

***Madrasah* in Singapore: Tradition and modernity in religious education**

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Abstract: The educational policies of the Singapore government are driven by the needs of a modern knowledge-based society and economic development, with the state advocating modernity while the Muslim minority, arguably, appeared to be caught in tradition and holding on to “old fashioned” education. However, whether the new attempts at modernizing *madrasah* education driven by the state will succeed remains to be seen, as earlier attempts of reformation driven by the Muslim community, or parts thereof, have been rather unsuccessful. This paper analyses the discourse between tradition and modernity of Islamic religious education in Singapore.

Keywords: Singapore, *madrasah*, reformation, modernization, tradition

Abstrak: Polisi pendidikan kerajaan Singapura didorong oleh keperluan masyarakat berasaskan pengetahuan moden dan pembangunan ekonomi, dengan negara yang menyokong pemodenan sedangkan terdapat segolongan minoriti Muslim, masih kelihatan terperangkap dalam tradisi dan berpegang kepada pendidikan “kuno.” Namun, samada usaha baru dalam memodenkan pendidikan *madrasah* yang didorong oleh negara akan berjaya, masih harus dilihat, kerana usaha awal untuk mengubah yang dilakukan oleh masyarakat Islam, atau sebahagiannya, masih kurang berjaya. Makalah ini menganalisis wacana antara tradisi dan modenisasi dalam pendidikan Islam di Singapura.

Kata kunci: Singapura, *madrasah*, reformasi, modenisasi, tradisi

In Singapore, the state is the principal provider of education. The Ministry of Education (MoE) oversees the formulation and

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implementation of education policies, and thereby controls the development and administration of government and government-aided schools. It also supervises private schools, which include Islamic religious schools (*madrasahs*). These Islamic religious schools are established under Art. 16 of the Constitution of the Republic of Singapore, 1999 (revised edition), stating that every religious group has the “right to establish and maintain institutions for the education of children and to provide therein instruction in its own religion.”

Based on this provision, contemporary Islamic institutions such as mosques and *madrasahs* have historically offered religious education with their own source of funding, administration and curriculum. Traditionally, the aim of religious education has been predominantly to train religious teachers, religious officials and religious leaders of the Muslim community.

In contemporary Singapore, the term *madrasah* tends to refer to a religious school for children and adolescents offering primary, secondary and sometimes pre-university education. The schooling may be full-time or part-time. The part-time *madrasah* is usually attached to a mosque and provides additional educational training for students who are also attending mainstream schools. The full-time *madrasah* offers education from primary up to pre-university level, although most offer education up to the secondary level. The religious component of *madrasah* curricula aims to educate and “socialize” students in line with Islamic principles and core teachings, and consists traditionally of the study of the Qur’ān, *ḥadīth* (the recorded words and deeds of the Prophet Muhammed [SAW]) or *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) and Arabic language. Most of the content of the core subjects was long considered unchangeable, a perception that effectively rendered the curriculum stagnant, more relevant to the 12th century than the 21st century (Talbani, 1996, p.70). This was because from very early on in Islamic history, Muslim scholars had stipulated the core areas of religious knowledge that every Muslim needed to know. This knowledge was considered *farḍ muta’ayyin* or *farḍ ‘ayn*, that is, an individual obligation that all Muslims must undertake, as opposed to knowledge of *farḍ kifāyah* (a collective obligation, that is, an obligation that is fulfilled if a section of the community fulfils it). This dichotomy of knowledge

is very well-known, and is maintained in Singaporean Muslim religious education.¹ It is reflective of the issues of Muslim views on the philosophy of childhood and education, and the dichotomy between secular and religious education. Debate about whether and how to reform Islamic education has often taken place between the Singaporean government and the broader Muslim community, represented by a range of Muslim organizations.

This article is divided into three parts. The first part provides an overview of the early developments of Islamic education in Singapore. The second part sets out the issue of *madrasah* education in the post-colonial development of Singapore. The final part focuses on the reform of *madrasah* education in the past few decades, identifying the key areas such as administration, curriculum reform and teacher training. These are areas of contestation, as identified in part two, in the discourse between the Singaporean state and the Muslim minority. Here, the state took the lead role by setting the agenda for reform.

Historical discourse over tradition and modernity

The early development of Islamic religious education in Singapore was dominated by traditional approaches based on Middle Eastern experiences. It was largely left untouched by the colonial administration with only minor control exerted towards the end of the colonial era. During this time, Singapore became one of Southeast Asia's centres for Islamic religious education and while initiatives to reform Islamic religious education were undertaken, they were quickly abandoned as they lacked popular support.

The traditional approaches towards Islamic education in surau

In its early stage, Islamic education for the Muslim population of Singapore consisted predominantly of the study of the Qur'ān, with classes held at mosques, *surau* (a small building used for religious purposes, also referred to as *pondok*), or at the homes of teachers or students (Chee Min Fui, 2006; Mutalib, 1996). These classes were offered on a purely voluntary basis and students were able to move freely from teacher to teacher in order to advance their education. Educational training would start at six or seven years of age (Chee Min Fui, 2006, p.7; Aljunied & Hussin, 2005, p.251) and basic Islamic

education consisted of teaching the rules relating to reading and reciting the Qur'ān; the proper performance of the five different daily prayers; Ramaḍān fasting; and the *hajj* (pilgrimage to Mecca) (Mutalib 1996; Aljunied & Hussin, 2005).

The *pondok* or *surau* offered a more comprehensive education than the mosque-based Qur'ānic classes, with a range of subjects including *tawhīd* (theology relating to the Oneness of God), *tafsīr* (Qur'ānic exegesis), *fiqh*, *ḥadīth*, *naḥw* (Arabic grammar), *taṣawwuf* (Islamic mysticism) and *tārīkh* (Islamic history). The focus, however, was on devotional worship and familiarity with the basic rituals of Islam (Aljunied & Hussin, 2005, p.252). The late 19th century saw the establishment of new Malay vernacular schools based on the Qur'ānic classes. The British colonial government tried to promote Malay religious education without further elevating the traditional position that Qur'ānic teaching held in Islamic education, and established the following rules:

- 1) The Qur'ān may be taught in school but must be kept strictly separate from Malay (language);
- 2) Morning lessons must be devoted to instruction in Malay, with Qur'ān lessons being confined to afternoon classes; and
- 3) Government allowances may be paid to teachers only in regard to the Malay lessons. Funding for Qur'ān classes must be privately obtained (Aljunied & Hussin, 2005, p.255).

