32

Islamic religious education and Muslim religiosity in Singapore

Mukhlis Abu Bakar

National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

One could almost sense a sigh of relief from among the Malay/Muslim community in Singapore when it was revealed by the authorities that, among the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) terrorist suspects arrested under the Internal Security Act in 2001 and 2002, none of them were products of the Islamic religious schools, the madrasahs. Such a relief is understandable given that, for a few years prior to the arrests, the madrasah has been the subject of much public debate following criticism of its education system by the Singapore government. Madrasah education was perceived as incompatible within the framework of the national education curriculum and with the needs of a modern economy. The compulsory education policy that followed, which originally required these full-time schools to stop enrolling Primary 1 pupils, drew outcry from the community, with some reading it as a sinister move to close them down. Under these circumstances, any proven connection between the madrasahs and the terrorist group would add pressure on the former and make it much harder for the community to continue defending it.

As it was, the madrasahs went through the JI episode unscathed. That the JI terrorists had all attended mainstream schools put to rest any thoughts that madrasahs in Singapore are copies of their counterparts in neighboring countries with their alleged roles as training camps for JI recruits. Conversely, in the midst of increased Muslim religiosity, there was growing concern of Islamic radicalism among mainstream students. However, while the pressure on the madrasahs has subsided, the attention on the Malay/Muslim community has intensified, for the arrest of the JI suspects has raised anxieties about the loyalty of an entire community to the state. Additionally, while in the madrasah episode the community took upon itself to "defend" the institution against government criticism, the period following the JI arrests saw the government going all out to "protect" the community from any potential backlash from the rest of society. The primary concern was to ensure that Singapore's national cohesion was not undermined.

Prior to the 1990s, the Singapore government did not pay very close attention to the religious dimension of the Malay/Muslim community life. Problems pertaining to madrasah education were internal to the Malay/Muslim community, engaging the attention of the Malay community and religious leaders and of most Malay political leaders within the government. Today these issues are national concerns because of their impact on economic development, national integration, and security. This chapter examines the tensions between the state and

437

Islam, focusing on Singapore's Malay/Muslim community and its religious educational institutions at a time of rapid and complex economic, social, and religious developments. It presents a perspective on the connections between education, religion, race, economy, and nation building within the context of Singapore's multi-religious, pluralistic, and modern society.

Singapore

Background

Singapore is a capitalist island city-state of over 4 million people in the middle of the Malay Archipelago. The years immediately preceding and following the separation of Singapore from Malaysia in 1965 were a tumultuous period marked by riots and racial tensions. When it became an independent republic on August 9, 1965, Singapore inherited a population of mixed racial background whose ethnic composition was roughly the same as it is today – Chinese (78%), Malays (14%), Indians (7%), and other races (1%) (Leow, 2001).

The Chinese and Indians can trace their lineage to the immigrant groups that were brought into the Straits Settlements and the Federated Malay States by the British in order to stimulate the colonial economy. The Malays are native to the area, and their ancestors were mostly rural peasants. Almost all Malays profess Islam as their religion. They form the biggest group of Muslims in Singapore, followed by Singaporeans of Arab and Indian descent. The Chinese and Eurasian converts make up the smallest Muslim group. Taoists, Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, Sikhs, and believers of other faiths make up the rest of the population.

Malay is the national language and one of four official languages that also include English, Chinese, and Tamil. English is also the language of administration and is widely used in the professions and in businesses. English is also the primary school language. Along with the primacy of English, the mother tongue languages – Chinese, Malay, or one of several "Indian" languages, including Tamil – are made a compulsory subject at the primary and secondary school level to safeguard Singaporeans' competence in these languages and their sense of identity with the cultures that their mother tongues represent.

Multiracialism and the place of religion

Singapore is overwhelmingly Chinese, and the governing political party largely depends on the Chinese population for its electoral success. However, Singapore has never been a Chinese state. Nor has Singapore explicitly privileged the biggest minority, the Malays, even though the Malays are recognized in the constitution as the indigenous people of Singapore. Instead, the government declares Singapore a "multiracial" society which safeguards racial tolerance in the law, pushes race out of the front line of politics, and relegates racial cultural practices "to the realm of private and voluntaristic, individual, or collective practices" (Chua, 1995, p. 106).

