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**Religion and Politics in Singapore - Matters of
National Identity and Security?
A Case Study of the Muslim Minority in a Secular State**

*Kerstin STEINER**

Abstract

This journal article will examine the political and legal framework that has been utilized in the discourse between the Singaporean state and the Muslim minority in Singapore.

Using a case study of the Muslim minority, it will argue that Singaporean state vigilant polices the delineation between politics and religion and any transgression will result in the state taking action. This places an onerous burden on Muslim Singaporeans as they have to negotiate a careful balance between their religious obligations and their obligations as Singaporeans. This is particularly pertinent in the manner that Singaporean Muslims can voice their political concerns that are relevant to their religion.

The sensitivity of the discourse between the Singaporean government and the Muslim minority is anchored in the history of Singapore: its need for security as a small nation with only a Muslim minority amongst Muslim dominated Southeast

* LL.B (Germany), LL.M (Melbourne) and Ph.D (Melbourne).

The author is currently a Lecturer with the Department of Business Law and Taxation, Faculty of Business and Economics at Monash University. The author can be contacted at kerstin.steiner@buseco.monash.edu.au

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Asia and its need to establish a national identity among the different ethnicities and religions. Yet the Singaporean government has been utilizing religion, albeit in a very sanitized and selective manner, to just forge this national identity.

Setting the Scene: The Singaporean Context for the Discourse between Religion and Politics

Singapore is ruled by the People's Action Party (PAP), which has dominated Singapore's politics since independence. The dominance of one party has led to a characterization of Singapore as a "hybrid regime"; a "stable semi-democracy"¹⁾; or, less 'flattering', as a "semi-authoritarian"²⁾ or "soft-authoritarian"³⁾ regime. This depiction as a 'controlling regime' is also evident in the manner PAP interacts with religion. J.S. Mill, for example, argued that

[f]ree institutions are next to impossible in a country made up of different nationalities. Among a people without fellow-feeling, especially if they read and speak different languages, the united public opinion, necessary to the working of representative government, cannot exist.⁴⁾

The multi-ethnic and multi-religious nature of Singapore's society means that the relationship between the different ethnicities, religions and the state is intricate. Ethnic and religious pluralism can impede on the development of a cohesive/collective society that, arguably, is essential for nation-building. In the process of nation-building, ethnic/religious tensions and conflicts are then at the centre of politics.⁵⁾

The attitude of PAP towards religion is characterized by suspicion and careful policing. At best, this approach can be described as pragmatic⁶⁾ with a "tolerantly

- 1) William Case, *Politics in Southeast Asia: Democracy or Less* (London Curzon, 2002).
- 2) Kanishka Jayasuriya, "Corporatism and Judicial Independence within Statist Legal Institutions in East Asia," in *Law, Capitalism and Power in Asia*, ed. Kanishka Jayasuriya (London: Routledge, 1999).
- 3) Gordon P. Means, "Soft Authoritarianism in Malaysia and Singapore," *Journal of Democracy* 7, no. 4 (1996).
- 4) John S. Mill, *Considerations on Representative Government*, ed. Currin V. Shields (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1958), 230.
- 5) David Brown, *The State and Ethnic Politics in Southeast Asia* (London: Routledge, 1994), Donald Horowitz, *Ethnic Conflict* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1985).
- 6) Charlene Tan, "Islam and Citizenship Education in Singapore: Challenges and Implications," *Education, Citizenship and Social Justice* 2, no. 1 (2007): 30. This pragmatic ideology by the Singaporean government has been noted by various authors in different

neutral stance [...and] occasional patronage of certain religious institutions or occasional action to control religious excess where necessary".⁷⁾ This pragmatism is coupled with a deep-rooted fear that religious sentiments can be politicized thereby threatening the political, social and economical stability of Singapore. The origin of this fear can be traced back to the early days of nation building when racial-religious conflicts were dominating politics in Singapore.

The racial make-up of Singapore had been changing dramatically. When the British first arrived, Malays - and therefore, in most cases, Muslims - constituted the majority, but in the years to come the Chinese population would soon become the majority. In the 1957 Census the racial make-up of Singapore was 75% Chinese, 14% Malay, 9% Indian and 2% cent others.⁸⁾ It was then widely seen as 'obvious' that the neighbouring states with predominant Malay Muslim populations would not accept 'another China' at their doorstep and might intervene on behalf of the Malay Muslim minority if considered necessary. Managing the different ethnicities was therefore a paramount objective for the Singaporean state.

