



Lily Zubaidah Rahim
University of Sydney

Governing Islam and Regulating Muslims in Singapore's Secular Authoritarian State

Working Paper No.156

July 2009

The views presented in this paper are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect those of the Asia Research Centre or Murdoch University. Working papers are considered draft publications for critical comments by colleagues and will generally be expected to be published elsewhere in a more polished form after a period of critical engagement and revision. Comments on this paper should be directed to the author at l.rahim@usyd.edu.au

© Copyright is held by the author(s) of each working paper: No part of this publication may be republished, reprinted or reproduced in any form without the permission of the paper's author(s).

National Library of Australia.
ISSN: 1037-4612



ABSTRACT

Governance of Islam in Singapore has been strongly shaped by the authoritarian state's micro-management of nation-building, commanding influence of Islamic institutions such as the peak religious bureaucracy MUIS (*Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura* or Islamic Religious Council) and reliance on draconian legislation such as the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act (MRHA), Sedition Act and the Internal Security Act (ISA). Inter alia, these Acts are geared towards curbing the politicisation of religion by attempting to separate religion from politics, regulate religious activity, restrain the development of an autonomous Muslim civil society. The efficacy of the MRHA and no-*tudung* (headscarf) policy is analysed in the context of the 'othering' of the Muslim community and the denial of their localised socio-economic and political grievances in motivating some to support radical Islamist ideology in the era of the 'war on terror'.

STRATEGIC SECULARISM OF THE AUTHORITARIAN STATE

Singapore is the only country in East Asia to have preserved its authoritarian political system despite having attained the status of a First World economy. The 2009 Human Rights Watch (HRW) Country Report has classified Singapore as ‘an authoritarian state with strict curbs on freedom of expression, assembly and association; denial of due process rights; draconian defamation laws; and tight controls on independent political activity...internal security and criminal laws permit prolonged detention of suspects without trial’(Human Rights Watch 2009). Similarly, Amnesty International’s 2009 report maintains that defamation suits and restrictive measures have been systematically unleashed against opposition activists, human rights defenders, the foreign media and conscientious objectors. ‘A climate of fear and self-censorship discouraged Singaporeans from fully participating in public affairs’ (Amnesty International 2009). Singapore’s legal system has been criticised by international legal and human rights bodies such as the International Bar Association, International Commission of Jurists and Asia Watch for the alleged use of the courts to persecute critics of the PAP government. In terms of defamations suits, 2008 was described as a ‘bumper year’ for legal actions and decisions against the international media and political opponents of the government (Rodan 2008).

The authoritarian city-state possesses the unique distinction of being the only country in the world to have devised legislation enforcing the separation of religion and politics – supposedly in the interest of maintaining ‘religious harmony’. Despite the comprehensive nature of the 1990 MRHA, the PAP government has yet to clearly define what it means by ‘religious harmony’. Moreover, the permissible parameters of religious activity remain ambiguous. This ambiguity has reinforced the culture of fear within religious communities and the larger society. Of particular concern to the Muslim community is the enforced separation of religion from politics – as this clearly contradicts the Islamic principles of *tawhid* and *ad-deen* which dictate that Islam encompasses all aspects of life. In reaffirming the organic relationship between religion and politics, the Catholic Archbishop of Singapore has also advised that ‘religion must show its concern about “secular” government policies when there are moral or religious implications’ (*Straits Times* 1990a).

In attempting to clarify the PAP government’s policy of separating religion and politics, Minister George Yeo opined that ‘Singapore’s government is secular, but it is certainly not atheistic. It is neutral’ (*Straits Times* 1990a). This view reflects the government’s strategic secularism, which is driven by the reality that more than 80% of Singaporeans profess a religious faith (refer to Table 1). The PAP government’s strategic secularism is characterised by a policy of state intervention in the administration of Islam, Sikhism and Hinduism. It appoints many or most office-bearers in statutory bodies which have been established to manage various aspects of these

faith communities (Tan, E. 2007). It is thus ironic that while the MRHA requires religion and politics to be separated, the state's inter-meshing of religion and public policy remains unquestioned (Thio 2007).

Table 1 Religious/Faith Affiliation in Singapore (%), 2000.

Religion/Faith	%
Christianity	14.6
Buddhism	42.5
Taoism	8.5
Islam	14.9
Hinduism	4.0
Other religions	0.6
No religion	14.8
Total	100.0

Source: Singapore Census of Population 2000.

In Singapore, religious beliefs are strongly divided along ethnic lines. 99.6% of Malays are Muslims, 66.4% of Chinese are Buddhists and Taoists, 55.4% of Indians are Hindus and 50% of ethnic minorities (referred to as 'others') are Christians. Malays are thus the most homogeneous ethnic community in religious terms. This has led to the categories Malay and Muslim used synonymously with the Muslim identity and treated as integral to Malay identity. Unlike other ethnic communities in Singapore, Malay ethnicity and Islam have been conflated - a phenomena not even practiced in the Middle-East where there are sizeable Christian Arab communities.

It is worth noting that the Malay Muslim community have persistently remained along the socio-economic and political margins of society since Singapore's political independence in 1965. In particular, economic and educational disparities between the Malay and Chinese communities have not narrowed in critical areas such as university enrolments, average monthly household income and ownership of private houses and apartments.¹

Following the terrorist attacks of September 11 2001, and subsequent detention of alleged *Jemaah Islamiyah* (JI) militants in Singapore, the secular authoritarian state has been particularly vigilant in policing the local Muslim community whilst ostensibly promoting inter-religious understanding via initiatives such as the Inter-Religious Confidence Circles (IRCC) and the Declaration of Religious Harmony (DRH).² The vigilant policing of the Muslim community is

strongly driven by apprehensions that the secular foundations of regional states such as Malaysia and Indonesia have been subverted by ‘creeping Islamisation’ - demonstrated by the ability of some Islamist parties and organisations to attain considerable electoral support, extend the reach of *shariah* (Islamic) law and incrementally Islamise secular political parties. Confronted by these global and regional Islamisation trends, the armoury of draconian legislation and restrictive administrative policies are expected to shield the secular city-state against the ideational incursions of political Islam.

Maintaining a watchful eye on regional and international influences, the PAP government is well equipped to pre-emptively move against any perceived threat. As Tan notes, since September 11, 2001, ‘close scrutiny, interventionist surveillance and ultra-sensitivity to internal security concerns are hallmarks of the government’s policy towards religion’ (Tan, E. 2007: 444). In particular, the increased level of Muslim religiosity in Singapore has been securitised as the community is perceived to be susceptible to radical Islamist propaganda (Tan, E. 2007: 444). Even if not susceptible to radical Islamist propaganda, their sheer religiosity is perceived to be detrimental to the multiracial social fabric of society. Reflective of this concern, Lee Kuan Yew cautioned in 2007 that ‘over the last 3 decades many Muslims in Singapore and the region are becoming stricter in their dress, diet, religious observances, and even social interaction, especially with non-Muslims...My original concern was over the growing separateness of our Muslim community...’ (Tan, E. 2007: 447).

INTERMESHING OF RELIGION AND POLITICS

A clear example of the intrusion of the authoritarian state on religious affairs is the 1965 Administration of Muslim Law Act (AMLA). Inter alia, the Act facilitates the management of Muslim affairs such as the collection of *zakat* (annual obligatory tax), administration of mosques, management of *wakaf* (bequeathed) land and coordination of *haj* (pilgrimage) activities. AMLA allows for the repeal and re-enactment of laws which relate to Muslims. Despite strong community disquiet, AMLA’s amendment in 1998 provides for the concurrent jurisdiction of *shariah* (Islamic) and civil courts, thereby allowing Muslims the choice of seeking redress, on matters such as custody, maintenance claims and division of matrimonial property, to either court.

Established in 1968, the *Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura* (MUIS) is a state sponsored religious bureaucracy with statutory board status that has centralised Muslim affairs. It administers the *zakat* collection, *wakaf* land, *haj* pilgrimages and manages nearly 100 mosques. It also administers the Mosque Building Fund (MBF) which collects financial contributions from working Singaporeans for the building and maintenance of mosques in housing estates. MUIS has the power to approve nominees to mosque management committees and provides the text of Friday mosque

sermons. From 1975, all pilgrims had to register with MUIS and could only perform the haj through MUIS approved vendors.