The political system that emerged thus featured a government that presents itself as working for the interest of the whole country and not for one class, race, or group. Essentially informed and guided by multiracialism, pragmatism, and meritocracy, the government relies on a centralization of authority and one that is prepared to engage in extensive social engineering to bring about orderly social change. The strategy is to confine politics within the realms of technocratic problem-solving and limiting its concerns to issues pertaining to the economy, 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 race or religious-based loyalties (Gopinathan, 1979; Jesudason, 1989).

438

This pragmatic ideology is best seen at work in education. One of the more important institutions in post-independence Singapore, education is valued both from the government's 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 for social mobility. Education is also considered a key factor in building a national identity and social unity, with national schools providing a common experience for all citizens. The basic governing ingredients are consistently at play, that is, centralization of authority with some measure of autonomy, emphasis on rationalization and cost-effective management, and the steady erosion of the legitimacy of subgroups such as clans and castes (Gopinathan, 1979).

Religion is by far the one major social institution in Singapore that has been treated with much sensitivity. Singapore is constitutionally a secular state, but the constitution upholds the right of groups to adhere to their religious faiths. All religious groups are granted space to engage in their practices 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; Tamney, 1988, cited in Hill & Lian, 1995). Thus religions are openly told to separate themselves from state politics, as evidenced by the institutionalization of the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act in 1990 which bars religious leaders from commenting on social and political issues in their capacity as preachers.

Precisely because of their ideological appeal, religions were not allowed to play a significant role in the national curriculum. Religion's inclusion in 1984 through a religious knowledge (RK) program was short-lived. Under this program, moral education was taught in secondary schools through courses in Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Sikhism, as well as Confucian ethics (C. Tan, 2008). 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. The program was withdrawn in 1989 shortly after the release of the findings of a government-commissioned, social scientific study of religion in Singapore which implicated the RK program in promoting religious proselytization and intensifying religious polarization among students which, the government feared, could foment social division (Chua, 1995; Hill & Lian, 1995; Tamney, 1992).

Madrasah education

Background

Schools whose educational aims detract from those set by the Ministry of Education (MOE) receive no funding from the government but enjoy significant autonomy in determining their own curriculum. The Chinese medium schools and the madrasahs were such schools, both of which pre-date Singapore's political independence. But unlike the Chinese schools, which were brought into the fold of the Ministry of Education in the 1980s after forgoing their autonomy in setting the curriculum and standards in exchange for financial assistance through the Grant-in-Aid Regulations, the six madrasahs that exist today are still outside the mainstream school system. They offer full-time education at the primary and secondary level, with some up to pre-university. They rely on school fees and donations from the Malay/Muslim community to sustain their operations.

Madrasah education is regarded as important and necessary by the government for the cultivation of indigenous Muslim religious elites. They have a significant role to play within the Singapore Muslim community as teachers and scholars on Islam. Traditionally, the primary focus of the madrasahs was on the teaching of religious knowledge and Arabic as well as subjects

such as arithmetic and Malay. They provided a convenient and affordable education for students who, apart from obtaining a foundation in religion, were also taught to read, write, and count. Some of the students who completed madrasah education became religious teachers within the community, while those who managed to further their religious studies abroad were appointed to positions as *kadi* (judge), *mufti* (leader in theological matters), and religious officials in various Muslim organizations such as the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura – MUIS), the Registry of Muslim Marriages, and the *Syariah* Court (court based on Islamic law with limited jurisdiction over matters, namely Muslim divorce cases).

The historical development of the madrasahs and the challenges they face in multicultural, secular Singapore have been well documented elsewhere (Abdul Rahman & Lai, 2006; Aljunied & Hussin, 2005; C. Tan & Kasmuri, 2007). Some salient points about the madrasahs and the challenges they face in multicultural and multi-religious Singapore are described in this chapter.

