrolment, these schools subsequently stopped admitting new students from 1983. They have since been phased out.

[11] These full-time madrasah are separate educational establishments from the "part-time madrasah". The latter cater to children who attend national schools and who come to the part-time madrasahs before or after school for a session or two a week, each session lasting about two hours. Many agencies such as mosques, Malay/Muslim welfare organisations and private commercial companies run these part-time classes.

[12] See Zahoor Ahmad F. Hussain (1967), Ahmad Mohd Ibrahim (1967) and Chee (1999, also in this volume), for a more detailed historical account of the madrasah in Singapore; for a related account on madrasah in Malaysia, see Rosnani Hashim (1996).

[13] Before the introduction of Malay vernacular education in the 1850s, the Koranic schools were the only educational institution attended by Malay children. They continued to be the preferred educational institution even after the introduction of vernacular schools partly because of the assumed foreign and Christian bias associated with such government-provided schools (Roff 1967, 76-77).

[14] The literacy activity around the Koran is mainly recitation without comprehension as the children were not taught Arabic. But it is one activity that touched the hearts and stirred the thoughts of the devout Muslim (Rauf 1964, 97).

[15] According to Rauf (1964, 98), *pondok* schools can be found mainly in the padi-growing areas in the north of the peninsula. Singapore has no record of such schools, although Chee Min Fui mentions their existence (see Chee Min Fui's chapter in this book).

[16] The reformers were represented by *Kaum Muda* (progressive faction), a reformist group whose ideas were very much influenced by those of Jamaluddin Al-Afghani and Muhammad Abduh, Muslim reformers from Afghanistan and Egypt respectively, who propagated the idea of rationalism in the Muslim world.

[17] In the propagation of their ideas, the reformists came up against the traditional *ulama* (traditionalists) who opposed the reformists' assertion that Islam had to be rid of the 'impurities' that had been assimilated from other religions and customary practices.

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[18] This latter group of students has ceased enrolling in the madrasah since 1994 after the MOE put in place a system that sees to the different needs of students with differing levels of academic ability, effectively keeping these students in school for at least ten years (*Straits Times* 28 Apr 1995).

[19] In late 2000, Madrasah Al Junied and Madrasah Irsyad rekindled the once failed MUIS-initiated twinning scheme in which Madrasah Al Junied was to gradually become a secondary level-only madrasah while Madrasah Irsyad was to focus on the primary level and become a feeder for Madrasah Al Junied. Beginning with the 2001 cohort, Madrasah Irsyad was to enlarge its P1 intake from the usual two classes to five classes. In the same year, pupils in Madrasah Irsyad bound for Secondary 1 would transfer to Madrasah Al Junied. However shortly before school reopened, the twinning agreement fell through; Madrasah Al Junied reverted to its original practice and took in its own P1 pupils leaving Madrasah Irsyad saddled with a large number of P1 pupils which it had earlier accepted. This explains the unusually high intake for the 2001 cohort (Madrasah Strategic Unit, MUIS).

[20] Prior to 2001, each child has to submit one application form to each of the madrasahs he/she applies to. Beginning with the 2001 cohort, all madrasah, with the exception of Madrasah Alsagoff, took part in a MUIS-initiated central registration system whereby each child submits only one application form irrespective of the madrasah he/she applies to. This partly explains why the number who applied fell from a high 1,354 applications in 2000, to 654 in 2003 (Madrasah Strategic Unit, MUIS).

[21] In 2003, the compulsory education policy was introduced in Singapore, that requires all Singaporean children to attend national schools for the first six years of their schooling. However, a selected group of children, including those enrolled in the madrasah, are exempted from the policy. But a caveat allows the madrasah to take in only 400 P1 pupils annually from that year onwards.

[22] There are other prevailing strands of thought within the Malay community that define knowledge in a more inclusive way, in which the categories "religious" and "secular" are irrelevant and where the struggle towards the development of a just, progressive, modern and enlightened world is as equally "religious" and important as learning about one's Creator and the life of His messenger. But in a community accustomed to traditional modes of thinking about religion, this and other such views do not stand out – see Hoodbhoy's depiction of the utilitarian spirit among Muslims both in the past and present (Hoodbhoy 1992, 120-123).

[23] Only Madrasah Al Junied, Madrasah Al-Maarif and Madrasah Wak Tanjung hold classes up to pre-university level.