Despite these restrictions, many Islamic scholars decided to teach in Singapore, as colonial rule provided a relatively stable political environment, and because funds to support Islamic education were readily available due to Singapore's prosperity. This progress continued into the first half of the 20th century, when *madrasahs* were innovating to develop a "modern" form of Islamic education (Aljunied & Hussin, 2005, p.252) but, as will be seen later, the modernization stagnated as secular schools began to catch up by rapidly modernizing in the period following national independence in 1965.

Traditional and modern approaches towards Islamic education in madrasah

At the beginning of the 20th century, Singapore established itself as one of the centers of Islamic education in Southeast Asia with a

variety of *madrasahs* advocating different educational approaches (Mutalib, 1996). During this second phase, distinctive approaches towards Islamic education emerged: a traditional and a modern approach (Aljunied & Hussin, 2005, p.252).

The so-called ‘Old Group’ or *Kaum Tua* favoured traditional forms of education as found in the classic *pondok* or *surau*. One of the first *madrasah* in Singapore, Madrasah As-Sibyan, established in 1905, exemplifies this approach. Its curriculum typically focused on learning the Qur’ān by rote, with little emphasis on understanding what was being memorized. Madrasah Aljunied, established in 1927, was modern as compared to *pondok* and *surau*, and was administered more efficiently (Yusoff, 1990/1991, p.24) but it followed traditional approaches in Islamic religious education and thus catered for the *Kaum Tua*. It emerged as the most prestigious Islamic school for religious teachers in Singapore and offered a postgraduate course, *Qismut-takhaşuş Fil Wa’dzi wal Irsyad*, specifically designed for religious leaders.

The ‘Young Group’ or *Kaum Muda* preferred a more modern approach to Islamic education associated with the Indonesian modernist movement, Muhammadiyah. The modernist, or sometimes also called reformist group “encouraged religious schools of a more ambitious and elaborate kind than had hitherto existed and in the formulation of a system of education which ideally would take into account of the need not only for a purified Islam but for modern secular knowledge as well” (Roff, 1994, p.66). The first *madrasah* following this approach was Madrasah al-Iqbal, established in 1908.² It was a rather “modern” *madrasahs* in various ways due to the levels of education on offer, curriculum design and approach to learning. This *madrasah* was similar to the national schools in its organizational structure, in that it offered primary, secondary and, in some instances, even higher education.

In regard to the educational reform, the official opening speech set the school up as a new phase for education in Singapore stating that:

[t]oday is the beginning of the new Hijrah year of 1326; and today is also the opening day of this Islamic school, thus it engulfs two historical events: the greeting day of the

beginning of the new year and the beginning of the revival of knowledge through a new system of education (Abu Bakar Hamzah, 1991, p.73).

The curriculum was mostly grounded in Islamic religious studies, including the recitation of the Qur'ān, worship and rituals, Arabic grammar and Arabic linguistics. The modern aspects of this form of education was the introduction of subjects that were also offered at national schools, including English, reading and writing, composition and essay writing, ethics, geography, history, mathematics and even town planning (Aljunied & Hussin, 2005, p.253). In terms of teaching design, memorization was substituted by more active student participation, typically through debates (Aljunied & Hussin, 2005, p.253). This was, of course, very much like the educational reforms that Muhammadiyah later introduced in Indonesia, along the lines of the Egyptian modernist reformist movement of Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī, Muhammad 'Abduh and Rashīd Riḍā.

It is probably for its modern approach that Madrasah al-Iqbal was often criticized by traditionalist '*ulamā*' (religious scholars). Contributing to the unpopularity of this school was the novel idea of charging a fee covering textbooks and other overheads for residential students such as accommodation, laundry and medical expenses (Chee Min Fui, 1999/2000, p.13). Consequently, Madrasah al-Iqbal was closed for about a year after its inauguration (Mukhlis Abu Bakar, 2006, p.33).

The unsuccessful reformist ideas of Madrasah al-Iqbal were later taken up by Madrasah al-Maarif, established in 1936, which offered non-religious subjects as well as education for girls (Aljunied & Hussin, 2005, p.253). Like Madrasah al-Iqbal, the innovative ideas at Madrasah al-Maarif were criticized by parts of the Muslim community as "un-Islamic" (A. Ibrahim, 1987, p.22 cited in Chee Min Fui, 1999/2000, p.20). However, this *madrasah* was able to secure support from the Muslim community, though with lower enrolment figures, of about 70 students in 1923 and 500 students in 1943 (Chee Min Fui, 2006, pp.9-10).

The relative non-acceptance of the modern Islamic education illustrates the difficulty of the reformist movement taking hold in Malay society. It had a significant effect on the further development

of Islamic religious education in Singapore. Mukhlis Abu Bakar speculates that it was

unlikely that the later *madrasah*-type school that eventually developed in Singapore which survived till today had any ideological connection with the reform movement. In fact, there is a sort of continuity between the religious curricula of the earlier traditional system of education and that of the post-Iqbal *madrasah* in terms of emphasis on rote learning and the authoritarian approach to teaching (Mukhlis Abu Bakar, 2006, p.33).

While the more traditional approach of learning might have been the popular form of Islamic religious education adopted by the Muslim population, it would pitch the Muslim population in conflict with the state authorities as the need for reform of the education system in general became a more pressing issue for the state.

From the early 1950s, the education of the Malay community became increasingly politicized. In 1951, the British Education Department revised the entire Malay education system, replacing it with a “Re-orientation Plan” that was seen as reflecting modern Singaporean policies in that it was designed to “integrate” the Malay community into “Singaporean society as a whole” (Kamaludeen bin Mohamed Nasir, 2007, p.315).