This multi-racial make up was seen as the cause for a number of conflicts that shaped the early history of an independent Singapore in the 1950s and 1960s.

Much was made, for example, of violent riots were sparked in December 1950 over a custody dispute involving Maria Hertogh, a young girl of Dutch-Eurasian background who had been brought up as a Muslim by a Muslim family during the Japanese occupation of Singapore in the Second World War.⁹⁾

Similarly, the official account has it that shortly after independence from Britain in the 1960s racial tensions of a different form emerged when a small group of Malay extremists, the *Angkatan Revolusi Tentara Islam Singapura* (Singaporean Islamic Army Brigade or ARTIS), plotted, it is claimed, to overthrow the government by inciting racial animosity between the Malay and Chinese

contexts, compare B.L. Chua, "Pragmatism of the People's Action Party Government in Singapore," *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science* 13, no. 2 (1985), W.K. Ho and S. Gopinathan, "Recent Developments in Education in Singapore," *School Effectiveness and School Improvement* 10, no. 1 (1999), K.L. Ho, *The Politics of Nation-Building in Singapore* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 2000), Raj K. Vasil, *Governing Singapore* (Singapore: Eastern Universities Press, 1984).

- 7) T.O. Ling, *Buddhism, Confucianism and the Secular State in Singapore*, Working Paper No 79 (Singapore: Department of Sociology, National University of Singapore, 1987), 2.
- 8) Chiew Seen Kong, "Ethnicity and National Integration: The Evolution of a Multiracial Society," in *Singapore: Development Policies and Trends*, ed. S.J. Chen (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1983), 49.
- 9) Chee Kiong Tong, *Rationalizing Religion: Religious Conversion, Revivalism and Competition in Singapore Society* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 233.

population.¹⁰⁾

Likewise, when Singapore merged with the Federation of Malaya and British Borneo (except for Brunei) to form the Federation of Malaysia on 9 July 1963, the Singaporean Malay minority expected to be granted special rights like those enshrined for Malays in the Constitution of the Federation of Malaya in 1957. When these rights were not granted, violence erupted with 22 people killed, about 454 people injured, 256 people arrested for unlawful assembly and rioting, and 1,579 people arrested for breaking the imposed curfew.¹¹⁾

When Singapore became a republic on 9th August 1965, the task of creating harmony between the different ethnic and religious groups that constitute Singapore's population was pivotal. Lee Kuan Yew, looking back at this part of Singapore's history, commented on the necessity of racial harmony that

[w]e cannot have our minority races worked up and pitted in hatred or fear against the majority, or have one religion so zealous for converts, or so intolerant, that they have open friction with other religions. Any communal or religious collision will be nasty and costly. Our history is besplattered with such outbursts. The racial harmony we have enjoyed since the last outburst in 1969 cannot be taken for granted.¹²⁾

The Singaporean government considers it of particular importance that Singaporeans "must have core values to bond the various ethnic groups"¹³⁾ in order "to forge the basis of an overarching national identity"¹⁴⁾ which is decisive in whether "a multi racial society will not be or become a nation".¹⁵⁾

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

10) Ministry of Home Affairs, *A Singapore Safe for All* (Singapore: Times Books International, 2002), 8.

11) Chee Kiong Tong, *Rationalizing Religion: Religious Conversion, Revivalism and Competition in Singapore Society* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 233, 34.

12) Lee Kuan Yew, "Why Singapore Is Ready to Pay a High Premium for Security," *The Straits Times*, July 3, 1987.

13) Chan Sek Keong, "Cultural Issues and Crime," *Singapore Academy of Law Journal* 12, no. 1 (2000): 23.

14) Li-Ann Thio, "Taking Rights Seriously? Human Rights Law in Singapore," in *Human Rights in Asia: A Comparative Legal Study of Twelve Asian Jurisdictions, France and the USA*, ed. Randall Peerenboom, Carole J. Petersen, and Albert Y. Chen (London, Great Britain: Routledge, 2006), 179.

15) Chan Sek Keong, "Cultural Issues and Crime," *Singapore Academy of Law Journal* 12, no. 1 (2000): 25.

people, not as Malay people – First as Singaporeans [...].¹⁶⁾

The Singaporean government tries to shape the influence of race and religion in a manner that is attuned with its overarching political objectives. This requires a careful monitoring of religion by the state. In the Singaporean context, the state, which is synonymous with PAP, has been the primary actor in determining the relationship between the state and the different ethnicities and religion. Racial harmony is created through two means: the creation of a national identity that utilizes religion albeit in a sanitized form highly controlled by the PAP and a legal framework that allows the policing of religion.