[24] MUIS is a statutory board established in 1968 when the Administration Law Act (AMLA) came into effect. Its primary role is to look after the interests of Muslims in Singapore.

[25] But openings in these institutions are limited. In recent times, madrasah graduates with tertiary qualification have started their own businesses which

range from private tuition centres to travel agencies catering to *haj* needs and trading of *halal* meat and traditional medicine (*Berita Harian* 27 Mar 1998).

26 Among those who opted out of the system are those who specifically enrolled in the madrasah. They form about 3.5 percent of the cohort (*Straits Times* 18 Jun 1999).

27 SAP schools are bilingual institutions intended to enable academically good pupils to offer two languages at first language level, namely English and Chinese, to preserve the character of traditional Chinese schools and to meet the charge that the education authorities were indifferent to the decline in standards in Chinese. These schools are given additional resources, including good bilingual teachers. The SAP schools policy drew criticism from both English-educated Chinese and the minority groups who charged that non-Chinese students who do not offer Chinese language at first language level would not have access to these good schools with better resources, and that bright Chinese pupils concentrated in such schools will not have an adequate opportunity to mix, on a daily basis, as students, with students of other races. A more significant argument is the perception that these bright students are destined for future leadership positions in government, industry and other vital sectors, and their socialization in a "Chinese" environment would limit their understanding of the values, expectations and norms of the other communities (Gopinathan 1998, 30; see also *Straits Times* 11 Mar 1999).

28 Mostly set up by clan associations and private individuals, the Chinese-medium schools were brought into the fold of the MOE which then determined the curriculum taught in these schools. In return, the schools receive financial assistance from the Ministry through the Grant-in-Aid Regulations. The established ones among these schools were later converted to SAP schools and the language of instruction changed to English except for the teaching of Chinese language and literature.

29 Some attributed the closure of the Malay schools to the lack of official support and the apparent neglect in promoting Malay as the national language (Lily Zubaidah Rahim 1998, 188-191).

30 It is instructive to note that the compulsory education idea was mooted once before but was rejected by the Education Minister. That this idea resurfaced in the midst of government criticism of the madrasah was seen by some as indicative of the policy being primarily aimed at the institution.

31 Parents and teachers, interested individuals, academics and educationists, and Malay/Muslim organisations all engaged the press in expressing their interests and positions and wrote in their proposals on how the madrasah system could be improved (*Berita Harian* 3 Jan 2000, 4 Jan 2000 & 2 May 2000). There were also heated exchanges in Cyber Ummah, a website maintained by PERGAS (*Berita Harian* 15 Jan 2000). Even the Government felt obliged to hold several

[32] rounds of closed-door meetings with Malay community leaders, including madrasah officials, in an attempt to pacify their concerns.

[32] In a statement released to the press on 1st April 2000, "PERGAS rejects the proposal, in its present form, to implement this compulsory education if it causes the closure of schooling in primary madrasah, which to PERGAS is tantamount to the gradual and inevitable closure of the madrasah, even if not intended… Any future proposal seen as undermining this institution would certainly invite negative reaction" (www.pergas.org.sg/pressce.htm 1 April 2000).

[33] There were also other categories of children exempted from compulsory education, including those attending the San Yu Adventist School, those receiving home-schooling and those with special needs.

[34] The Committee on Compulsory Education in Singapore (CCES) in its report recommended "that the benchmark for madrasahs be pegged at the average PSLE aggregate score of EM1 and EM2 Malay pupils in the six lowest-performing national schools, based on the ranking of the performance of their EM1 and EM2 Malay pupils in the PSLE of the same year. Each madrasah must attain an average aggregate score which meets the benchmark." (CCES, July 2000).

[35] The madrasah uniform for girls, typically a long dress and a headscarf (*tudung*), has been one of the pulling factors that attract parents to the madrasah (Zainah Alias 1998, 41). As a measure of how increasingly important the wearing of the *tudung* has become, some parents who failed to secure a place for their children in the madrasah have been known to defy the authorities by continually making their children wear the *tudung* in the national schools. But these children were eventually suspended from the schools (*Straits Times* 2 Oct 2002).