Instructively, the President of Singapore, on the recommendation of the Prime Minister, appoints all key office-bearers in MUIS, including the *Mufti* (Muslim religious leader)(Kadir 2004: 360). The Chairman of MUIS is none other than the PAP Minister-in-charge of Muslim Affairs. The Muslim community's perception of MUIS as a body unduly influenced by the state was articulated by *PERGAS* (Islamic Scholars Association of Singapore) President, Uztaz Hasbi, in 2003. He pronounced that *PERGAS* had to serve as the moral anchor for Muslims in Singapore as 'MUIS could not do it....MUIS is a statutory board, they must serve the interests of the state. It is our responsibility to serve the interests of the Muslim community' (cited in Kadir 2007: 150). Similarly, many Muslim community organisations are subjected to government influence by their reliance on state funding and the dominant position of PAP politicians in these organisations. For example, the Chairman of the Muslim self-help organisation Mendaki is a PAP Minister, Yaacob Ibrahim. Several PAP MPs are also on Mendaki's Board of Directors. Moreover, the state managed Central Provident Fund facilitates the collection of Mosque Building Fund contributions while the Singapore Constitution provides for special religious and personal laws and *Shariah* (Islamic) courts for Muslims.

Thus despite the legislative and policy mechanisms which ostensibly reinforce the separation of religion and politics, the state continues to intrude into the religious sphere. It would thus appear that the separation of religion and politics only applies to the citizenry and not the PAP government.

It is worth noting that the PAP government is supportive of faith based welfare organisations playing a prominent role in assisting the socially disadvantaged. This is consistent with the government's 'many helping hands' welfare approach which serves to minimise its welfare expenditure. Mosques have long provided social services in the form of remedial tuition classes, pilgrimage and Arabic language classes, bursaries, food vouchers for low-income families, counselling services and rehabilitation programs for reforming delinquents and criminal offenders.

ALIGNING RELIGION TO NATION-BUILDING OBJECTIVES

Sensitive to the power of religion to mobilise and motivate, the PAP government has selectively co-opted and harnessed the potential of religion in achieving its nation-building objectives (Tan 2008: 66-7). Religion has been perceived as a means of providing moral 'ballast' and a means of countering the supposedly negatively values associated with modernity (Pereira 2005: 171-2). The harnessing of religion for political ends was exemplified by the introduction in 1984 of compulsory Religious Knowledge classes for upper secondary school students - ostensibly a means of helping

the younger generation maintain their moral values in the face of purportedly corrosive Western influences.³

The promotion of Religious Knowledge classes in schools complemented the PAP leadership's concerted promotion of Confucianism and its paternalistic style of authoritarian governance by a technocratic class of scholar-mandarins. In political terms, Confucianism provided the cultural and moral capital for legitimising deference to authority. However, when it became evident that religious revivalism and proselytisation was on the rise, and most Chinese students were electing to study Buddhist Studies and Bible Knowledge rather than Confucianism, the PAP government finally 'pulled the plug' on compulsory Religious Knowledge classes in 1990. Confronted by these unintended consequences, Compulsory Religious Knowledge was replaced by a civics and moral education program. However, the promotion of Confucian values persisted with the construction in 1991 of a national ideology or civil religion referred to as 'Shared Values' - based on codifying five precepts that strongly integrated Confucian principles.⁴ Importantly, the 'Shared Values' ideology constitutes a rejection of liberal democratic principles based on an adversarial system of politics.

Even though faith communities have been prohibited from engaging in political activities, they have been expediently encouraged to work with the PAP government in advancing its nation-building project. For example, the PAP government has been careful to consult the views of religious organisations when implementing policies that directly impact on religious morality. Consultations occurred during the managed public discussions on controversial issues such as the MRHA, regulation of *madrasahs* (Islamic religious schools), liberalisation of gaming laws and bio-ethics research. However, once the proposed law or policy is implemented, the public and civil society are expected not to campaign against it even though they may have opposed the proposal.⁵

CONSTITUTIONAL GUARANTEES AND LEGISLATIVE RESTRICTIONS

Singapore's Constitution provides for freedom of speech, assembly, association and religion. In particular, Article 12 guarantees equality before the law and freedom from racial and religious discrimination, Article 14 provides for freedom of expression and Article 15 religious freedom and practice. Similarly, Article 16(2) and Article 16(3) provides for every religious group the right to establish and maintain educational institutions and offer instruction or take part in any ceremony or act or worship of a religion other than their own. However, while Article 15 provides the right to religious freedom and practice, this right is subject to citizens not engaging in any act contrary to the law relating to public order, public health or morality. This conditional right allows the PAP government to determine 'appropriate' religious activity.

Numerous laws and administrative policies have restricted the constitutional and civil rights of Singaporeans on the grounds of national security and public order. Many of these laws and administrative policies, such as the Internal Security Act (ISA), Societies Act and Sedition Act were initially designed by the British colonial authorities in their Cold War campaign against communist and other radical nationalists. The PAP government not only retained these illiberal laws and policies but expanded their scope and reach. Significantly, these laws and administrative policies have been criticised by international bodies such as the International Commission of Jurists, Amnesty International, Asia Watch and Human Rights Watch for their failure to conform to international law.

The existence of detention without trial laws has made it problematic for the Singapore government to ratify the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights 1966 and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights 1966 and contradicts its ratification of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). These draconian laws have also made it problematic for the formation of a national Human Rights Commission – long established in neighbouring Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines and in the process of formation in the regional grouping ASEAN.

Despite Singapore's ratification of the UDHR, the PAP government remains uneasy with the human rights ideals enshrined in the declaration. Reflecting the government's ambivalent attitude towards the UDHR at a function commemorating its 60th anniversary in December 2008, Singapore's ambassador-at-large Tommy Koh remarked that human rights will always take a back seat to other national interests. Employing the logic of moral equivalence, Koh pronounced that all states were guilty of collective hypocrisy in their practice of human rights: 'All of us, whether we are Europeans, Americans or Asians, are guilty of collective hypocrisy. We are all moral degenerates on a level playing field' (Yong 2008). This logic of moral equivalence is clearly an attempt by the Singapore government to 'normalise' its less than salutary human rights record.

The Sedition Act provides for criminal offences relating to race and class – these include defiling a place of worship, disturbing a religious assembly, uttering words or sounds to deliberately wound religious feelings. It is thus an offence to promote feelings of ill-will between the different ethnic groups or classes of the population. In 2005, three bloggers were convicted under the Act for posting web-blog comments that were anti-Muslim. In 2007, a person received a stern warning for posting an offensive cartoon of Jesus and in the following year, a couple was charged for distributing publications that were seditious and objectionable to Muslims. In these publications, Islam was referred to as a 'dangerous' faith (Chong 2008).

Under the Societies Act, the registration of a society is not automatic but subject to inquiry by the Registrar of Societies. This requirement provides the government with a powerful means of

proscribing religious groups deemed to be prejudicial to public peace, welfare or good order (Chong 2008). As the Societies Act prohibits the political engagement of organisations not specifically registered for that purpose, it has been effective in intimidating and threatening the non-registration or de-registration of civil society actors that have been overtly critical of government policies. Faith groups that have run foul of the government's nation-building agenda and suffered deregistration include Jehovah's Witness (JW) and the Unification Church, deregistered in 1972 and 1982 respectively. The former was deregistered because the government does not recognise its conscientious objection to military service. To date, 26 Jehovah's Witnesses continue to be imprisoned for refusing to enlist in compulsory military service.⁶ Significantly, deregistration disallows these churches from holding public meetings. The government has also banned all written materials published by the Jehovah's Witness.

Draconian legislation such as the International Security Act (ISA) has strongly engendered a culture of fear. Initially used by the British against communists and radical nationalists in the tumultuous colonial and immediate post-colonial era, the ISA allows for renewable detention without trial for two year periods. The ISA has been invoked against those deemed to be acting in a manner prejudicial to Singapore's security. The Act is typical of governance by the 'rule by law' in authoritarian states where the executive routinely overrides the other arms of the state such as the judiciary and legislature. It allows the executive the right of not having to provide evidence against detainees to the courts. These executive privileges are based on the premise that the public has faith in the integrity of the executive and state security agencies to conduct due diligence.