Declining enrollment

The 1930s and 1940s were the so-called golden period for the madrasahs, particularly in the case of Madrasah Aljunied, which attracted students from all over Southeast Asia for its high standard of Arabic and vibrant learning environment. In contrast, the period after independence in the 1960s was a downturn for the madrasahs as the pace of industrialization quickened and employment became dependent on educational qualifications. With madrasah education carrying little economic value, enrollment in the madrasahs, especially of boys, declined in favor of the national schools. The expansion of the national education system and the resettlement of villagers into subsidized high-rise public housing in new towns coincided with the further decline of the madrasahs. At their lowest point in the 1970s, the madrasahs became a place of last resort for those who did not make it through the streaming system in the national schools (Abu Bakar, 2006).

Broadening the curriculum

It was in the above context that changes in the objectives of madrasah education – and specifically in the curriculum – were first raised and discussed by Malay political leaders in the late 1960s. The main concerns were to ensure the continued relevance and attractiveness of madrasah education, which would also simultaneously alleviate the problem of poor employment prospects of madrasah graduates. The madrasahs were urged to broaden the emphasis and content of their curriculum by incorporating the teaching of "non-religious" or "secular" subjects such as science, math, and English. Madrasah officials, religious elites, and MUIS also generally supported the proposal affirming the changes that were needed to raise the status of madrasah education and provide students with knowledge related to the economy. By producing not only *ulama* (religious scholars) but also Muslim professionals, it was argued that madrasah education can remain relevant to Singapore's development and attract Muslim parents to send their children to them.

The media consistently ran stories of madrasah students succeeding in obtaining places in or graduating from overseas Islamic universities such as Al-Azhar in Egypt as well as from the local universities such as the National University of Singapore. Such reports appeared to bring home the message that madrasah education was just as good as if not better than that provided by the national schools, and that madrasah graduates have succeeded in obtaining a comprehensive education that is not limited to religious but that also includes secular knowledge.

This was the beginning of a shift in educational emphasis in the post–independence history of the madrasah. While the curriculum changes appeared to be conditioned by the poor job prospects of madrasah graduates, that these changes would save and preserve the Muslim educational heritage was not missed by the madrasah officials and religious elites whose own careers in a sense were also on the line should the madrasahs close. However, as discussed in the following sections, the widening of the curriculum poses its own problems.

Renewed interest in the madrasah

The efforts discussed earlier increased the demand for madrasah education. Enrollment steadily grew, thereby reversing the trend of previous decades. In 1986, there were 135 Primary 1 pupils enrolled in the six madrasahs. By 1994 and beyond, the figure hovered above the 400 mark, with the year 2000 registering a record of 464 pupils. This represents about 5–6% of the Malay Primary 1 cohort. Every year there were many more applicants than there were places available (Abu Bakar, 2006).

The students' and parents' understanding and expectations of madrasah education increased as enrollment in the madrasahs grew. Alias (1998) found that the majority of parents look to the madrasahs for an encompassing Islamic education that offers both secular and religious knowledge and the freedom to perform religious rituals like *solat* (prayers) and to practice a particular code on modesty such as wearing attire that covers the *aurat* (part of the body that must be covered following a certain standard of decency) which cannot be practiced in the national schools. They subscribe to the idea that religious knowledge should be included in the school curriculum and that Islam as a way of life should not be separated from the rest of a child's education. Indeed, the madrasahs attracted well-educated parents who are genuinely convinced of the type of education that madrasahs provide.

The madrasahs' appeal coincides with the perceived encroachment of "undesirable" and "foreign" values that come with the capitalist developments and modernization in Singapore. In the Alias (1998) study, almost half of the parents interviewed expressed the need to equip their children with religious values in the face of modernization, with many citing the madrasah culture as offering an environment in which their children can be insulated from the influence of negative social values associated with modernization such as drug abuse, sexual permissiveness, youth gangsterism, and consumerism (Alias). Religion thus became a moral check and the madrasahs a security for their children.