This Plan can be seen as one of the first attempts by state authorities to implement an approach centred around the simultaneous modernization and marginalization of traditional Islamic education in Singapore. Indeed the Plan was heavily (and not inaccurately) criticized by the Malay community as an attempt to eradicate instruction in Malay language and to undermine Malay/Muslim traditional values and customs (Kamaludeen bin Mohamed Nasir, 2007, p.315). Seeking to counter this perceived “Westernization,” the Malay/Muslim community chose to send their children to *madrasah*, with the result that the idea, if anything, backfired.

This approach has, however, been favoured by the state ever since, with the post-colonial Singaporean state adopting a similar approach and as such has, unsurprisingly, inherited the Malay/Muslim opposition to it.

Post-colonial development of *madrasah* in Singapore

The debate of Islamic education in post-colonial Singapore is reminiscent of problems faced by other colonial states.³ In this debate, the state's need of promoting education in the interest of creating a national identity and to develop a flourishing economy has to be reconciled with the minorities' rights to local identities, languages, cultures and equal access to education and economic development (Tran & Walter, 2010, p.1). This debate was intensified by the control that one political party has over the Singaporean state and its policies, and the loyalty felt by the Muslim minority towards "their" religious education. *Madrasah* education was popular with Malay/Muslim Singaporeans, and this, together with demands for a modern national education system, led to *madrasah* education being increasingly challenged to reform.

Following Singapore's independence in 1965, the number of *madrasah* increased dramatically. By 1966, the estimated number of religious schools, most of them only offering primary education, had risen to between 50 and 60, with an estimated total of around five to six thousand students (Chee Min Fui, 2006, p.13). The quality of the education offered at these schools was, however, considered questionable, as some schools chose not to register with the government (Chee Min Fui, 1999/2000, p.26) and most were, in general, not well-regarded by the broader community (Chee Min Fui, 2006, p.13). Juxtaposed to the educational interests of the Muslim minority were the needs of the modern secularized Singaporean state with the government occupying the centre stage as educator.

Singapore, since independence, is ruled by the People's Action Party (PAP) and the system has been variously labeled as a "stable semi-democracy" (Case, 2002); a "semi-authoritarian" (Jayasuriya, 1999) or a "soft-authoritarian" (Means, 1996) regime. As argued by J.S. Mill (1958, p.230) "[f]ree institutions are next to impossible in a country made up of different nationalities". This stance towards religion per se is transposable towards religious education. The right to religious education had to be subjugated to the needs of the state, in particular national cohesion and economic development and progress.

Education for national identity and social cohesion

Driven by concern to engineer a national identity and social cohesion in its new and seemingly vulnerable state,⁴ the PAP quickly began to establish a national education system following independence in 1965, with the aim of building national identity. Lee Kuan Yew (1966b, p.3) for example, proclaimed that the colonial authorities had never designed an education system to “produce a people capable of cohesive action” and so sought to counteract the influence of the local schools by actively using education to create a national identity.

The Singaporean government considers that as a plural society it “must have core values to bond the various ethnic groups” (Chan Sek Keong, 2000, p.23). This, it hopes, will “forge the basis of an overarching national identity” (Thio, 2006, p. 179), and be decisive in whether “a multi racial society will not be or become a nation” (Chan Sek Keong, 2000, p.25).

The future really depends upon how we, in Singapore, are able to see our long term interest, not as Chinese people, not as an Indian people, not as Malay people – First as Singaporeans ... (Lee Kuan Yew, 1966a).

For these reasons, the Singapore government has long seen education as a tool to create a national identity and to ensure racial and social cohesion.

At one stage, the PAP government attempted to utilize religion in creating this national identity.⁵ In 1982, religious education was included in the national curriculum as part of the “moral educational programme” in government schools, titled “Religious Knowledge” or RK. This programme, which started in 1984, offered religious knowledge course for each of the seven major faiths: Protestantism, Catholicism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Sikhism and, in particular, Confucianism (Tamney, 1992, p.203). The course was, however, short-lived, as a government-commissioned study found that the “moral educational programme” was threatening religious harmony by promoting religious revivalism and polarization of students along religious lines (Mukhlis Abu Bakar 1999, p.2), making it counterproductive to the programme’s initial aim. In 1990, the government reverted to the previous system of teaching moral

education without a religious basis, and religious knowledge became an optional subject outside school hours (Tamney, 1992, p.204).

The notion of utilizing religion to create a national identity was therefore abandoned. Instead, the focus shifted towards creating unity among the different ethnicities and religions. The National Education Programme, introduced by the Ministry of Education (MoE) in 1997, stated that “Singapore is our homeland; this is where we belong. Singapore’s heritage and way of life must be preserved,” and stressed that “despite the many races, religions, languages and cultures, Singaporeans must pursue one destiny” and “racial and religious harmony must be preserved” (MoE cited in Han [2000, p.64]).

In this context, the existence of a separate and (at least partially) independent schooling system competing with national schools for students is considered by the Singapore government as an impediment to a complete “integration” of the Muslim minority into “mainstream” Singaporean life, society and its workforce. Yoon Ying, then Press Secretary to Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew, made this point in 1999 during the resurfacing of a longstanding debate on compulsory education, arguing that the increasing popularity of *madrasah* education constituted a “danger” to the development of other schools (“No intention to close *madrasahs*,” 1999). Similar issues of integration have, in fact, been raised on various occasions throughout Singapore’s history. In 1993, for example, Brigadier-General George Yeo, then Minister for Information and Arts, argued that “the concern was whether those who were educated in Muslim religious school all along, from Primary One, would later share a common outlook and attitude with other Singaporeans” (cited in Abdul Rahman 2006, p.76). This idea was reiterated seven years later by then Prime Minister, Goh Chok Tong, who stated that the Singapore government:

[has] taken a realistic and practical approach to build the Singapore nation. We accept the natural and understandable divide between the races, and focus on the areas where we share common interests for national cohesion...The overlapped area is the common field where all Singaporeans, whatever their race and religion, work and play together. This area is where we must do more in future... Here, I believe education plays a critical part. If all of us go to national

schools, participate in sports and other activities together, acquire the same social vocabulary and norms, we can reduce the fault lines of our multi-racial society to hair-line cracks. We can then work to stabilise the 'bedrock formation' of Singapore's multi-racial society (Goh Chok Tong, 1999).