[36] Among the well-educated parents spoken to include a teacher holding a senior teaching position in a government school who decided on a madrasah education for his two daughters, and a lecturer waiting to be conferred a doctoral degree whose eldest son and two daughters were in the madrasah. There have also been reports in the local daily newspapers of engineers and lawyers opting for the madrasah for their children's education (*Straits Times* 1 Mar 1998b).

[37] The 1990 Census of Population found Muslims (inclusive of Malays, Indians and other races) to be negatively associated with the level of education and that a high percentage of them were found in the ranks of those in blue-collar occupations (Kuo & Tong 1995).

[38] This is not to ignore the progress made by the Malay-Muslims over the same period (*Berita Harian* 25 Oct 1997).

[39] Feedback from parents attending the "Meet the Parents" session of Madrasah Al-Irsyad, 29 May 1999.

[40] As mentioned previously, a handful of students from Madrasah Al-Maarif have qualified for entry into the National University of Singapore each year.

[41] Personal communication with a madrasah official who requested anonymity.

[42] There are instances of National Institute of Education (NIE)-trained teachers who voluntarily left the government schools after having served their bond in favour of teaching in the various madrasah despite facing a 30 to 40 percent cut in their salaries. Their number, however, is small.

[43] Based on media reports (*Straits Times* 1 Mar 1998b; *Berita Harian* 23 Aug 1999), the dropouts include students who abandon their full-time education prematurely and those who move to the secular system. This prompted some madrasah officials to dispute the figures. The statistics also do not indicate to what extent this figure is attributed to students who were already dropouts of mainstream schools but were taken in by the madrasah as has happened in the past until 1993, or those who opt to leave a particular madrasah for other religious institutions in Singapore or abroad (*Berita Harian* 15 Jan 1998 & 31 Aug 1999).

[44] The madrasah have existed long before the establishment of MUIS. As a statutory board, MUIS's overture towards the madrasah has been viewed with suspicion, seen as imposing, and interpreted as interference by the Government in the affairs of the madrasah. MUIS's slow bureaucracy also contributed to the madrasah's ambivalent liaison with MUIS.

[45] The appointment of the management of these madrasah has been in the hands of MUIS since the time they encountered difficulties and asked MUIS to step in – for fund raising for a new building in the case of Madrasah Al Junied, and finding an alternative location for Madrasah Al-Irsyad.

[46] Presumably this is to accommodate non-Muslims who will have equal access to such government-aided schools.

[47] The government-aided school idea was rekindled by Perdaus, a local Muslim voluntary welfare organisation, as recently as 2000 in the midst of the compulsory education debate. In its submission to the Committee on Compulsory Education, Perdaus suggested turning two of the madrasah into such a school as part of their proposal to restructure the six madrasah to better attune to the needs of CE (*Berita Harian* 13 May 2000).

[48] This debate surfaced in the wake of a Government announcement in early 1999 to review the teaching of Chinese language. Some members of the Malay elite were appealing for similar attention to be paid to the future of their own language (*Straits Times* 28 Jan 1999) while others were against it (*Straits Times* 27 Feb 1999; *Berita Harian* 9 Apr 1999).

[49] Despite this, the key leaders in the madrasah community in their dialogue with the then PM Goh, accepted the PSLE idea as a healthy challenge and were upbeat about the madrasah meeting the minimum standard (*Straits Times* 20 May 2000). However, some community leaders who long recognised the inadequacies of the madrasah system were privately concerned that this might be attained at a high cost to the community.

[50] In his interview with *Berita Harian* on 20 September 2001, the then DPM Lee was quoted as saying "Singaporeans should be bonded by shared

[51]   experiences of living in Singapore – attending the same schools, serving national service together, living in the same blocks of flats, interacting with one another at work and at play."

[51]   A complete closure of the madrasah is presently a remote possibility. The governing party is likely to take heart the electoral reverses which it once suffered when the Chinese-educated mass showed their disapproval at the 1991 polls after a string of macro-economic and social changes that seemingly affected their status, culture and language. On the other hand, however, the Malays are not significant in number nor are they the centre of Singapore society, unlike the Chinese mass base. Nevertheless, the proximity of Muslim communities in Malaysia and Indonesia may have an important political bearing. The closing of some of the primary level madrasahs might, however, be possible if they fail to meet the low PSLE benchmark. In the event this happens, the government would have been cleared of any responsibility, for the madrasah leaders have themselves accepted the CE policy and its accompanying risks.

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