Engineering a Community: Religion a Thread to National Identity and Security?

According to Rupert Emerson, a nation is a “community of people who feel that they belong together in the double sense that they share deeply significant elements of a common heritage and that they have a common destiny for the future” so that the nation, “when the chips are down, effectively commands men’s loyalty, overriding the claims [...] of the lesser communities within it”.¹⁷⁾ These attempts to create unity are almost always imagined, starting at a certain moment in time “because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion”.¹⁸⁾

The problem for Singapore is that there is no common heritage but a multitude of different allegiances according to race or religion of the population – either as Chinese, Indian/ Hindus or Malays/ Muslims. Singapore’s attempt to create a national identity is characterized by policies that are designed “to attenuate and sanitize the cultural values of each component ethnic community in Singapore so as to make them compatible with each other and with the ideological preference of the governing elite”.¹⁹⁾ This is based on the assumption that some religious believers will not necessarily conduct their activities in a manner that would guarantee

16) Lee Kuan Yew, “Big and Small Fishes in Asian Waters” (Paper presented at the Meeting of the University of Singapore Democratic Socialist Club, Singapore, June 15, 1966).

17) Rupert Emerson, *From Empire to Nation: The Rise to Self-Assertion of Asian and African People* (Boston, USA: Beacon Press, 1962), 95, 96.

18) Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections of the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Revised ed. (London, Great Britain; New York, USA: Verso, 1991), 6.

19) David Brown, “Democratization and the Renegotiation of Ethnicity,” in *Towards Illiberal Democracy in Pacific Asia*, ed. Daniel A. Bell et al. (New York, USA: St. Martin’s Press, 1995), 156.

religious harmony.

The premises of the Singaporean government was that an overarching national identity would overcome these different allegiances and redirect the loyalty towards Singapore. The First Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Defence at that time, Mr. Goh Chok Tong, officially raised the issue of national ideology and values in his speech to the People's Action Party (PAP) Youth Wing on 28 October 1988. This quest for a national identity resulted in the *White Paper on Shared Values* presented at the 10 Parliament by command of the President of the Republic of Singapore on 2 January 1991. In this paper it was stated that "Singapore is still a young nation. Its citizens do not share a common, unique culture, binding people of all backgrounds together. A coherent Singaporean identity has not yet galled. We cannot be certain that such an identity will automatically emerge if we do nothing." Requesting "respect the great religions and cultures to which different groups of Singaporeans belong" it was the task "to identify a few key values which are common to all the major groups in Singapore, and which draw on the essence of each of these heritages". These shared values will be interpreted and conveyed according to the various cultural and religious traditions, "the Malays will do in Malay and Muslim terms, the Christians in terms of Bible stories and Christian traditions, many Chinese by reference to Confucian, Buddhist or Taoist teachings, the Hindus in terms of the Ramayana and Mahabharata, and so forth for other groups. This way, in time, all communities will gradually develop more common, distinctively Singaporean characteristics."

In October 2002, the then Prime Minister, Goh Chok Tong, suggested implementing a Code on Religious Harmony. Despite its name, the Code was not intended to be a legal agreement or law, but, rather, a 'guide' to how to practice religion.²⁰⁾ A working committee was established, comprising various parliamentarians with different religious affiliations.²¹⁾ This committee then consulted various different national religious representative bodies, including Buddhist, Muslims, Christians, Catholics, Hindus, Sikhs and Taoists. Dr. Vivian Balakrishnan, Minister for Community Development, Youth and Sports said

20) "Pm Condemns 'Dastardly Acts' at S'pore's Doorstep," *The Straits Times*, October 15, 2002.

21) The members of the committee were Chan Soo Sen, Minister of State (Community Development and Sports and Prime Minister's Office – no religious affiliation); Ong Chit Chung (Christian), Inderjit Singh (Sikh), R. Ravindran (Hindu), Ang Mong Seng (Taoist), Ong Seh Hong (Buddhist) and Ahmad Khalis Abdul Ghani (Muslim), as well as former Nominated MP Gerard Ee (Catholic). "Multi-Religious Team to Draft Harmony Code; Free-Thinker Chan Soo Sen Has Roped in Seven People, Each Representing a Key Religion, to Work on the Pledge," *The Straits Times*, November 2, 2002.