Educational activities that promoted these aims included the introduction of English as the primary language of instruction, and flag-raising and pledge-taking ceremonies at schools. The only schools that did not participate in this programme were the *madrasah* (and a Christian school run by the Seventh Day Adventist Church), a fact that naturally was to contribute to their marginalization in the future (Chee Min Fui, 2006, p.13).

This recusance on the part of the *madrasah* was most likely caused by their independent status. *Madrasahs* were usually established by private funds, mostly by Muslim philanthropists, and were later run as family institutions by the founding families or trustees of the families. This meant that they were administered independently, each with their own management committee responsible for the policies of the schools. This resulted in the development of quite distinctive traditions and cultures from one school to another, and an overall culture in the Muslim education sector that had little connection with the state's objectives (Tan Tay Keong, 2001, p.19).

The introduction of the national school system also meant that *madrasahs* were in competition with government-aided Malay schools whose curricula focused on teaching the particular skills required for a rapidly-industrializing state and growing economy of the kind that most *madrasah* did not offer (Abdul Rahman, 2006, p.60) and which were prioritized by the state.

Education for economic development and progress

Part of the Singaporean identity is the popular "Singaporean dream" of a better way of living, comprising good jobs and salaries, better housing, private cars and so on. Achieving this dream obviously requires economic development and progress. Indeed, the success of the PAP in holding onto political power is, arguably, based on the deliverance of economic development and progress.

Economic development was prioritized even before democracy (Lee Kuan Yew, 1992, p.29).

The need for economic development is firmly enshrined in the national history of Singapore. For example, when the British military decided to pull out of Singapore and not deliver promised aid, Lee Kuan Yew warned against dependency on foreign aid by saying that “the world does not owe us a living. We cannot live by the begging bowl” (Lee Kuan Yew, 2000, p.53).

Paramount for economic progress and development were two notions: first that all citizens of Singapore could share in the economic success and secondly, that the population of Singapore was educationally equipped to offer the skills, knowledge and abilities needed in the envisaged modern economy.

Several studies undertaken present the Muslim minority in Singapore as lagging behind in educational achievement, resulting in Muslims being disadvantaged socially, economically and politically.⁶ The issue of employability is, for example, often raised in the context of *madrasah* education. It has been argued that due to the limited range of skills acquired, poor academic performance and the high drop-out rates of *madrasah* students, these students will face more difficulties in finding employment (“*Madrasahs* don’t teach critical skills,” 1999) and a high number will be unable to find well-paid work.⁷

These issues have been well-documented in several surveys over the years. In 1984, for example, only 47 per cent of Malay students who sat the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE)⁸ passed, compared to 68 per cent for non-Malay pupils. By 1988, the figure had significantly improved, with 70.5 per cent of Malay students passing, compared to 89.4 per cent for Chinese and 79.4 per cent of Indian pupils (Mutalib, 1989, p.3).

Another study conducted by MENDAKI⁹ in 1997 showed that transition to higher education was impaired and that there was a higher prevalence of drop-outs among *madrasah* students, that is, students not completing their education at all. In 1998, for example, 60 per cent of the Malays in national schools went on to sit for their GCE O-Level.¹⁰ Only 35 per cent of the students in *madrasah* studied

to that level. Overall 71 per cent of *madrasah* students dropped out in 1996, 60 per cent in 1997 and 65 per cent in 1998 (Chee Min Fui, 2006, p.21).

Based on all these studies, it was clear that the performance of Malay pupils remained well below the performance of students from two other ethnicities, as well as the national average, resulting in a social and economic disadvantage of the Muslim/Malay population. The fact that Muslims/Malays continued to lag behind Chinese and Indians in education was seen as the main reason why Malay-Muslim income levels were significantly lower.

The Report of the 1980 Census of Population revealed that Malays were underrepresented in the higher level of education...Malay pupils also do not perform as well as pupils of other races in (national) examinations. Given the practical importance of examination success, there is, therefore, a definite need to take steps to help Muslim students, Malays especially, to realise their full potential in terms of educational attainment (Then-Minister for Social Affairs, Dr Ahmad Mattar, *Parliament of Singapore Official Reports*, 24 August 1984, cols 2033-2036).

Yet, these disadvantages did not seem to deter Muslim parents from sending their children to a *madrasah* in order to obtain a more “religious” education. This pattern is not uncommon across Southeast Asian Muslim communities but it has particular political resonance in Singapore because of the co-identification of Islam and the Muslim minority, and the government’s perception of this group as a potential source of threat to the cohesion of Singaporean state and society.

Critics and opponents of Islamic education argue that the poor academic performance of Islamic school students is partially due to the curricula of contemporary Islamic educational institutions, that is, full-time *madrasah* (Mukhlis Abu Bakar, 2006, p.37). They question both the quality of the education offered and the academic performance of students. These criticisms are not without merit.

Historically, the main method of instruction at *madrasah* was rote learning and memorization, with a heavy focus on traditional Islamic religious studies, including recitation of the Qur’ān, Arabic grammar and linguistics, and Islamic practices, supplemented by

basic skills such as reading, writing and arithmetic (Abdul Rahman, 2006, p.60). This is reflective of the traditional *kuttāb* (also: *maktab*, Islamic elementary schools) curriculum for elementary education. Rote learning and memorization have often been core features of Islamic religious learning and scholarship.