Whereas the Malaysian government has been under considerable pressure by civil society campaigns for the abolition of the ISA, civil society in Singapore appears to be too emasculated and intimidated to launch a similar campaign lest they stand accused of undermining the national interest or acting on behalf of sinister anti-national agents.

MANUFACTURING CONSENT

Singapore's long-serving PAP government has systematically blocked potential challenges to its hegemonic status by undermining independent centres of power - utilising techniques that vary from the crude to the sophisticated (Rodan 2009). Since the 1990s, there has been a trend towards relying less on draconian security laws and more on law suits, administrative policies and legislation to discipline critics and maintain the political hegemony of the PAP. New structures such as the Nominated Member of Parliament (NMP) draw on individuals with specialist expertise from functional groups in society. It is worth noting that individuals and representatives from Muslim organisations have been regularly appointed as NMPs. These corporatist initiatives are in line with the PAP leadership's aversion to the politics of contestation and preference for the politics of

consensus and managed 'active citizenship' when developing public policy (Rodan 2009). Rodan has observed that this style of consensus politics and 'active citizenship' has essentially 'updated the ideological rationale for the de facto one-party state' and is geared towards 'expanding the political space of the state rather than any greater toleration of independent, collective organisations engaged in political competition with, or mobilization against, the PAP' (Rodan 2009).

The PAP's ostensible promotion of consensus politics has been characterised by Cherian George as a sophisticated form of calibrated coercion based on refining authoritarian modes of control by a less frequent recourse to arbitrary arrest and skilfully choosing the 'right tools of repression for the right job'(George 2007). When repression is employed, it is carefully targeted at individual organisers of dissent or groups who are in turn thoroughly discredited by agencies of the state such as the compliant mainstream media for undermining public order or the national security.

Consent is also maintained by promoting the PAP government's reputation for 'good governance', strongly reliant on delivering sustained economic growth, providing social services and enhancing the material well-being of the citizenry. It is worth noting that PAP hegemony has been made less problematic by the relatively weak small and medium enterprises sector and the reluctance of foreign investors and businesses operating in the city-state who are primarily concerned with accruing profits and inclined to practice self-censorship rather than directly confront the authoritarian state (Rodan 2004). Consent has been facilitated by the authoritarian government's cultivation of a depoliticised but highly materialistic *homo economicus* society inculcated with an individualistic *kiasu* (obsessive fear of losing out) mindset. Indeed, many political observers such as Kenneth Tan have argued that materialism remains the basis of the PAP's political legitimacy (Tan K 2007).

Chua Beng Huat purports that the principle of multiracialism has been transformed into an instrument of social control by officially racialising the identity boundary of Singaporeans. In this way, each Singaporean is expected to be embedded in their officially designated race by the state. The Chinese Singaporean is thus supposed to be Confucianist and speak Mandarin while Malay Singaporeans are supposed to be steeped in Islamic knowledge and cultural practices (Chua 2003). Constant reminders of the tenuousness of racial harmony serve to justify the vigilant policing of racial issues. Public discussion of sensitive racial issues have been swiftly suppressed and those raising such issues such as racial discrimination in the labour market and discriminatory policies in the Singapore Armed Forces and who challenge the propriety of government policies have been publicly rebuked or condemned as racial chauvinists. As a consequence of this tight policing, racial harmony has remained superficial and premised on the tolerance of difference rather than a genuine appreciation and valuing of cultural difference (Chua 2003: 75).

The promotion of a survival and crisis discourse centred on reminding Singaporeans of the vulnerabilities associated with being a resource poor and largely Chinese city-state surrounded by larger, densely populated, resource rich and potentially hostile Muslim states has reinforced the stature of the PAP as guardians of the predominantly Chinese populace. The survival discourse is particularly convenient for the authoritarian PAP government as it represents an effective means of rallying the masses behind an ethno-nationalist rhetoric that rationalises high defense spending and compulsory national service (Rahim 2009).

SOCIO-POLITICAL ROOTS OF ‘RELIGIOUS CONFLICTS’

‘Religious conflicts’ in the 1950s and 1960s have been expediently highlighted by the PAP government to justify draconian administrative policies and laws in the name of national interest, public order or security. For example, the Hertogh riots in December 1950 has become somewhat of an icon in the authoritarian state’s characterisation of Singapore society as being susceptible to destabilisation along religious and ethnic lines. According to the official narrative, the Hertogh riots, which left 18 people dead and 173 injured, were triggered by a custody dispute over a girl of Dutch ancestry who had been raised by a Malay Muslim family during the Japanese Occupation and married under *Shariah* (Islamic) law. However, religion was only one of a variety of factors that contributed to the riots. Aljunied’s (2008) study suggests that the riots were strongly fuelled by the Muslim community’s myriad grievances which included a low regard for the colonial authorities, the influence of radical ideas, the effects of socio-economic marginalisation, press sensationalisation and the ineffectiveness of the police force and other colonial security agencies.

In 1964, a skirmish during a procession commemorating the Prophet Muhamad’s Birthday sparked off a riot which left 33 dead and 600 injured. Like the Hertogh riots, the 1964 riot was not religiously based but strongly fuelled by the political bickering between the PAP and Alliance leadership in the contest for Malay electoral support during the tumultuous merger years. This political tension was aggravated further by Indonesian agent provocateurs based in Singapore and inflammatory journalism. Without the existence of genuine Malay socio-economic and political grievances, the provocation of these myriad forces would not have been effective (Rahim 2008).

MANUFACTURING CRISIS – 1987 ‘MARXIST CONSPIRACY’

Twenty-two social activists were detained without trial under the ISA in 1987 for allegedly engaging in a Marxist conspiracy and attempting ‘to overthrow the Government and establish a communist state’ (*Straits Times* 1987). Instructively, these so-called Marxist conspirators were associated with the Student Christian Movement of Singapore, the National University of Singapore Catholic Students Society, the Singapore Polytechnic Catholic Students Society, the Justice and

Peace Commission of the Catholic Church and the Catholic Welfare Centre (Tey 2008). Writing about the 1987 detentions more than a decade after the event, human rights advocate Geoffrey Robertson QC contends that the detentions stemmed from Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew's anxiety over liberation theology, particularly after Marcos was toppled in the Philippines.

Political turbulence in the Philippines had apparently instigated Singapore's Internal Security Department (ISD) to closely monitor all Catholics who espoused 'subversive' ideals such as liberation theology. The ISD director warned Singapore's Archbishop that 'there were too many 'truth and justice' columns in Catholic publications'. Following the latter's disregard of these warnings, Lee then urged the Vatican to send an Archbishop who would be inclined to deter priests from engaging in politics (Robertson 2008: 238). Lee was apparently angered by the opportunity granted to the relatives of the detainees to address a Catholic congregation in the cathedral (Robertson 2008: 237). Dismissing the Government's allegation that the detainees were engaged in a Marxist conspiracy, Robertson has characterised these social activists as 'do-gooders who wanted to help the poor and the dispossessed' (Robertson 2008: 233).

The 1987 ISA arrests have had a profound impact on the PAP dominated state's regulation of religion. Roundly criticised by the international community for the alleged physical and psychological abuse of the detainees, the government introduced a constitutional amendment that would henceforth exclude the process of judicial review from all preventative detention cases under the ISA. Not long after, the MRHA was introduced, enforcing the separation of religion from politics.

RE-REGULATING RELIGION – MAINTENANCE OF RELIGIOUS HARMONY ACT (MRHA) 1990

Nearly 20 years after the passage of the MRHA, the following questions remain salient: What is so unique about Singapore that justifies its status as the only country in the world to legislate the separation of religion and politics? Why has the Sedition Act rather than the MRHA been invoked against those alleged to have caused religious ill-will? What political purpose does the MRHA serve in the PAP dominated authoritarian state?

An historical contextualising of the above questions is useful in providing a nuanced understanding of 'religious conflicts' in Singapore. As noted above, the PAP government had closely monitored the activities of Christian social activists influenced by liberation theology popular in countries afflicted by enormous socio-economic and political challenges. In the Philippines, the dictator Ferdinand Marcos had been ousted in the mid-1980s by a popular revolt supported by Cardinal Sin and many within the clergy who stood in defiant solidarity with the masses. In Iran, the secular monarch Reza Shah was overthrown in 1979 and replaced by a

theocratic state led by Islamic clerics. In particular, Iran's Islamic revolution had galvanised millions in the Muslim World against corrupt and authoritarian secular oriented regimes. The Islamic state became an increasingly popular alternative to secular oriented failed and weak states in the Muslim World.