‘[a]nother good example [of social harmony initiatives] is the Declaration on Religious Harmony which was jointly developed in 2002 by our major religious organisations such as the Islamic Religious Council (MUIS), the Singapore Buddhist Federation, the National Council of Churches Singapore. This initiative reflected a common appreciation of the need to work together to preserve religious harmony in Singapore’.²²⁾

The public was also invited to provide feedback through letters and emails to the general media, and a Feedback Unit was set up.²³⁾

Several issues were raised during this process regarding the phrasing and content of the proposed Code, with various religious groups expressing different concerns. For example, Muslim religious bodies wanted to document or to simply elucidate the principles of each religion,²⁴⁾ without prescribing how that religion was to be practiced.²⁵⁾ This approach was based on the hope that it would “educate the general public and the Muslim community” that “Islam promoted peace and wisdom”, and therefore should not be linked to the JI plots.²⁶⁾ This was, however, mixed with fear that the Code might be yet another attempt at government control. Jurong GRC MP Halimah Yacob commented that

[t]he objective and purpose of this code must be made explicit and clear, as there is a possibility that it could be misconstrued, if people feel that the Government is now telling them how to practice their religion.²⁷⁾

22) Vivian Balakrishnan, “MCYS Speech No. 19/2006”, Speech by Dr Vivian Balakrishnan, Minister for Community Development, Youth and Sports and 2nd Minister for Information, Communications and the Arts, June 22, 2006.

23) Li-Ann Thio, “Constitutional ‘Soft Law’ and the Management of Religious Liberty and Order: The 2003 Declaration on Religious Harmony,” *Singapore Journal of Legal Studies* (2004): 424.

24) Ameer Ali Abdeali, Secretary-General of the Islamic Fellowship Association, and an Inter-Religious Organization member, as cited in Alicia Yeo, Shahida Ariff, and Suhaila Sulaiman, “Don’t End up Preaching, Say Religious Leaders,” *The Straits Times*, September 26, 2002.

25) Rozlan Giri, MENDAKI (Council for Education of Muslim Children) Chief, as cited in Alicia Yeo, Shahida Ariff, and Suhaila Sulaiman, “Don’t End up Preaching, Say Religious Leaders,” *The Straits Times*, September 26, 2002.

26) Mohamed Nawab Mohamed Osman, President of the National University of Singapore’s Muslim Society, as cited in Alicia Yeo, Shahida Ariff, and Suhaila Sulaiman, “Don’t End up Preaching, Say Religious Leaders,” *The Straits Times*, September 26, 2002.

27) Jurong GRC MP Halimah Yacob, as cited in Alicia Yeo, Shahida Ariff, and Suhaila

Probably as a result of these concerns, the Code ultimately refrained from prescribing religious principles, instead setting up very vague and general guidelines for a “mutual interaction within Singapore’s multi-racial and multi-religious society”.²⁸⁾ To emphasize this more informal nature of the proposal, it was also agreed to re-title the ‘Code’ as a ‘Declaration’. Despite the fact that the proposal had not originally been intended to have a legal character, it was felt the title ‘Code’ could have implied this.²⁹⁾ Several terms used in the initial draft were also debated. The initial draft read

We, the citizens of Singapore, acknowledging that we are a **secular society**;
 enjoying the freedom to practice our own religion; and
 recognising that religious harmony is a cornerstone of our peace, progress and prosperity;
 hereby resolve to practice our religion in a manner that:
 promotes the cohesion and integration of our society;
expands the common space of Singaporeans;
 encourages mutual tolerance, understanding, respect, confidence and trust;
 fosters stronger bonds across religious communities; and
 prevents religion from ever being a source of conflict.³⁰⁾

Several objections were raised, with the most controversial phrase being the “expansion of the common space”. In consultation with the working committee, religious groups voiced their concern that this term implied that they would have to retreat even further from public life so that the ‘common space’ could be enlarged. This was, of course, the exact opposite of the intentions of the draft, which was, in fact, designed precisely to counteract the withdrawal of religious communities, as this was seen as causing increased religiosity (particularly in the case of the Muslim community)³¹⁾ which was, in turn, regarded as dangerous. The issue was finally resolved with a compromise that saw the word “expands” replaced with the word “grows” (which was hardly much of a change), with the phrase “while respecting

Sulaiman, “Don’t End up Preaching, Say Religious Leaders,” *The Straits Times*, September 26, 2002.

28) Chan Soo Sen, *Singapore Parliamentary Debates*, vol. 75, col. 1495, November 25, 2002.