Hence, in Islamic learning, notions of *talaqqī mushāfahah* (literally, learning “mouth to mouth”), *isnād muttasīl* (a continuous chain of teaching and learning leading back to the Prophet,) and *ijāzah* (accreditation and recognition of achievement having learnt through a chain of scholarship) have dominated for centuries. This is, of course, seen by many Muslims as evidence of the suitability of these methods for past and present Muslim communities. These methods are, however, in many respects, at odds with modern teaching methods employing creative learning and critical thinking, with a focus on skills, knowledge and abilities needed in the modern economy and society as developed in contemporary Singapore (Azhar Ibrahim, 2006, pp.95, 96). It would, however, be wrong to attribute the alleged poor quality of Islamic education solely to traditional curricula and outdated teaching methods. These shortcomings—and they certainly do exist—are symptoms of two deeper and interwoven problems that have been apparent in Islamic education for a much longer period: skepticism about reform and a lack of funds to carry it out.

The reform of *madrasah* – Towards a modern Islamic education system

Debate about whether to reform Islamic education has often taken place between the Singaporean government and the broader Muslim community, represented by a range of Muslim organizations. The need for additional funding to implement reform has also been a long-standing issue for *madrasah*. Substantial amounts of money were provided by the government in the early years of the 21st century for the development of a new curriculum, to employ more qualified teachers or offer development programmes for existing staff, and to modernize equipment, technology and facilities in general. It will, however, take many more years before these changes produce concrete results, and today *madrasahs* in Singapore are generally backward in terms of both content taught and methodology employed.

Despite these shortcomings, religion is still a priority for the Muslim minority in Singapore and religious education, as mentioned, is still sought after. According to a national survey on religion in 1989, 95 per cent of the Muslim population stated, for example, that religion and religious education is “important.” This was the highest percentage among all religious groups in Singapore and it was confirmed in a survey conducted by Gallup in 2000, which found that ethnic Malays mostly identified themselves through their religion, while the ethnic Chinese community, for example, identified themselves by ethnicity and neighbourhood (Tan, 2007a, p.26). The reform of *madrasah* has therefore become a focus for tension and debate between the government and the Muslim/Malay minority in the last two decades, because it directly concerns Muslim, and thus, Malay, identity and the minority politics associated with those identities. It is, therefore, no surprise that the reforms of *madrasah* education in areas of administration, curriculum design and teacher quality have been progressing slowly, sometimes with great resistance from parts of the Muslim community.

The administrative reform of madrasah: Modernization through bureaucratic control?

Historically, each *madrasah* was an independent institution with its own administration. This individuality and independence made it difficult to reform *madrasah*. One of the first steps of the government was therefore attempting to streamline the administration of these institutes. One solution for assisting and co-ordinating the various forms of Islamic education offered at the different *madrasahs* was to place all *madrasahs* under the supervision of the Islamic Council of Singapore, or MUIS. MUIS, a statutory body established under the Administration of Muslim Law Act (No. 27) of 1966, is under the auspices of the Ministry for Youth, Community and Sports. In educational matters, however, it also coordinates these with MoE.

The legislative framework to oversee Islamic religious education was introduced early on. Nevertheless, MUIS was unable to carry out this mandate due to a lack of both financial and human resources, allowing *madrasahs* to function independently without a central co-ordinating body, despite the early legislative changes (Chee Min Fui, 2006, p.15).

In fact, it would take more than three decades for the legislative changes to take hold. In 1982, as a result of the Educational Congress, a Religious Education Unit was discussed. This unit was not, however, set up until 1989, and the relevant Sections 87 and 88 of AMLA providing MUIS with the power to control the registration and management of *madrasah* only became operational on March 1, 1990.

The influence of MUIS on the management of *madrasah* is complex, as it is exercised indirectly and directly. For one, MUIS is involved in the management of *madrasah* by providing recommendations to MoE for the appointment of members of the Madrasah Management Committees (MMC). The MMCs are running the individual *madrasah*, yet the responsibilities of these MMCs are somewhat lacking in specificity. In general, they act as employers who decide on the recruitment of staff, their scope of work, performance and dismissal; and are involved in the vision, mission and curriculum development of the *madrasah*. In other words, they have broad, if vague, overarching authority in respect to almost every aspect of *madrasah* activity, should they wish their power to extend that far. The MMC members are usually volunteers and have other professional commitments, meaning that both their time and their professional expertise, as well as their skills and knowledge of *madrasah* administration, may be limited. The result is that *madrasah* management tends, in fact, to be mostly left to the headmasters and full-time employed staff (Othman, 2007, pp.32, 33), with the MMCs exercising a sort of sporadic right of intervention.

Direct involvement of MUIS occurs through the allocation of funding. The Madrasah Strategic Unit, a unit within MUIS, operates several financial programmes under the rubric “Dana Madrasah” (Madrasah Fund) such as a Capitation Grant, top-up allowances for *asatizah* (religious teachers), and resource grants for use of audio visual aids, libraries, national education and curriculum activities. MUIS also administers and facilitates the national examinations, that is, the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) and the Sijil Thanawi Empat (STE)¹¹ at the *madrasah*. The establishment of at least partial control over *madrasah* in the administrative area has opened the door for further bureaucratic control of *madrasah*, in particular curriculum reform and quality control of teachers.

The curriculum reforms of madrasah education: Modernization through revision of subjects?

The discourse surrounding the curriculum reform of *madrasah* is rather paradoxical. On the one hand, the Muslim community strongly supports and identifies with the *madrasah* and its learning outcomes. Yet, this support is not necessarily unquestioning. The Muslim community, to a certain degree, shared the opinion that curriculum reform was required to ensure educational standards and employability as identified by the Singaporean government. Parents increasingly began to feel that the education offered at *madrasah* in the 1960s was not adequately preparing their children for the workforce. As a result, boys were sent mostly to secular schools, where they could obtain an education seen as more appropriate to a society undergoing rapid economic and social development. This trend continued well into the 1980s. In 1985, for example, 95 per cent of *madrasah* students were female (Chee Min Fui, 1999/2000, p.27). All this resulted in a widespread dissatisfaction with *madrasah* education making them a “dumping ground” for local students who failed in the secular system (Chee Min Fui, 1999/2000, pp.31, 32, 35).