The renewed interest in madrasah education also came at a time of government's emphasis on reviving traditional values and returning to the cultural roots of the respective communities in order to counter the individualism that comes with an increasingly consumerist orientation of Singapore society. While the government has paid lavish attention to the promotion of Chinese culture through initiatives such as the Speak Mandarin Campaign and the Special Assistance Plan schools that provide an intensive Chinese-oriented curriculum to groom the proposed Chinese elite, the Malays have been relatively left to their own devices until recently. Islam, very much entrenched in Malay culture and society, and which has enjoyed a resurgence in Singapore since the 1980s, seems a natural source from which the Muslims can seek moral strength and carve their own identity.

The promise of a "balanced education" feeds into the Muslims' belief that success is meaningful only if one strives for happiness in this world and the world hereafter. It is a pull factor that many parents find hard to resist, although they are aware that the funds and resources of the madrasahs are severely limited.

441

Financial constraints

Appealing as it seems, the incorporation of the secular subjects into the madrasah curriculum has aggravated the funding problems that have long beset madrasahs. Financial constraints have meant paying meager salaries to madrasah teachers. This in turn affects the quality of teachers, many of whom are lowly qualified with little exposure or training in pedagogy. With the inclusion of secular subjects based on the national curriculum and an increased student enroll-ment, the problem became critical. Some madrasahs had to turn to volunteer teachers from the national schools to fulfill the new objectives. Others had to dig into their reserves to sustain operating costs.

Facilities such as laboratories, libraries, computer facilities, and suitable premises are also inadequate. There is dire need for the madrasahs to upgrade and renovate their premises and provide infrastructure for the increasing number of students and facilities in view of curriculum expansion. Such projects require herculean efforts and involve substantial sums of money. Madrasahs are constantly appealing for donations from the community, urging them to donate on the grounds that it is a religious obligation to do so (Abdul Rahman, 2006). Many in the community have heeded the call and over the years have contributed tens of millions of dollars to several rebuilding projects.

Poor academic results

Against this backdrop, it is not unexpected that the vast majority of madrasah students do not make it to tertiary levels of education. Malay students in the madrasah perform below their counterparts in the national schools. Between 1996 and 1998, only 35% of Malay students who were in the madrasah from Primary 1 went on to take the national examinations at the end of Secondary 4, compared to 60% from the mainstream schools. Madrasah students' low pass rates for English, math, and science also make it hard for them to move on to post-secondary education. An average of only 9% of such students compared to 29% of Malay students from national schools went on to either the polytechnics or the junior colleges (Osman, 1999). Those who succeeded admitted that they required tremendous outside help to survive and succeed in the system.

In addition to the low quality of teaching in the madrasahs, the poor academic results can also be attributed to the time allotted for the teaching and learning of subjects. A typical madrasah allocates no more than 50% of curriculum time for the teaching and learning of the secular subjects – math, science, English, and Malay – plus a humanities subject such as geography at the secondary level. Any more time than this would mean threatening the madrasahs' identity as educational institutions that teach religious subjects – *Tauhid* (theology on the Oneness of God), *Tafsir* (Quranic exegesis), *Fiqh* (jurisprudence), *Hadith* (collections of sayings of the Prophet), *Nahu* (Arabic grammar), *Tasawwuf* (Islamic mysticism), and *Tarikh* (Islamic history) (Aljunied & Hussin, 2005). In contrast, in the national schools, the secular subjects take up most of the curriculum time (Abu Bakar, 2006). The heavy workload of the students coupled with poor academic results led Abdul Rahman (2006) – an academic – to question the ability of the madrasah to fulfill the dual role of training students to be missionaries and professionals, citing its vision as "utopian" (p. 70).

A national concern

It is in the face of these worrying statistics and the upward trend in madrasah enrollment that madrasah education became a national concern. In 1997, a government minister noted the

442

increasing number of Malays opting out of the mainstream schools, and questioned whether these students receive the quality education necessary for good jobs and to be able to integrate well into the social and economic system. In 1999, a senior minister was more upfront and said that the madrasahs' concentration on religious education would not enable the students to acquire the critical skills that are essential in an economy that gives preference to knowledge workers. The students' identification with their fellow Singaporeans would also be weak, as they would not have shared a common experience in the national schools. Unable to be full participants in Singapore's economy – nor to fit into Singapore's mainstream society – he feared that they would be disadvantaged and become a problem, like the students who had graduated from the now defunct Chinese medium schools. He recommended that Muslim students attend national schools in the morning and madrasahs in the afternoon.