From the mid-1980s, Malaysia's Prime Minister Mahathir expediently launched an Islamisation campaign geared towards 'out-Islamising' the opposition Islamist party PAS, while Indonesia's President Suharto shrewdly incorporated Islamists into the quasi-secular *Pancasila* state apparatus. The religious fervour of these political convulsions in the Middle East and Islamist strategising in Southeast Asia unsettled the secular-minded PAP government - operating in the midst of Southeast Asia's Muslim World and positioned just north of the most populous Muslim country in the world. The PAP leadership's apprehensions have only been heightened by the activities of Islamic militants since the 'war on terror'.

The globalised city-state has not been immune from the global religious revivalism. In the 1980s, the PAP leadership expressed concerns about the growing number of Singaporeans converting to Christianity despite its systematic promotion of Confucianism. This trend was thought to have the potential of unsettling religious harmony due to the numerical decline of faiths such as Hinduism and Buddhism. This concern was confirmed by a 1986 Internal Security Department (ISD) report which highlighted the prevalence of inter-religious tensions, incidence of aggressive proselytisation and exploitation of religion for political and subversive purposes (Sinha 2005: 27-28). Justifying the need for legislation to pre-empt possible religious tensions, the Minister of Law, S. Jayakumar advised that 'To contemplate legislation after the damage is done will be too late. Violence would have occurred. People killed. Deep feelings of resentment and wounded feelings would divide our society' (*Straits Times* 1990b). The Minister had essentially echoed the PAP government's view that as religion is prone to disorder and instability, only the rational secular state can prevent this religiously generated disorder (Kiong 2007).

During the carefully managed debate on the proposed MRHA, opposition politicians and members of the Muslim and Christian communities sought clarification on the motives for the proposed legislation and the unbridled power of the Minister of Home Affairs in the legislation. At a forum organised by the Evangelical Fellowship of Singapore, the congregation was keen to know why the proposed legislation was needed in view of existing legislation which addressed religious strife (Sinha 2005: 31). The President of the Graduates Christian Fellowship warned that the proposed Bill would curb discussion of sensitive topics in its seminars and generate fear that any discussion of sensitive topics might be reported to the government (Sinha 2005: 31). Even though the government-appointed *Mufti* (highest Muslim religious authority) supported the proposed Bill (*Straits Times* 1990a), the President of the Adult Religious Students Association and

Muhammadiyah Association were concerned that the proposed Bill would prohibit Muslims from countering deviant teachings within their community. Other Muslim organisations wondered how far missionary activity would be allowed and what constituted legitimate missionary activity (Sinha 2005: 31). Several religious leaders expressed the view that the separation of religion and politics was inconsistent with their faith (Eng 2008: 625). PAP MP Aline Wong frankly acknowledged that the proposed Bill caused anxiety within some religious communities who saw it as 'yet another layer of control by the government' (cited in Sinha 2005: 33).

The Singapore Democratic Party critiqued the proposed Bill for representing 'an invasion of politics into religion' and allowing it to be applied arbitrarily by the government. Similarly insightful was the observation of opposition MP Chiam See Tong who dismissed the proposed Bill for enabling the PAP government to 'tighten control over every aspect of Singapore life', even further stifle political dissent and use the Bill as 'an instrument of repression' (cited in Sinha 2005: 33). Another salient criticism centred on the ambiguity of terminology in Sections 8 and 9 of the proposed Bill. This includes terms such as 'religious harmony', 'harmful conduct', 'appropriate religious behaviour', 'ill-will', 'carrying out activities to promote a political cause', 'carrying out subversive activities' and 'exciting disaffection'. The Mufti and Head of the Catholic Church called for less unambiguous terminology in the proposed Bill while PAP MP Lau Ping Sim reminded the government that the line between religion and politics was ambiguous and subject to diverse interpretations (cited in Sinha 2005: 33).

The ambiguous wording of the Bill has only reinforced suspicions that the PAP government is intent on restraining religious leaders and faith based social activists who, like the 1987 Catholic 'Marxist conspirators', venture beyond the narrow political parameters permitted to civil society in the authoritarian state. Importantly, the Bill serves as a stern reminder that political activity must be restricted to secular activity and thus not the appropriate domain for religious leaders and others associated with faith communities.

As the MRHA has never been invoked, many Singaporeans are inclined to view it as yet another initiative of the PAP leadership who are acutely sensitive to potential nodes of political resistance to its hegemony. Singaporean academic Tsun Hong Tey purports that 'It [MRHA] expresses the ideological position of the government, underscores the political leadership's deep distrust of the electorate and opposition. More importantly, the Act serves to cleanse religion from the central political space' (Tey 2008: 120). Instructively, the government has not explained why religious issues conducted in the private arena should be less combustible than those aired in public forums. The government has also failed to explain why or how religious debate in the political arena is more inflammatory than arenas such as the newspaper (Tey 2008: 26). Furthermore, pre-existing legislation such as the ISA, Sedition Act and Societies Act can readily be invoked to deal

with religious conflict. Under these Acts, the Minister is already granted with the power of restraint. To specifically address the issue of religious conflict, the Sedition Act, could have been amended to include the word religion, rendering obsolete the need for an MRHA (Tey 2008: 130). This point is made more salient by the fact that the MRHA, like the Sedition Act and ISA, is designed to protect the security of the state (Rajah 2008: 288).

Following the managed consultations with various interested parties which included religious leaders, opposition politicians and lay people, the MRHA was passed in 1990, even though the Singapore Constitution makes no mention of the separation of religion and politics. As a Constitutional Court does not exist, the judiciary notoriously compliant and subjected to executive influence, and opposition parties remain relatively weak, the constitutionality of the MRHA has remained untested.

POLICING MUSLIMS - THE NO-TUDUNG POLICY

The *tudung* (*hijab* or headscarf) has become one of the most contentious sites of conflict between Muslims and non-Muslims and among Muslims around the world. The issue has been the centre of heated national debates in states as diverse as Britain, France, Turkey, Germany, Singapore and Australia. These debates directly relate to the prevalent notions of national identity and values, multiculturalism and the acceptable attire in public schools and the larger society.

As schools are commonly viewed as sites that reflect and shape the character of the nation-state, they have long been ideological battlegrounds in determining the nation-building agenda. In countries where wearing the tudung in school continues to be contentious, it is not just national identity but also national secular identity that is deemed to be at stake (Abraham 2006: 170). For example, when Liberal party politicians Bronwyn Bishop and Sophie Panopoulos proposed a ban on headscarves in Australian schools in 2005, the former declared that wearing headscarves was ‘a sign of defiance and difference between Muslim and non-Muslim students’ and ‘when you have a clash of cultures, the dominant culture is the one that you follow and that’s ours’ (Abraham 2006: 183). Particularly for politicians from conservative political parties in the West who have long held reservations about the propriety of multicultural social policies,⁷ the tudung is commonly viewed as a ‘trojan horse’ or a slippery slope which will, if not vigilant, undermine public education and the cohesion of society. Moreover, allowing some Muslim girls to wear the tudung is expected to compromise the ability of other Muslim girls to choose not to wear it (Fetzer and Soper 2005).

In Britain, the veiling of Muslim women has been commonly projected as an obstacle to meaningful communication, a symbol of the rejection of modernity and refusal to integrate into mainstream British society. Multiculturalism is commonly criticized for granting too much tolerance to ethnic and religious minorities and undermining ‘European values and culture’.

Significantly, critics of multiculturalism and cultural diversity have attributed discrimination faced by Muslims in the workplace and the larger society to their own anti-modern practices such as veiling.