The government had also been pushing for curriculum reform. In 1977, for example, the then-Minister for Social Affairs, Ahmad Mattar, stated in *Berita Harian*, October 19, 1977 that:

... for Muslims as with the other communities, education is the key to progress of the individual and society. As such, I am of the view that the curriculum in religious schools must be radically altered so as to incorporate technical and other secular subjects apart from religion. This is necessary in view of the changing society we live in and to prepare our youths for suitable jobs (cited in Abdul Rahman 2006, p.61).

This pressure to reform the *madrasah* curriculum finally came to bear in the late 1990s. Curriculum reform would have to focus on two areas in particular: overhauling the existing teaching material, which mostly focused on traditional Islamic subjects, and including secular subjects into the curriculum.

One of the major initiatives by MUIS in this area was the establishment of the Curriculum Development Committee once MUIS

obtained full control over curriculum development when Section 87 AMLA was implemented. At first, this committee was steered exclusively by MUIS but due to public pressure, representatives of full-time *madrasah* were invited to join in 1997, and in 1998 a project plan (Curriculum Development Project or CDP) was developed, detailing the new curriculum, including subjects, curriculum plan, content and main features.

Initially, the CDP planned to re-develop the curriculum in Arabic for Primary One to Six but this project was abandoned midway by MUIS (Othman, 2007, p.27). A tender for curriculum development in English was then issued and awarded to IQRA International Foundation, a non-profit Islamic organization based in Chicago, USA.¹² The new curriculum developed by IQRA is now being implemented in several stages. In the beginning, Madrasah al-Maarif, Madrasah al-Irsyad and Madrasah al-Arabiah used the new curriculum in full, while Madrasah aljunied implemented it partially and Madrasah Alsagoff and Madrasah Wak Tanjong refused to use it at all (Othman, 2007, p.28)

In 2007, the development of *madrasah* primary education in English was completed, yet the re-design of the primary curriculum in Arabic seems to have stalled, perhaps reflecting a lack of enthusiasm for the support of Arabic studies on the part of the state.

The focus on reforming the curriculum with the interest of the state in mind is rather unsurprising. A similar development is observable in regard to inclusion of secular subjects. Critics and opponents of *madrasah* education contended that it did not provide the critical foundation skills taught in the secular subjects such as English, mathematics, science and information technology (IT) that were required by an economy seen to favour “knowledge workers” (Mukhlis Abu Bakar, 2006, p.37). This notion of “knowledge workers” feeds, of course, directly back to the notion of economic development and progress mentioned above, as envisaged by the Singaporean state.

The general issue in regard to “secular” subjects was that they are unrelated to Islamic studies, making it difficult for *madrasah* students to appreciate the necessity of learning these subjects. However, in the particular case of mathematics and science, it has

been argued that these subjects have traditionally featured prominently in Islamic studies and are therefore not “secular” per se (Tan, 2007b, pp.62, 63).

In fact, some *madrasah* had been including these “secular subjects” before the state began to take active interest in the curriculum reform of *madrasah*. Madrasah al-Maarif, for instance, had started offering secular subjects as early as the 1980s. Inclusion of these subjects was, however, rejected by Madrasah Aljunied on the grounds that it might compromise opportunities for students to continue their education at foreign tertiary institutions. Al-Azhar University in Cairo, it was said, would not recognize *madrasah* that offer secular subjects (Mutalib, 1989, p.6). Still, secular subjects started to slowly gain importance in the late 1990s, with all *madrasah* eventually introducing secular subjects, albeit with different weighting ranging from 30 per cent to 50 per cent (“*Madrasahs* don’t teach critical skills,” 1999).

“Knowledge workers,” as mentioned above, required an education in secular subjects and it was assumed that there was a shortage of them among *madrasah* graduates. It was, therefore, suggested that Singapore citizens residing in Singapore should be required to attend a standard form of national education for six years, from Primary One to Primary Six, in order to give students a “core of common knowledge” as preparation for Information Technology subjects.

This notion began a debate of compulsory primary education and examination. *Madrasah* students and pupils from the San Yu Adventist School had previously been exempted from having to take the PSLE exam.¹³ In 2000, the Compulsory Education Act (No. 27) was passed stating that children already enrolled in *madrasah* were exempt from the PSLE but students admitted after the Compulsory Education Act 2000 came into effect (that is, the 2003 cohort onwards) were required to take the examination.¹⁴ Further, a benchmark was established for the overall performance of students (Committee on Compulsory Education, 2000a), set at the same average as that of the six lowest-performing schools.¹⁵ In 2007, these requirements were relaxed as a result of consultation between MoE and MUIS. *Madrasah* now only have to pass this benchmark twice in a three-year period, and once they have fulfilled this requirement

they are allowed to enroll Primary One students for another three years (Ibrahim, 2007). If a *madrasah* fails to meet these requirements, it must stop taking full-time primary school students and transfer the students to another *madrasah* that meets the requirements, or to another national school.

The results of *madrasah* students in the PSLE is rather varied. Superficially, it appears to be a success. In 2008, the first batch of *madrasah* students took the compulsory PSLE and 98 per cent qualified to progress to secondary school, higher than the national average of 97 per cent (Ministry of Education, 2008). In 2009, 93 per cent of *madrasah* pupils who sat for the PSLE qualified for secondary school (Jamil, 2010) with the national success rate being 97.1 per cent. A comparison of the success rate is unfortunately not possible for 2010 as the reporting modus changed, with MoE no longer providing the success rate for *madrasah* pupils and instead only reporting which *madrasah* failed to make the benchmark. These are the *madrasah* that have lost out in this 'success' story. Madrasah Wak Tanjong, for instance has to stop taking in Primary One students from 2012 to 2014¹⁶ as it failed to make the benchmark twice in three years (Hussain, 2010). Madrasah al-Arabiah also failed to make the benchmark in 2008, 2009 and 2010 (Hussain, 2010). Since this *madrasah* had already previously decided to focus on secondary education as part of the Joint Madrasah System (JMS) discussed below, this result is neither surprising nor upsetting for this *madrasah*.