These remarks sparked an emotional outcry from the Malay/Muslim community, who by this time had developed a sense of ownership towards the madrasahs. Many read murky meanings into the minister's statements, and believed that the government was hinting at an impending change in the madrasah system – if not its eventual closure. Others – including madrasah officials – were furious that the government acknowledged neither the madrasahs' efforts to equip students with the knowledge and skills that the ministers mentioned nor their financial struggles. They called for the government to give financial assistance to the madrasahs, citing the Chinese schools as an example. However, madrasah officials forgot that, in the Chinese schools case, the national curriculum had been embraced in exchange for grants, which the madrasahs were not prepared to do.

Compulsory education

The political leadership's interest in the madrasahs continued to be articulated for some years. It culminated in 2000 when legislation on compulsory education (CE) was enacted for implementation in January 2003. At its core, CE is defined as education in the national schools for a duration of six years (from Primary 1 to Primary 6) for Singapore citizens residing in Singapore. It was meant to give Singaporeans "a common core of knowledge" to prepare them for the information age and to build a sense of national identity ("Send Dad to Jail," 1999, p. 25).

It was obvious that the madrasahs would run foul of the CE policy unless they stopped taking in primary students. This prompted fierce rumblings of discontent within the Malay community, which perceived the proposed policy as infringing on their right and freedom to educate their children in ways they viewed as appropriate. Many within the madrasah community were genuinely concerned about the possibility that not many students would be motivated to switch to the madrasah after spending six years in the national schools. Some claimed this 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 if it were to start later at the secondary level.

CE was therefore viewed as a potent threat. The six madrasahs – frustrated with MUIS for its perceived inability to represent their interests to the government – formed the Joint Committee of Madrasahs to develop a collective response to the government's concerns. The influential Singapore Islamic Scholars and Religious Teachers Association (Persatuan Ulama dan Guru Agama Islam Singapura – PERGAS), which spearheaded much of the public protest, quickly dismissed the government's assurance that the madrasahs would not face closure under CE. Such an open and unprecedented protest was a test of the government's treatment of the Muslim minority.

443

In response to the protest by PERGAS, the government offered a "compromise." In the legislation enacted in 2000, students enrolled in a madrasah are exempted from compulsory attendance in national schools provided that their madrasah's test performance matches the average aggregate score for Malays in the six lowest-performing national schools whose students sit the primary school leaving examination (PSLE) the same year. The madrasahs have to meet this minimum passing standard beginning in 2008. If they fail to meet this standard, they will have to stop providing elementary education. In addition, the six madrasahs' total enrollment of Primary one pupils was capped at 400 every year, beginning in 2004.

The compromise appeared to have eased tensions, and the debate ended with what some thought was a "win–win" solution. However, in order to fulfill the PSLE benchmark, the madrasahs may be forced to reduce teaching time for religious subjects and give more time to secular subjects. However, it may still be an uphill task for the madrasahs to fulfill the new requirement because of their limited resources.

In 2007, a year before the first batch of madrasah pupils were to sit for the PSLE, MUIS announced that three madrasahs had agreed to collaborate within the framework of a joint madrasah system (JMS). In this system, Madrasah Aljunied and Madrasah Al-Arabiah will not enroll primary students so that they can focus on secondary education, while Madrasah Al-Irsyad will close its secondary classes to specialize in primary education and serve as a feeder school for Aljunied and Arabiah. At the secondary level, Aljunied will focus on the religious curriculum, offering students intensive religious education at higher levels. Al-Arabiah will provide greater emphasis on the arts and the sciences and cater to students who are more inclined towards a secular education within a madrasah setting.