29) Li-Ann Thio, “Constitutional ‘Soft Law’ and the Management of Religious Liberty and Order: The 2003 Declaration on Religious Harmony,” *Singapore Journal of Legal Studies* (2004): 424.

30) “Pm Condemns ‘Dastardly Acts’ at S’pore’s Doorstep,” *The Straits Times*, October 15, 2002.

31) Neo Hui Min, “More Than Words, a S’pore Way of Life,” *The Straits Times*, June 10, 2003.

our diversity” added (although this was hardly much of a victory for the religious groups).

Another point of controversy concerned the nature of society. The original draft provided that Singapore was a “secular society”, but religious representatives argued that it was the state of Singapore that was secular, not ‘society’ as such. Again a sort of weak compromise was reached, with the paragraph rephrased to “recognising the secular nature of the State”, although, again, this does not represent a significant shift from the original.

The final version of the Declaration of Religious Harmony reads:

We, the people in Singapore, declare that religious harmony is vital for peace, progress and prosperity in our multi-racial and multi-religious Nation.

We resolve to strengthen religious harmony through mutual tolerance, confidence, respect, and understanding.

We shall always

Recognise the **secular nature of our State**,

Promote cohesion within our society,

Respect each other’s freedom of religion,

Grow our common space while respecting our diversity,

Foster inter-religious communications,

and thereby ensure that religion will not be abused to create conflict and disharmony in Singapore.³²⁾

This final version provided a compromise that all concerned stakeholders could agree upon but at the end most of the concessions had been made by the different religions in order to accommodate state interests.

This accommodation of state interest in the case of the Muslim minority is enabled through co-opting bureaucratic institutions and legislative measures.

Islam and the Law: The Legal Framework of Policing Religion

The legal framework for policing religion is built on several key pieces of legislation, the most important being the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act 1989 (MRHA),³³⁾ a statute based around a notion of ‘religious harmony’ defined in terms of state security, the Internal Security Act, 1985 (ISA),³⁴⁾ and the Sedition

32) The full text was taken from the Inter-Religious Organization Singapore, accessed June 29, 2008, <http://www.iro.org.sg/website/declaration.html>.

33) Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act, Cap. 167A, 1989.

34) Internal Security Act, Cap. 143, Rev. Ed. 1985.

Act 1985.³⁵⁾ This legal framework is basically designed around the notion of preventing religiously motivated criticism of politics.

The Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act

The rationale of the MRHA was to formally conceptualize certain actions as inherent threats to national harmony and security responding directly to particular events that were seen as just such threats.

In 1982, for example, the Singapore People's Liberation Organization (SPLO)³⁶⁾ was investigated by the Internal Security Department (ISD). In the course of the investigation, the ISD alleged that the SPLO planned to cause communal unrest in Singapore by exploiting religious and racial issues, with the aim of overthrowing the Government by violent means.³⁷⁾ Similarly, in April 1987, spiritualist *silat* (Malay martial arts) experts were arrested by the ISD for instigating rumours of racial clashes on the 18th anniversary of the May 1969 race riots in Singapore and Malaysia.³⁸⁾ Even more significant was another event in the same year, the so-called 'Marxist Conspiracy'. Catholic Church social worker Vincent Cheng, who was allegedly in contact with a former student agitator in exile, Tan Wah Piow, was accused of establishing a Marxist group aimed at overthrowing PAP and establishing a Marxist state in Singapore.³⁹⁾ While the government was focused on 'Marxist' activities, it also made it clear in meetings with Catholic church representatives that using religion and the organised networks of religions for political activities would not be tolerated.⁴⁰⁾

35) Sedition Act, Cap. 290, Rev. Ed. 1985.

36) The existence and nature of the SPLO is, however, somewhat obscure. Very little has been written on it, even in local newspapers. The result is that not much is known except for what has officially been released by the ISD and the Ministry of Home Affairs. Ministry of Home Affairs, *A Singapore Safe for All* (Singapore: Times Books International, 2002), 8, 175.

37) Internal Security Department, "Countering Threats," accessed October 25, 2010, <http://www.mha.gov.sg/isd/ct.htm>.

The credibility of this threat was questioned by some who saw it as a crude attempt to discredit the Workers' Party, which had recently won a seat in the legislature. The five alleged members of SPLO - all middle-aged, poorly educated Indian Muslims or Malays - were accused of having links to the Workers' Party. Cynics argued that the episode was intended as a "warning to genuine religious dissidents who might be tempted to work on minority communal feelings". Chan Heng Chee, "Singapore in 1982: Gradual Transition to a New Order," *Asian Survey* 23, no. 2 (1983): 202.