The teaching reforms of madrasah education: Modernization through bureaucratic control?

The final step for reform was the establishment of a quality control framework for teachers. For this, MUIS established in 2005 the Asatizah Recognition Scheme (ARS) to enhance the standing of teachers and to guarantee minimum professional qualifications. Islamic religious teachers teaching at *madrasah*, mosques, private institutions or Muslim/Malay organizations or residences in Singapore must now have their knowledge of Islam verified and approved. ARS is overseen by a special Asatizah Recognition Board (ARB) comprising senior religious teachers and scholars, all appointed by MUIS. The other main stakeholder in Islamic education, Persatuan Ulama & Guru-Guru Agama Islam (Singapura)/Singapore

Islamic Scholars & Religious Teachers Association or PERGAS, provides administrative and secretarial assistance to the ARB. The number of teachers registering under this new scheme is increasing consistently. In the first phase of the project, up to March 2006, the annual average number of teachers registering was 333. The second phase saw a dramatic increase, with as many as 950 teachers registering in 2006 (MUIS, 2004, 2005, 2006).

Apart from registration of teachers, MUIS also initiated several further training programmes for these teachers. In 2007, MUIS initiated a multidisciplinary degree offered in collaboration with Syarif Hidayatullah State Islamic University and McGill University (MUIS, 2007). In 2009, 26 *madrasah* teachers had completed this National Institute of Education Specialist Diploma in Teaching & Learning (MUIS, 2009). Additionally, in 2007, the MUIS Academy and the Asatizah Network developed an additional course for registered *asatizah*, the Asatizah Executive Development Programme.¹⁷ By the end of 2009, more than 300 *asatizah* had completed this programme (MUIS, 2009).

Obtaining control through the accreditation and registration of teachers completes the process through which the state via MUIS has sought to modernize Islamic education in Singapore. These reforms are further streamlined in the Joint Madrasah System (JMS), which is designed to provide the blueprint for the future of Islamic educational scene in Singapore.

Conclusion

As a result of the above-discussed reform, and in particular in light of the changes concerning PSLE, JMS was announced by the Minister-in-Charge of Muslim Affairs in October 2007 (Ibrahim, 2007). JMS was implemented in 2009 as a joint project between MUIS and three *madrasahs*: Madrasah al-Irsyad, aljunied and al-Arabiah.

The project was partially prompted by the strain *madrasahs* were under in preparing for the 2008 PSLE examinations (“*Madrasah* revamp to lift academic standard,” 2007). From 2009 onwards, these three *madrasahs* have opted to specialize in one particular area of studies instead of providing comprehensive education at primary

and secondary levels (“Madrasah revamp to lift academic standard,” 2007) with different pathways of education, that is, “hybrid,” “academic” and “*ukhrawi*” (religious, MUIS, 2009).

Madrasah al-Irsyad will exclusively focus on primary education, although students currently enrolled at secondary level will be able to complete their studies up to O-level exams held at the final year of secondary school. Al-Irsyad will then function as a feeder school for the other two *madrasahs* (“Singapore Islamic Council aims to improve quality of religious teachers,” 2007). This is most likely, strategically motivated, as al-Irsyad had already been relatively accommodating in making changes to its curriculum to address the challenges of Primary One education. It had, for example, changed its curriculum in 1993 to have a fifty-fifty balance between religious and secular subjects, and has adopted the General Curriculum from MoE and, later, the new curriculum developed by MUIS, so that students would be prepared for the PSLE examination. It had also changed the language of instruction for Primary One classes for religious subjects from Arabic to Malay, and for secular subjects to English.¹⁸ Secondly, al-Irsyad only began offering Secondary One education from 1996 onwards,¹⁹ and its experience and association at this level has, therefore, been relatively limited. It is noteworthy that the remodelling of Madrasah al-Irsyad was led by members of PERDAUS in order to create a “model” *madrasah* that other *madrasahs* could follow. The original aim was to offer a 10-year minimum education with secular subjects modelled closely on the curriculum developed by MoE. It appears, however, that this aim could not be met (Ibrahim, 1998). The willingness of this *madrasah* to reform and to combine secular and religious subject has apparently made it a role model for other *madrasahs* in the region (Onishi, 2009).

The other *madrasahs* had established a much stronger presence in secondary education and will, therefore, focus on this level. Madrasah Aljunied has a good record internationally for its secondary programme, as it has developed strong ties with overseas tertiary institutions such as al-Azhar University in Cairo, one of the Islamic world’s most prestigious universities (Mukhlis Abu Bakar, 2006, p.33). Further, while secular subjects at primary level had only constituted 30 per cent of the subjects it offered in the late 1990s, it

had incorporated O (Ordinary) level and A (Advanced) level examinations (Abdul Rahman, 2006, p.64)²⁰ for its secondary and pre-university studies in 1973 and 1979 respectively. Madrasah al-Arabiah has also adopted a focus on secondary and pre-university education, although it has had relatively low enrolments at the secondary level—arguably the lowest, in fact, for *madrasah* offering secondary education. Its participation in the feeder system might be an attempt to balance out the secondary-level enrolments across the *madrasah* and encourage more enrolments. The phasing out of primary education at these two *madrasahs* will follow a similar model to that of Madrasah al-Irsyad, with the students currently enrolled at al-Junied and al-Arabiah able to complete their primary education at these institutions until they take the PSLE test.

Based on this blueprint it appears that a specialization of the *madrasah* in Singapore will take place on either primary or secondary level education. The issue of primary level *madrasah* education will, however, remain. The education offered there will have to compete with secular modern schools which can solely devote their time and resources on teaching the subjects to be examined in the PSLE while a *madrasah* will have to fulfill expectations of teaching religious and secular subjects. This will place a lot of strain not only on the *madrasah* but on the students as well, as they will have to cope with a heavier learning load.