The collaboration was justified because it enables resources to be shared and optimizes and enables a more focused learning approach to be offered. However, given the madrasahs' past record, the collaboration may be seen as a subtle admission by Aljunied and Al-Arabiah that they are unable to fulfill the PSLE benchmark. In addition, the necessity for Al-Arabiah to duplicate the national curriculum is questionable when vast resources have been set aside by the state for this purpose in the mainstream schools, never mind whether it can mount it successfully without imposing huge costs on the community. At the same time, however, Aljunied's focus on religious education might bring it back to its past glory as the premier Islamic school. The other three madrasahs choose to remain outside the JMS.

Maintaining national cohesion

Background

Just when the debate on madrasah education was showing signs of abating after the "truce" was achieved between PERGAS and the government in 2000, a different kind of debate ensued triggered by the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington on September 11, 2001 by the radical Islamic group Al-Qaeda. While shock and horror at the atrocities generally typified the immediate reaction of the local public, time since the 9/11 events has muted the response. However, the subsequent arrests in 2001 and 2002 in Singapore of members of the extremist JI group – with alleged links to Al-Qaeda – brought home the message of a terrorist threat from within and catapulted to the forefront not only the Malays but the entire Muslim community. Among the Muslim religious elites, the initial fear was of discovering that among those arrested were graduates of the madrasah. This would tarnish the institution's image further, following challenges to its educational system. Their fears

444

were unwarranted, as it was later revealed that those arrested were neither educated in the madrasah nor possessed of adequate Islamic credentials.

The threat of terrorism in multicultural Singapore and its implications have been reviewed elsewhere (A. Tan, 2002; E. Tan, 2007; Vasu, 2008). Of relevance is the response of the Singapore government to the terrorist threat, in particular its quest to maintain racial and religious harmony and its inclusive approach of actively encouraging the Muslim community to see itself as an integral part of Singapore. The latter is significant, as the terrorist threat from within has created an atmosphere of mutual suspicion and distrust between Muslims and non-Muslims, and leaving this unchecked would serve only to marginalize the Muslim community and jeopardize inter-racial confidence.

Religiosity and religious extremism

One issue that has surfaced from the JI episode is the Muslims' apparent susceptibility to radical and militant Islam. Official reports revealed that most of the local JI detainees had received religious instructions from dubious sources. The religious knowledge they acquired did not come from any recognized programs provided at the mosques, madrasahs, or religious classes or from accredited religious teachers. Some had learned from lone preachers who themselves had no proper religious credentials. Official explanations suggested that many had developed radical ideas based on information they had obtained from the Internet, where an estimated 6,000 websites can be identified as those that set out to abuse Islamic teachings to legitimize terror and espouse extremist and radical ideologies. These websites were believed to have fed on a skewed sense of material injustice that is seen being committed against Muslims in some parts of the world.

Such official articulation of how good sense gets derailed by external influences appears to absolve the Muslim community of any possible wrongdoing. This has generally been the strategy adopted by the government to manage Singapore's multiracial framework, which has been under strain by the terrorist threat. This notwithstanding, there has been the occasional panic – not widely reported – that attempted to link Islamic religiosity and perceived Muslim separateness with increased susceptibility towards terrorism (E. Tan, 2007).

Building inter-racial confidence

That the JI operatives were Muslims and carried out their activities in the name of Islam created the possibility that non-Muslim Singaporeans might overreact and start viewing the entire Muslim community with suspicion. Eager to reassure the government and Singaporeans that Muslims in Singapore are committed to peace and nation building, several Muslim groups issued statements denouncing acts of terrorism and reaffirming their commitment to enlarge the common space of Singaporeans. In particular, PERGAS and its members endorsed a list of guidelines on how Muslim Singaporeans can lead their lives as moderate followers of Islam. In 2003, a group of religious teachers formed a volunteer group – the Religious Rehabilitation Group – to help in the counseling and rehabilitation of the JI detainees.