The no-tudung policy for schoolgirls in Singapore has raised questions pertaining to the rights of religious minorities in the secular authoritarian state, its multicultural or multiracial identity, rights of children to education, actual religious obligations of Muslim women, the perceived threat of Islamic revivalism and the national security agenda of the predominantly Chinese society in an overwhelmingly Muslim region. Fuelled by insecurities associated with the 'war on terror', paranoia underpins much of the state's response to Muslims campaigning against the no-tudung policy. This paranoia and fear appears to have extended to a fear of political and militant Islam, fear of conspiracy, fear of difference, fear of the weakening of an already fragile national identity and perhaps most significantly, the PAP government's fear of loosening its grip on power. Khiabany and Williamson have referred to this Muslim phobia in many secular states as a form of 'cultural fundamentalism' that is reflective of a shift towards assimilation (Khiabany and Williamson 2008).

In many respects, Singapore's intransigent no-tudung policy for Muslim schoolgirls bears many similarities to Turkey's headscarf restriction policy. Even though Muslims in Singapore are a minority and Turkey is a Muslim majority state, both states exhibit secular fundamentalist and authoritarian tendencies. Despite the secular nature of the Singaporean and Turkish states, they have paradoxically acquired a strong degree of control over religious life and view secularism as essential to the centralisation of state power. Societal resistance to restrictions on the tudung has thus been viewed by many within the ruling elite as an assault on the integrity of the secular and modernising state - as enunciated by their authoritarian modernising founding fathers Lee Kuan Yew and Kemal Ataturk. An Naim has observed that this form of authoritarian state secularism is often 'designed to enable the state to control religion rather than simply remove it from the public sphere' (2008: 197). However, unlike Singapore, the constitutionality of the banning of headscarves in schools and public institutions has been repeatedly challenged within Turkish institutions such as the Constitutional Court⁸ and by the ruling pro-Islamist Justice and Development (AKP) government. Inter alia, Turkish critics of the headscarf ban claim that it violates the religious freedom of women and the principles of equal opportunity in education and employment (as enshrined in Article 24) while supporters of the ban cite Article 14 of the constitution.⁹

The Singapore government's no-tudung policy for schoolgirls has been a longstanding source of grievance within the Muslim minority community. Muslim organisations and individuals have for many years lobbied the government in various forums to terminate the policy on theological, constitutional, human rights and educational grounds. PAP MPs have also privately

lobbied senior government officials to terminate the policy (*Straits Times* 2002d). So why has the Singapore government persisted with its no-tudung policy when opposition to the policy within the Muslim community is pervasive?

Singapore's no-tudung policy is based on the premise that a strict code governing school uniforms promotes ethnic integration and social cohesion. The tudung is thus perceived as a symbol of exclusiveness that impedes students from social interaction and constitutes a threat to national integration. In justifying the policy, the Ministry of Education (MOE) claims that 'The government seeks to expand the common space Singaporeans share. Schools require pupils to wear uniforms, regardless of race, religion or social status. Allowing exceptions would fragment the common space and invite competing demands from different communities' (cited in *New York Times* 2002). Yet, in reality, the MOE has allowed exceptions in the school dress-code. For example, Muslim girls have for some years been allowed to wear track pants for physical education classes. The tudung is also allowed in post-secondary institutions such as polytechnics and universities.

Rather than promoting ethnic integration and social cohesion, the no-tudung policy has paradoxically contributed to the steady rise in *madrasah* (Islamic school) enrolments. Parents who believe that the tudung is a fundamental requirement in Islam are inclined to educate their daughters in madrasah. This conservative interpretation of Islam has been encouraged by peak Muslim bodies such as MUIS and PERGAS who contend that wearing the tudung is a religious requirement.

To date, the government has not provided any empirical evidence to support the presumption that allowing Muslim headscarves in primary and secondary schools impedes national unity. Indeed, some school principals contend that students who had donned the tudung in the past did not disrupt social integration in class (Davie 2002). This view contradicts Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong's claim that Singaporean society was not well integrated enough for the government to overturn the no-tudung policy (*Straits Times* 2000). Moreover, the government's rationale for the no-tudung policy contradicts its energetic support for and funding of the predominantly mono-ethnic Special Assistance Plan (SAP) schools, geared towards maintaining Chinese culture. The policy of allowing Sikh schoolboys to wear the turban in national schools highlights the lack of even-handedness in the government's no-tudung policy.

Critics of the no-tudung policy have also pointed out that in many countries in the West, such as Britain, Australia and the United States, Muslim schoolgirls are permitted to wear the headscarf in public and independent schools. Even in France where Muslim girls are not permitted to wear the headscarf in public schools, other religious emblems such as turbans, skullcaps and crosses have been banned ostensibly to preserve the secular tradition of French society. Significantly, Singapore's no-tudung policy may also be in breach of the Singapore government's obligations to Articles 14, 27, 29 and 30 of the International Convention on the Rights of the Child

and Article 10 of the United Nations Convention for the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

CAMPAIGN OF RESISTANCE

The contentious no-tudung policy came to a head in early 2002 when a handful of Muslim parents insisted on their primary school daughters donning the tudung and dressing in a modified uniform. When the schoolgirls-in-tudung were suspended for repeatedly flouting the school uniform policy their parents protested that they had been deprived of their constitutional right to religious freedom. References were made to Article 15(1) of the Singapore Constitution which provides that ‘every person has the right to profess and practise his religion and to propagate it’ (Rahim 2003: 12). Instructively, the constitutionality of the no-tudung policy was prevented from being tested in the Singapore courts when Karpal Singh, the Malaysian legal counsel for the four suspended schoolgirls-in-tudung was denied a practising certificate by the Singapore Supreme Court even though he had been permitted to represent Singaporean clients in the past (Ahmad 2002). If Singh had been allowed to represent the suspended school girls it would have been the first time in Singapore’s history that civilians were taking the government to court.

Despite the untested constitutional standing of the no-tudung policy and inconsistencies in the school uniform code, Muslim PAP politicians and the government-appointed Mufti, the highest religious authority, urged the girls to return to school without the tudung. They claimed that Islam did not require young pre-adolescent girls to wear the tudung and that if a choice had to be made, Islam accords higher priority to education than it does to the wearing of a headscarf (*Straits Times* 2002c). Instructively, the Mufti’s position was not only rejected by the suspended girl’s parents but also by PERGAS. PERGAS issued a statement a day after the Mufti’s position on the tudung that ‘it is the responsibility of every individual Muslim to strive as best he/she can to remove whatever causes which obstruct the fulfilment of one’s religious duties’ (Cited in Kadir 2007: 148). On the moot issue of the four suspended schoolgirls-in-tudung not having attained puberty, PERGAS was equally sympathetic and commented: ‘Although their children have not yet attained the age of puberty and discernment (*baligh*), the [parents] view the inculcation of modesty [in dressing] to be an [intrinsic and] important element of their children’s education that should be instilled while still young’ (cited in PERGAS 2004: 344). Concerned by the lack of public discussion on the no-tudung policy, the PERGAS leadership noted that ‘it is regretted that several people including those regarded as community leaders, have made statements which clamour for the closure of further discussions just because the Mufti had made a statement... PERGAS likewise affirms the view that the *hijab* is not an obstacle to national integration. Therefore the door for further discussions should continue to remain open’ (PERGAS 2004: 246).

While PERGAS was allowed to contradict the Mufti and PAP Muslim MPs with impunity, Fateha's spirited campaign against the no-tudung policy drew a response that was more characteristic of the PAP government's draconian record of dealing with dissenting organisations that adopt an adversarial approach. In a bold challenge to the government's out-of-boundary (OB) markers, Fateha announced its intention to 'nationalise and if necessary internationalise Malay issues' without being 'cowed by political expediency' (Shariff 2004: 345). Replicating PERGAS's outspoken position on issues related to Islam and the Muslim community, Fateha submitted a petition endorsed by 3,300 Singaporeans opposed to the government's no-tudung policy. Staffed by volunteers who were apparently galvanised by an earlier campaign to protect the future of madrasahs against the implementation of compulsory education in national schools, Fateha attempted to raise S\$100,000 to fund its anti-no-tudung policy campaign (Shariff 2004: 345).

Even before its campaign against the no-tudung policy, Fateha had come under intense pressure when its Chief Executive Zulfikar Mohamad Shariff, in a BBC interview conducted shortly after the ISA arrests in late 2001 of alleged Muslim militants, criticised the PAP government for being insensitive to the concerns of the local Muslim community by 'aligning itself so closely with the US and Israel' (*Straits Times* 2002a).