The secondary level education will then be further divided into preparation for a mainstream “modern” career or a religious, Islamic, one. It remains to be seen as to whether this specialization will be able to ensure the continuance of Islamic religious education per se.

Endnotes

1. Many mosques in Singapore still teach *fard ‘ayn* classes and it is, in fact, one of the desired outcomes of the Tweens aL.I.V.E programme developed by the Islamic Council of Singapore or MUIS.
2. Some authors date the opening of this school in 1908, see, for example, Mukhlis Abu Bakar (2006, p.33).
3. See, for example, Brown (2007); Clothey (2005); Flores-Crespo (2007); Mao (2008); Takeda & Williams (2008); Tran & Walter (2010); Vandeyar (2008) and Watson (2007).

4. For details on the perceived vulnerability of the post-independence state and the relationship between the Singaporean government and the Muslim minority, see Steiner (2011).
5. For details on the Religious Knowledge Programme, see Lindsey & Steiner (2011).
6. This issue has been taken up not only by the Singaporean government; others have also commented that while Singapore has the highest living standard in Asia, and a “relatively equitable” income distribution pattern, the income gap between the different ethnic groups, in particular, for Singaporean Malays, is widening. Compare the CRC (Committee on the Rights of the Child) Initial Report, CRC/C/51/Add. 8, Paragraph 3.3, and CRC Initial Report, CRC/C/133, further discussed in Thio (2006).
7. This view has been expressed, for example, by then Rear-Admiral (NS) Teo, at a closed-door National Education seminar for leaders of the Malay community organized by the People’s Association Malay Activity Executive Committee Co-ordinating Council (Mesra), (Koh, 1997).
8. The PSLE is the national examination undertaken by students in Singapore at the end of the sixth year in primary school. This exam is instrumental in deciding which secondary school will be chosen for the student’s further education. Originally *madrasah* students were exempted from taking this exam. With the enactment of the Compulsory Education Act (No. 27) of 2000, the PSLE became compulsory for *madrasah* pupils as well.
9. MENDAKI stands for Majlis Pendidikan Anak-Anak Islam (The Council for Education for Muslim Children) established in 1980 by the Singaporean government as a self-help organization to improve the socio-economic standards of the Malay population. It considered its task as closely linked to raising the educational standard of the Muslim/Malay population and started several initiatives and would later on be involved in projects with MUIS when the educational units there became fully operational.
10. This certificate is obtained at the end of secondary school after 10 years, or 11 years for students completing the “Normal” secondary school stream. GCE A-Levels are required for tertiary entry. GCE O-Level graduands may enter polytechnics and vocational institutions.
11. The STE is an Islamic religious examination for all fourth year secondary full-time *madrasah* students conducted by MUIS.
12. This organization has been active in the area of Islamic education, working on various projects. More information is available from the organisation’s website at <http://www.iqrafoundation.com>, retrieved September 3, 2009.

13. See Ministry of Education information at <http://www.moe.gov.sg/initiatives/compulsory-education/exemptions/>, retrieved May 18, 2010.

14. In the interim period (from 2003 to 2008), students enrolled in a *madrasah* would require a certificate issued by the compulsory education unit at MoE exempting the pupil from compulsory education. The *madrasah* would also have to provide detailed reports to MoE and MUIS on enrolment figures; advise of any students dropping out, including reasons why the student discontinued; as well as information on where the student intends to finish his or her compulsory education. Regular reports must be submitted to MUIS on students exempted from compulsory education, including details such as attendance, topics covered in the curriculum and examination results (Afiza binte Hashim & Lai Ah Eng, 2006, p.127).

15. In 1999, this constituted an average of 175 aggregate points out of 300. The aggregate score reflects the total scores in English, Maths and Science and Mother Tongue (Mandarin, Malay or Tamil), (Committee on Compulsory Education, 2000b, p.50). It is interesting to note that the PSLE benchmark for students from San Yu Adventist School, the only private primary school, is slightly higher than the one for students from *madrasah*. The benchmark for San Yu Adventist School stands at 191 points. See Ministry of Education information at <http://www.moe.gov.sg/initiatives/compulsory-education/exemptions/>, retrieved May 18, 2010.

16. Madrasah Wak Tanjong can take Primary One students again in 2014 if it makes the benchmark between 2011 and 2013.

17. The programme covers five topics, i.e., community challenges; learning journey; critical and creative approaches in addressing contemporary issues; changing role of *asatizah*; and Singapore Muslim identity. For details on the programme, see <http://www.muis.gov.sg/cms/services/Islamic.aspx?id=4718>, retrieved February 15, 2011.

18. The history of Madrasah Al-Irsyad is detailed in its Handbook, *Shine*, pp.8, 9, Retrieved July 9, 2009 from http://www.irsyad.sg/xweb/data/shine_per cent2Dweb.pdf. Madrasah al-Irsyad had been supportive of the curriculum development by MUIS from the beginning, stating that it will fully adopt the standards set by MUIS, while four of the other *madrasahs* had opted out to form the Joint Committee on Madrasahs (JCM) in order to develop their own curriculum back in 1999, which was later on discontinued (“Curriculum Drawn Up, but Will *Madrasahs* Take to It?,” 2002).

19. Madrasah Al-Irsyad, Milestones, Retrieved August 4, 2009 from http://www.irsyad.sg/xweb/web/sub_cat1.asp?id=ART00112-2006&pgno=1&keyword=&srch=.

20. The Singapore-Cambridge General Certificate of Education 'Ordinary' Level Examination is taken by students at the end of their fourth or fifth year in secondary school determining as to whether students will be encouraged to pursue further studies at pre-university educational institutes.

The Singapore Cambridge General Certificate of Education 'Advanced' Level Examination determines the eligibility of students to continue with tertiary studies at universities. It is usually offered by a junior college for a two-year pre-university course or a centralized institute with a three year pre-university course. Details on the educational system in Singapore are available from the Ministry of Education at <http://www.moe.gov.sg>, retrieved July 9, 2009.

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