The government took important steps to strengthen the nation's religious harmony and to ensure that the actions of a minority would not affect the harmonious relations between Muslim and non-Muslim Singaporeans. Through its members of parliament, it intensified the activities of its grass roots via the constituency-based inter-racial confidence circles (IRCC) to strengthen the trust and confidence among the different races and to establish a viable grassroots mechanism to deal with serious racial or religious problems on the ground. Each inter-racial

confidence circle comprises leaders of the various racial, religious, social, educational, and business groups, and organizations in the respective constituency (E. Tan, 2007). The government also assigned one of its members of parliament to visit and elicit views from all the national religious bodies and thereafter draft a Code on Religious Harmony, essentially a pledge affirming that groups will practice their respective religions while respecting Singapore's secular and multi-religious context.

The prime minister reminded non-Muslim Singaporeans in his dialogue with community leaders that

> your individual actions have large consequences. You make up the majority of our society. If you let unfounded suspicion affect the way you behave towards Muslim Singaporeans, this will build up resentment among Muslims, and turn even moderate ones against the society. So rein in your emotions and fear, and act rationally.
>
> (Cited in "Coping With the Terror Threat," 2002, p. 13)

Based on this and the speeches of other ministers over the months subsequent to the arrests, it would appear that there has been an undercurrent of tension and mutual suspicion among ethnic groups. Such tensions were, nonetheless, contained, at least since the anticipated terrorist attack in Singapore has yet to occur.

At a time when national cohesion is critical, it would seem that building Singaporeans' confidence towards each other, particularly that of non-Muslim Singaporeans toward their Muslim counterparts, takes priority even if the government remains concerned over what it perceived as the heightened religiosity and growing separateness of the Muslim community. As late as 1999, Muslims were said to center their social activities in their mosques rather than in multiracial community clubs. They have also been repeatedly told to be "part of the mainstream." At the Singapore21 forum in 1999, senior minister Lee Kuan Yew – responding to a question by a student who asked whether certain instinctive emotional bonds among the ethnic groups could be overcome so that Singapore could truly become a nation – said that a Muslim's religious belief could put him in a position of conflict with the interests of the nation (Ng & Lim, 1999). Then, in 2000, deputy prime minister Lee Hsien Loong admitted the state's concerns regarding the loyalty of the Malay/Muslim community in the event of a war against fellow Malays/Muslims in the region (Kadir, 2006).

Whether these anxieties over the rising influence of Islam and its influence on national integration contributed to the tension in the debate on compulsory education was not very clear. In as far as the JI episode is concerned, the government saw it as convenient to reiterate the need for Muslim Singaporeans not to become exclusive and different and at the same time to call on non-Muslims not to let their emotions and fear overrule their rationality.

During the controversy over the madrasahs, the government presented criticisms and set benchmarks for them without showing interest in knowing how they went about addressing those criticisms and achieving the targets. If the government had acted differently, it would have been viewed as doing a special favor for a particular religious group. In the case of the JI arrests, the government voiced muted concern over the ease with which extremism can grow in the midst of the Muslim community, even as it took pains to show that the radicalization of the JI detainees was the result of their own doing, and not the community's, as they had not obtained proper religious instructions. This was finely balanced with an acknowledgment that community institutions in Singapore are strong, including mosques, well-qualified religious teachers, and a holistic part-time religious education curriculum.

446

Concluding remarks

By recounting the journey madrasahs have followed over the past half-century, this chapter attempts to offer a perspective on the Malay/Muslim community in Singapore that sometimes was aligned with, and other times was in opposition to, the state within which it holds membership. The push – pull experienced by the community along multiple dimensions – ideological, educational, economic, and social – resulted in the community being faced with numerous decisions and dilemmas that are not easy to resolve. For example, both the leaders of the madrasahs and the government want to equip students with relevant knowledge and skills needed for the economy and to forestall what is perceived as insidious individualism and Westernization. However, the fact that religion is legitimated within a separate system of education that involves a small but significant number of citizens gives the government cause for concern because, in the event of a contest between religious beliefs and government ideology, religion is likely to triumph. The compulsory education policy ameliorates this concern, at least at the level of elementary education.