Following the BBC interview, Fateha issued a press statement in January 2002 which boldly suggested that the existence of alleged *Jemaah Islamiah* (JI) militants 'signals a deeper problem' in the Singaporean polity. It pointedly asserted that 'the motivation for the act seems to be the US army in Singapore. It is incorrect to merely label them as terrorists and leave it at that' (Shariff 2004: 336-46). Put simply, Fateha sought to contradict the PAP leadership's assertion that the alleged JI detainees were solely a product of the radical international Islamist movement rather than localised grievances. Despite the Muslim community's intractable marginal socio-economic and political status, Lee Kuan Yew has consistently asserted that local Muslim militants and the Muslim community in general did not have legitimate grievances against the PAP government: 'Their actions had nothing to do with local conditions...They want a cause, and the leaders captured them and dragged them along...' (Millard 2004: 83).

In further defiance of the restricted political parameters in the authoritarian state, Zulfikar played host to Malaysian politicians from the Islamist party Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS), whose visit to Singapore in May 2002 was intended to provide moral support to the anti-no-tudung policy campaigners (*Straits Times* 2002f). Much to the chagrin of the PAP leadership, PAS had set up a fund geared towards collecting one ringgit from each Malaysian to support the anti-no-tudung policy campaigners (*Straits Times* 2002e). Malaysian politicians from the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), People's Justice Party (*Keadilan*) and the Democratic Action Party, and their counterparts in Brunei, uniformly denounced the no-tudung policy. International scrutiny of

the policy was intensified after probing articles were published in the *New York Times* (Mydans 2002) and *Time* (Asia) (Elegant 2002), which placed the PAP government on a defensive footing. In particular, the *New York Times* contention that ‘the result of Singapore’s race policies have been peace not integration, with the upper echelons of society disproportionately Chinese’ (Mydans 2002) contradicted the PAP government’s projection of the city-state as an oasis of meritocracy and multiracialism. Weighting in on the debate, international NGOs such as *Karamah* (the Association of Muslim Women’s Lawyers for Human Rights) voiced their objections to Singapore’s no-tudung policy. In 2002, Karamah lodged an official letter of protest to the Singapore government at the Singapore embassy in Washington DC. Inter alia, the organisation accused the Singapore government of violating its constitutional obligations of upholding religious freedom.

At the height of the no-tudung controversy, the Singapore Broadcasting Authority (SBA) demanded that Fateha register its Internet portal as a political website. By July 2002, Zulfikar’s computer was seized and he was taken in for questioning. Moreover, Fateha members were alleged to have been subjected to severe harassment and intimidation. Their telephones and e-mails were tapped and movements monitored and Zulfikar’s family members were apparently ‘advised’ by anonymous phone callers to leave Singapore (Shariff 2004: 345-6). Shortly after criminal defamation proceedings were filed against him, Zulfikar fled Singapore for Australia, claiming a lack of confidence in the independence of the judiciary (Rodan 2004: 517).

LOCALISED MUSLIM GRIEVANCES

How accurate is Zulfikar’s claim that the PAP government has been insensitive to the concerns of the Muslim community and that the detention of alleged JI militants in Singapore signals a ‘deeper problem’ in Singapore’s supposedly meritocratic society? What are we to make of the statement of opposition politician J.B. Jeyaretnam that ‘It is not the wearing of the tudung by Muslim girls and women that will divide the communities ...It is the policies that have been carried out by the government that divided the communities’ (Netto 2002)? How accurate is the *New York Times* claim that the policies of the Singapore government have contributed to a disproportionate representation of Chinese in the upper echelons of society? To what extent have the marginalised status and localised grievances of the Muslim community contributed to the existence of militant Islamists in the city-state?

Consistent with Rahim’s (2001) study of the contradictions in Singapore’s supposedly multiracial paradigm, Barr and Skrbis’s (2008) recent scrutiny of the PAP government’s nation-building project highlights the serious disjuncture in the rhetoric and reality of multiracialism and meritocracy. Barr and Skrbis (2008) purport that since the early 1980s, an aggressive program of assimilation has accompanied the emergence of an increasingly racialised and elitist society.

Moreover 'ethno-racial hierarchies permeate every aspect of Singapore society even though the official discourse of multiracialism ...obscures this reality' and 'a Singapore version of Chinese ethno-nationalism' (Barr and Skrbis 2008: 10-13) has dominated Singapore national identity. They characterise this phenomena as incomplete assimilation – where ethnic minorities are paradoxically pressured into mimicking the Chinese in order to succeed yet remain relegated to the margins of society (Barr and Skrbis 2008: 98). Significantly, they draw attention to the failure of the Chinese community to acknowledge their dominance or to consider the possibility that the Muslim community has remained along the socio-economic fringes of society because of the existence of discrimination in the workplace and wider community. In effect, the perpetuation of the rhetoric of meritocracy and multiracialism allows the Chinese to maintain their dominance in public life 'from the high ground of neutral umpire' (Barr and Skrbis 2008: 107).

The more than two decade exclusion and discrimination of Malays in the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) is indicative of the contradiction in the practice of meritocracy and multiracialism in Singapore. This policy was finally acknowledged in the late 1980s but rationalised on the grounds of questionable Malay loyalty to the state. Justifying the government's policy of institutionalised discrimination, Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew claimed that 'it would be a very tricky business for the PAP to put a Malay officer who was very religious and who had family ties in Malaysia, in charge of a machine-gun unit' (*Straits Times* 2001). The perpetual doubting of Muslim loyalty to the Chinese dominated state has contributed to the common perception of the community as untrustworthy and disloyal to the state - perceptions which have undercut religious and ethnic harmony. For example, a 2000 *Straits Times* survey on ethnic relations indicated that 46% of non-Malays believed that they could not trust Malays in the event of a war with a neighbouring Malay Muslim country. Moreover, 60% of non-Malays polled believed that it was necessary to check the background of a Malay officer before placing him in a sensitive position in the SAF (Osman 2000).

The 'othering' of Muslims has been reinforced further since the 'war on terror' due in no small part to Islamophobic reports in the mainstream local media and the ISA detention of alleged JI militants. There has been considerable pressure on Muslims to prove their loyalty following the urgings of the PAP leadership for Muslims to 'speak up' against Muslim militants. In 2004, Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew criticised Muslims for their supposed silence in the face of the Muslim terrorist activity in Singapore and around the world (*Agence France Presse* 2004). Having uncritically supported the US invasion and occupation of Iraq, the PAP government's approach is reminiscent of the Bush administration's 'you are with us or against us' mentality – allowing little space for grey areas. Placed 'under the spotlight', it is unsurprising that many Muslims in Singapore feel judged and arbitrarily slotted into categories of 'moderate', 'extreme', 'tudung wearing' or 'non-tudung wearing' (Ismail and Shaw 2006: 39). Their sense of alienation has been reinforced further

by the realisation that the Chinese community in Singapore were never placed ‘under the spotlight’ or expected to publicly condemn the supposedly subversive activities of the 1987 ‘Marxist conspirators’, even though most of them were Chinese.

Reaffirming the perception of Malays as the ‘unintegrated other’, Lee Kuan Yew claimed in 2005 that Malays constituted a drag on Singapore’s nation-building project: ‘It’s [national integration] not been completely successful because the rate of intermingling is faster among certain groups than others. The Malay community now is centred on a mosque more than the other social centres we have built’ (Koh 2005a). Objecting to Lee’s callous remarks which totally disregards the national trend towards religiosity across all ethnic communities, a young Malay wrote to the *Straits Times* newspaper: ‘...I do not see how mosque-going Malays are different from my devout Christian friends who devote their weekends to church activities or the Buddhists and Hindus who perform prayers at big temples regularly’ (*Straits Times* 2005).¹⁰ With 86% of Singaporeans professing a religious faith, this national trend towards religiosity is demonstrated by the presence of numerous religious based welfare organisations, prominence of mega-churches and the more obvious prevalence of Muslim women donning the tudung (Lim and Low 2005).

Calls by the PAP leadership for Muslims to integrate into the larger society is ironic in view of the numerous surveys since the 1990s which consistently indicate that the Chinese community are the least integrated in terms of their interaction with Malays and Indians. These surveys suggest that the Chinese have less non-Chinese friends compared to Malays and Indians (Ooi 2005: 115). Ooi’s 2005 study of national integration found that Malays are the least affected/concerned by being among people of different races while the Chinese the most affected/concerned (2005: 118). Despite the empirical evidence of relatively strong Malay social integration, Malays have been paradoxically subjected to greater pressure to integrate than the less racially integrated Chinese community. This phenomenon is consistent with Barr and Skrbis’s (2008) incomplete assimilation thesis noted above.

The PAP government has consistently denied the significance of localised socio-economic and political grievances in motivating the alleged JI militants detained under the ISA. This denial is reaffirmed in the 2003 White Paper on the JI detainees in the following way: ‘These men were not ignorant, destitute or disenfranchised outcasts. All 31 had received secular education...they held normal, respectable jobs’ (White Paper 2003: 15). Yet the empirical data suggests otherwise. 9 of the 31 JI detainees in 2002 had lower than Cambridge ‘0’ level (equivalent to Year 10 in Australia) education and 6 were ‘exempted’ from military service (Tan 2003a; White Paper 2003). Similarly, 13 of the 15 JI detainees arrested in December 2001 had incomes below S\$2,000 per month (Rodan and Hewison 2006: 112) and 4 of the 15 were ‘exempted’ from ‘compulsory’ military service (White Paper 2003). Affirming the marginal socio-economic status of the JI detainees, *Straits Times*

columnist Tan Tarn How observed: 'The onus so far has largely been placed on Muslims...But if their spiritual fervour is an effect rather than a cause of their marginalisation, then surely society at large needs to improve their situation...Finger pointing is not the best thing to do now. Self examination, on the other hand, is' (Tan 2003b). Likewise, Workers Party MP Low Thia Kiang has drawn attention to the political and social alienation and economic grievances that may have contributed to the radicalisation of JI detainees. During a parliamentary debate on the White Paper, Low noted that Muslims have conveyed to him their frustration with being discriminated, having their religion suppressed and being marginalised (Tan 2003b). Muslim alienation and frustration have no doubt been compounded further by the PAP government's uncritical support for the US invasion and occupation of Iraq.

CONCLUSION

Like most industrialised societies, Singapore has been affected by renewed religiosity and post-traditional and new age spirituality. The political manifestations of this renewed religiosity are of concern to the PAP government. Intent on maintaining their political hegemony after 50 years of uninterrupted rule, the PAP government is acutely conscious of the potential of religion to be a powerful tool of protest against perceived injustices. As such, religion and religious institutions have been tightly regulated, via legislation such as the MRHA, to curtail the potential of religious institutions and groups in mobilising against the authoritarian state. Draconian legislation such as the MRHA, which proscribes the mixing of religion and politics, remains deliberately ambiguous in terms of where the line between religion and politics is drawn. This lack of clarity serves to reinforce the climate of uncertainty, self-censorship and fear. While the political dimensions of religious doctrine that seeks to promote social justice have been restricted, the government has encouraged a religious orientation that is individualist and materialist, that lacks social consciousness and that negates linkages between the spiritual, economic and political realms (Rahim et al 2001: 6).

The calibrated coercion against Fateha and other no-tudung policy campaigners, who believed it was their constitutional right and religious duty to challenge the no-tudung policy, illustrates the way by which the ambiguous distinction between religion and politics has served the authoritarian state. Just as Fateha was prevented from challenging the constitutionality of the MRHA in court, a public debate on the merits of the no-tudung policy was not allowed to take place. Robust public debate on this politically sensitive issue would have exposed the assimilationist contradictions in Singapore's supposedly multiracial society. In many respects, the no-tudung campaign crystallised the myriad socio-economic and political grievances of the Malay Muslim community – grievances that have been denied or attributed to the community's inherent

failings. The maintenance of draconian legislation, stringent policing of the Muslim community and dismissal of genuine Muslim grievances does not bode well for the nurturing of religious harmony required for the promotion of a genuinely multiracial society based on justice for all Singaporeans.

¹ For a comprehensive analysis of the socio-economic and political marginality of the Malay community, refer to Rahim (2001).

² The IRCC and DRH were initiated from 2002 to promote interfaith dialogue and interaction. IRCCs consist largely of government and senior religious and community leaders. They organise activities in places of worship and inter-faith celebrations. The DRH is a non-legislative, non-enforceable code of conduct that is a government-led effort to exert moral suasion on religious leaders and believers. The rules of religious conduct are clearly laid out. See Tan (2008).

³ Students in the upper secondary levels were offered six options – Bible Knowledge, Buddhist Studies, Confucian Ethics, Hindu Studies, Islamic Religious Knowledge and Sikh Studies.

⁴ The five precepts are the family, religious and racial harmony, community support and consensus.

⁵ The anti-casino lobby included the Islamic Religious Council, Singapore Buddhist Federation, Hindu Endowments Board and the National Council of Churches.

⁶ Singapore's Jehovah's Witness community attempted to seek exemption from compulsory military service on the grounds of religious belief. Their appeal for exemption from military service was rejected by a 1996 Court of Appeal decision which ruled that actions arising from religious beliefs are unlawful if they offend against the requirements of public order or public service. Conscientious objection to compulsory military service was not tolerated as 'the whole system of universal national service will become unstuck' and that 'the sovereignty, integrity and unity of Singapore are undoubtedly the paramount mandate of the constitution and anything, including religious beliefs and practices, which tend to run counter to these objectives must be restrained'. (Cited in Tan 2008: 63).

⁷ Multiculturalism commonly refers to polities that promote the equality and dignity of all communities and cultures and where the various communities build a common national identity while preserving their ethnic and cultural identity. There are various types of multicultural societies and no single doctrine of multiculturalism. In this essay, multiculturalism and multiracialism are used interchangeably.

⁸ In the 1980s, the Turkish Constitutional Court found that the law banning women from wearing 'anachronistic clothing' such as the headscarf was unconstitutional. Yet in 1998, the Constitutional Court banned headscarves from universities. (An Naim 2008: 207-8).

⁹ Article 14 of the Turkish constitution notes that 'None of the rights and freedoms embodied in the constitution shall be exercised with the aim of violating the indivisible integrity of the state with its territory and nation, and endangering the existence of the democratic and secular order' (Cited in An Naim 2008: 210).

¹⁰ 'Malays Do Not Intermingle Outside Mosques', Forum, *Straits Times*, 6 July, 2005.

- Agence France Presse, 2004 'Moderate Muslims Must Take Stand Against Extremism: Senior Lee', *Agence France Presse* (Singapore), 28 March.
- Abraham, Ibrahim, 2006 'Hijab in an Age of Fear: Security, Secularism and Human Rights', *Australian Religious Studies Review*, Vol.19, No.2, p.170.
- Ahmad, Reme 'Karpal Asked to Fight Singapore Tudung Case', *Straits Times Interactive*, 2 February 2002.
- Aljunied, Syed Muhd Khairudin 2008, *Colonialism, Violence and Muslims in Southeast Asia: The Maria Hertogh Controversy and Its Aftermath*, (London: Routledge), p.22.
- Amnesty International Report 2009*, May 2009. Available at <http://www.amnesty.org>.
- An Naim, Abdullahi 2008 *Islam and the Secular State: Negotiating the Future of Shari'a*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press
- Barr Michael and Zlatko Skrbis, 2008, *Constructing Singapore: Elitism, Ethnicity and the Nation-Building Project*, (Copenhagen: NIAS Press), p.10-13.
- Chong, Elena 2008 'Couple Go on Trial for Sedition', *Straits Times*, 5 December.
- Chua Beng Huat, 2003, 'Multiculturalism in Singapore: An Instrument of Social Control', *Race & Class*, Vol. 44, No.3, p.58-77.
- Elegant, Simon 'Not a Question of Loyalty', *Time* (Asia), 18 February, 2002.
- Fetzer J. and J.C. Soper, 2005, *Muslims and the State in Britain, France and Germany*, (Cambridge: Cambridge Uni. Press).
- George, Cherian 2007 'Consolidating Authoritarian Rule: Calibrated Coercion in Singapore', *The Pacific Review*, Vol.20, No.2, June, p.127-131.
- Human Rights Watch, 2009, *Country Summary, Singapore, January 2009*. Available at http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/related_material/Singapore.
- Giok Ling Ooi, 2005 'The Role of the Developmental State and Inter-Ethnic Relations in Singapore', *Asian Ethnicity*, Vol.6, No.2, June, p.115.
- Ismail, Rahil and Brian Shaw, 2006 'Singapore's Malay-Muslim Minority: Social Identification in a Post 9/11 World', *Asian Ethnicity*, Vol.7, No.1, Feb., , p.39.
- Kadir, Suzaina, 2007 'Muslim Politics, the State and Society', in Kenneth Paul Tan (ed.), *Renaissance Singapore?: Economy, Culture and Politics*, (Singapore: NUS Press.), p.150.
- Kadir, Suzaina, 2004 'Islam, State and Society in Singapore', *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, Vol.5, No.3, , p.360.
- Khiabany, Gholam and Milly Williamson, 2008, 'Veiled Bodies-Naked Racism: Culture, Politics and race in the Sun', *Race & Class*, Vol.50, No.2, p.73-85.
- Lai Ah Eng, 2008, 'The Inter-Religious Organisation of Singapore', in Lai Ah Eng (ed.), *Religious Diversity in Singapore*, (Singapore: ISEAS, LKY School of Public Policy and IPS), p.625.
- Lim, Lydia and Aaron Low, 2005, 'nation of Believers', *Straits Times*, 16 July.
- Millard, Mike, (2004), *Jihad in Paradise: Islam and Politics in Southeast Asia* (Armonk, NY:M.E. Sharpp. 83.
- Mydans, Seth, 2002 'Singapore School Dress Code Alienates Muslims', *New York Times*, 2 March
- Netto Anil, 2003 'Row Over Islamic Headscarf Goes Beyond S'pore', *Asia Times* (Malaysia), 23 February, 2002. Rodan, Garry 'Embracing Electronic Media But Suppressing Civil Society: Authoritarian Consolidation in Singapore', *The Pacific Review*, Vol. 16, No. 4, p.517.