Government leaders have often highlighted the vulnerability of Singapore as a state with its limited size, lack of natural resources, and a diverse population. Since Singapore became independent in 1965, its survival has been the structuring center of reasoning and rationalization for the policies by which Singapore has been governed. While religious and racial tensions are considered major domestic threats to its survival, economic development is seen as a solution to such threats. Political discourse thus frequently underscores economic development, competition, and the meritocratic principle, with the political elite taking a very pragmatic stance (Hill & Lian, 1995). The state's responses to the controversy over the madrasah and the fallout from the arrests of the members of the JI network illustrate the government's intent on managing Singapore for economic development and political stability to ensure its survival.

References

Abdul Rahman, N. A. (2006). The aims of madrasah education in Singapore: Problems and perceptions. In N. A. Abdul Rahman & A. E. Lai (Eds.), *Secularism and spirituality: Seeking integrated knowledge and success in madrasah education in Singapore* (pp. 58–92). Singapore: Singapore Institute of Policy Studies & Marshall Cavendish Academic.

Abdul Rahman, N. A., & Lai, A. E. (Eds.). (2006). *Secularism and spirituality: Seeking integrated knowledge and success in madrasah education in Singapore*. Singapore: Singapore Institute of Policy Studies & Marshall Cavendish Academic.

Abu Bakar, M. (2006). Between state interests and citizen rights: Whither the madrasah? In N. A. Abdul Rahman & A. E. Lai (Eds.), *Secularism and spirituality: Seeking integrated knowledge and success in madrasah education in Singapore* (pp. 29–57). Singapore: Singapore Institute of Policy Studies & Marshall Cavendish Academic.

Alias, Z. (1998). *The goals of madrasah educational system in Singapore: Obstacles and recommendation*. Unpublished honors thesis, National University of Singapore.

Aljunied, S. M. K., & Hussin, D. I. (2005). Estranged from the ideal past: Historical evolution of madrassahs in Singapore. *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs, 25*(2), 249–260.

Chua, B. H. (1995). *Communitarian ideology and democracy in Singapore*. London: Routledge.

Coping with the terror threat in S'pore. (2002, October 15). *The Straits Times*, p. 13.

Gopinathan, S. (1979). Singapore's language policies: Strategies for a plural society. In K. S. Sandhu, L. Suryadinata, V. Pombhejara, M. Rajaretnam, & C. Tan (Eds.), *Southeast Asian Affairs 1979* (pp. 280–295). Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies & Heinemann Educational Books (Asia).

Hill, M., & Lian, K. F. (1995). *The politics of nation building and citizenship in Singapore*. London: Routledge.

447

Jesudason, J. (1989). *Ethnicity and the economy: The state, Chinese business and multinationals in Malaysia.* Singapore: Oxford University Press.

Kadir, S. (2006). Islam, state and society in Singapore. *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, *5*(3), 357–371.

Leow, B. G. (2001). *Census of population 2000: Education, language and religion* (Statistical release 2). Singapore: Department of Statistics, Ministry of Trade and Industry.

Ng, I., & Lim, L. (1999, September 19). Reality in race bonds exist. *The Straits Times*, p. 26.

Osman, A. (1999, September 5). Malays in mainstream schools doing far better. *The Straits Times*, p. 4.

Send Dad to jail if child doesn't go to school? (1999, October 31). *The Straits Times*, p. 25.

Tamney, J. B. (1992). Conservative government and support for the religious institution in Singapore: An uneasy alliance. *Sociological Analysis*, *53*(2), 201–217.

Tan, A. (2002). Terrorism in Singapore: Threat and implications. *Contemporary Security Policy*, *23*(3), 1–18.

Tan, C. (2008). The teaching of religious knowledge in a plural society: The case for Singapore. *International Review of Education*, *54*(2), 175–191.

Tan, C., & Kasmuri, A. (2007). Islamic religious education: Case study of a madrasah in Singapore. In C. Tan & K.-C. Chong (Eds.), *Critical perspectives on values education in Asia* (pp. 109–123). Singapore: Prentice Hall.

Tan, E. K. B. (2007). Norming "moderation" in an "iconic target": Public policy and the regulation of religious anxieties in Singapore. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, *19*(4), 443–462.

Vasu, N. (2008). (En)countering terrorism: multiculturalism and Singapore. *Asian Ethnicity*, *9*(1), 17–32.