- New York Times* 'Malays in Singapore', *The New York Times*, 16 March, 2002.
- Osman, Ahmad, 2000 'MPs Son Shocked by Survey's Trust Response', *Straits Times*, 10 March.
- PERGAS, *Moderation in Islam in the Context of the Muslim Community in Singapore*, Working Papers Presented at the PERGAS Ulama Convention, 13-14 September 2003 (Singapore: PERGAS, 2004), p. 344.
- Pereira, Alexius A. , 2005 'Religiosity and Economic Development in Singapore', *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, Vol.20, No.2, p.171-172.
- Rahim, Lily Zubaidah, 2009 *Singapore in the Malay World; Building and Breaching Regional Bridges*, (London: Routledge).
- Rahim, Lily Zubaidah, 2008 'Winning and Losing Malay Support: PAP-Malay Community Relations, 1950s and 1960s', in Michael D. Barr and Carl A. Trocki (eds), *Paths Not Taken: Political Pluralism in Post-War Singapore*, (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press), p.107.
- Rahim, Lily Zubaidah, 2003 'Minorities and the State in Malaysia and Singapore: Provisions, Predicaments and Prospects', Working Group on Minorities (9th Session), United Nations Office for the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Geneva, February, p.12.
- Rahim, Lily Zubaidah, 2001 *The Singapore Dilemma: The Political and Educational Marginality of the Malay Community*, (KL: Oxford Uni. Press).
- Rahim, Lily, Ravi Palat, Muhammad Fuad and Mayfair Yang, 2001, *Civil Society in Asian Contexts*, Occasional Papers, (Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California), p.6.
- Rajah, Jothi 2008 'Policing Religion: Discursive Excursions into Singapore's Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act', in Penelope Nicholson and Sarah Biddulph (eds), *Examining Practice, Interrogating Theory: Comparative Legal Studies in Asia*, (Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff Pub.), p.288.
- Robertson, Geoffrey, 1999 *The Justice Game*, (London: Vintage), p.238.
- Rodan, Garry, 2009 'Goh's Consensus Politics of Authoritarian Rule', Bridget Welsh et al, *Impressions of the Goh Years*, (Singapore: NUS Press).
- Rodan, Garry, 2008 Singapore Maneuvers in Response to Chee', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 5 December.
- Rodan, Garry, 2004 *Transparency and Authoritarian Rule in Southeast Asia: Singapore and Malaysia*, (London: RoutledgeCurzon).
- Rodan, Garry, 2003 'Embracing Electronic Media But Suppressing Civil Society: Authoritarian Consolidation in Singapore', *The Pacific Review*, Vol. 16, No. 4, p.517.
- Rodan, Garry and Kevin Hewison, 2006, 'Neoliberal Globalisation, Conflict and Securit: New Life for Authoritarianism in Asia?', in Vedi R. Hadiz (ed.), *Empire and Neoliberalism in Asia*, (London: Routledge), p.112.
- Shariff, Zulfikar Mohamad, 2004 'Fateha.com: Challenging Control Over Malay/Muslim Voices in Singapore', in Steven Gan, James Gomez and Uwe Johannsen (ed.), *Asian Cyberactivism: Freedom of Expression and Media Censorship*, (Singapore: Freidrich Naumann Foundation), p.345.
- Sinha, Vineeta, 2005 'Theorising Talk About Religious Pluralism and Religious Harmony in Singapore', *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, Vol.20, No.1, p.27-28.
- Koh, Lynn Lee Leslie 2005, 'Multiracial Efforts Not Completely Successful', *Straits Times*, 2 July.

- Straits Times*, 2005, 'Malays Do Not Intermingle Outside Mosques', Forum, *Straits Times*, 6 July.
- Straits Times*, 2002a, 'Muslim Group Attacks Govt Support for US', *Straits Times*, 19 January.
- Straits Times*, 2002b, '4 Still Wearing Tudung as Deadline Approaches', *Straits Times*, 30 January.
- Straits Times*, 2002c, 'Mufti Puts School First', *Straits Times*, 6 February.
- Straits Times*, 2002d, 'Muslim Leaders Must be Seen to speak Their Minds', *Straits Times*, 6 February.
- Straits Times*, 2002e, 'PAS Leader Writes to SM Lee on Tudung Issue', *Straits Times Interactive*, 6 February
- Straits Times*, 2002f, 'DPM Lee Slams Ex-Fateha Chief for PAS Visits', *Straits Times*, 26 May
- Straits Times*, 2001, 8 February.
- Straits Times*, 2000, 'Time Not Right For Islamic Attire in National Schools', *Straits Times*, 8 May.
- Straits Times*, 1992 'Government is Secular, Not Atheistic: BG Yeo', , 8 October.
- Straits Times*, 1990a, 11 January.
- Straits Times*, 1990b, 23 February.
- Straits Times*, 1987, 27 May.
- Tan, Eugene K.B., 2008 'Keeping God in Place: The Management of Religion in Singapore', in Lai Ah Eng (ed.), *Religious Diversity in Singapore*, (Singapore: ISEAS).
- Tan, Eugene K.B. , 2007 'Norming "Moderation" in an Iconic Target: Public Policy and the Regulation of Religious Anxieties in Singapore', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol.19.
- Tan, Kenneth Paul (ed.) , 2007, 'In Renaissance Singapore', in Kenneth Paul Tan (ed.) *Renaissance Singapore? Economy, Culture, and Politics*, Singapore: NUS Press, pp.45-70.
- Tan Tarn How, 2003a, 'Don't Fear Mildly Heretical Questions in Our Mind', *Straits Times*, 21 January
- Tan Tarn How, 2003b, 'Passive Peace Just Wasn't Good Enough for S'pore Anymore', *Straits Times*, 22 January.
- Tey, Tsun Hong 2008, 'Excluding Religion From Politics and Enforcing Religious Harmony – Singapore Style', *Singapore Journal of Legal Studies*, p.123.
- Thio Li-ann, 2007, 'Secularism, the Singapore Way', *Straits Times*, 30 October.
- Kiong, Tong Chee 2007 , *Rationalising Religion: Religious Conversion, Revivalism and Competition in Singapore Society*, (Leiden: Brill).
- Yong, Jeremy Au, 2008 'Mixed Mood at Human Rights Celebration', *Straits Times*, 11 December.
- White Paper, 2003, *Jemaaah Islamiyah Arrests and the Threat of Terrorism*, (Singapore: Ministry of Home Affairs, January), p.15.