38) Internal Security Department, "Countering Threats," 176.

39) "Marxist Plot Uncovered," *The Straits Times*, May 27, 1987. "Government Detains Six More," *The Sunday Times*, June 21, 1987.

40) Lee Lai To, "Singapore in 1987: Setting a New Agenda," *Asian Survey* 28, no. 2 (1988): 205.

All these events, in PAP's view at least, provided legitimacy for the enactment of the MRHA. In the background paper to the MRHA it was argued, for example, that

in recent years there has been a definite increase in religious fervour, missionary zeal and assertiveness among Christians, Muslims and Buddhists and other religious groups in Singapore. Competition for followers and converts is becoming sharper and more intense. More Singaporeans of many religions are inclining towards strongly held exclusive beliefs, rather than the relaxed, tolerant acceptance of and coexistence with other faiths. More specifically, however, the MRHA has two main aims: first, to legally frame the separation of politics and religion; and, secondly, to curtail the areas that religion can influence.⁴¹⁾

This justification of the bill was not without its critics. Several members of parliament queried the necessity of the MRHA. The MP for Cheng San, for example, questioned the objectives, timing and intention of the Act, coming as it did soon after the arrest of Vincent Cheng and the Marxist group.⁴²⁾ Dr. Lee Siew-Choh, a Non-Constituency Member of Parliament (NCMP),⁴³⁾ argued that "it is an attempt, a belated attempt by the Government to justify the arrests of the so-called Marxists".⁴⁴⁾ The broad scope of the MRHA was also controversial. Abdullah Tarmugi, for instance, argued that

I have thought, Sir, as those who oppose the Bill do, that existing laws were more than sufficient and adequate to handle the issues and problems addressed by the Bill. And indeed they are, Sir, in many respects. Take the Penal Code for instance. It is a crime for anyone to utter words to deliberately wound the religious feelings of any person. The ISA empowers the Government to detain anyone whose religious activity is likely to set religious groups against one another or to heighten differences and intolerance between religions. I found it difficult, Sir, if not futile, to argue that

41) Government of Singapore, "Maintenance of Religious Harmony," (White Paper, Cmd. 21 of 1989, December 26, 1989), 10.

42) Cheng San, *Singapore Parliamentary Debates*, vol. 54, col. 1109, February 22, 1990.

43) NCMP are members of opposition parties who are appointed to the Parliament despite having lost in the parliamentary election. The scheme was introduced in 1984 in order to provide a voice for the opposition in Parliament, since there had been no opposition member at all from 1968 to 1981.

44) Lee Siew Choh, *Singapore Parliamentary Debates*, vol. 54, col. 109, February 22, 1990.

these provisions could not do the job we want in this Bill except, as pointed out by the Senior Minister of State for Education, on the question of religion and politics.⁴⁵⁾

Supporting the bill, Professor S. Jayakumar, then Minister of Home Affairs, argued unambiguously that the PAP state saw no role at all for religion in politics, and claimed that the new Act would, in reality, support or ‘harmonize’ religion in Singapore so much as to exclude it entirely from public life, something he apparently considered a positive development:

followers of different religions must exercise moderation and tolerance and not instigate religious enmity and hatred. [...] Religion and politics must be kept separate because religious leaders are seen to have a special status and their pronouncements will have an emotional effect on their people.⁴⁶⁾

These ideas are clearly reflected in the scope of the MRHA, which in Sections 8 and 9 prohibits four particular forms of behaviour of concern to PAP:

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

However, although the MRHA allows for a range of legal sanctions (including restraining orders preventing people from speaking, writing, publishing or distributing material), these measures are seen as “limited mechanisms to enable prompt and effective action to defuse potential explosive situations which could endanger or religious harmony”⁴⁷⁾.

The MRHA has been proven most effective as a latent instrument of controlling

45) Abdullah Tarmugi, *Singapore Parliamentary Debates*, vol. 54, col. 1077, February 22, 1990.

46) S. Jayakumar, *Singapore Parliamentary Debates*, vol. 56, col. 325, July 18, 1990.

47) S. Jayakumar, *Singapore Parliamentary Debates*, vol. 56, col. 325, July 18, 1990.

Similar sentiments were voiced by other members of Parliament. Compare, for example, Arthur Beng Kian Lam, *Singapore Parliamentary Debates*, vol. 54, col. 1069, February 22, 1990.

religion. It has not been used since its enactment, although several ‘warnings’ have been issued. In 2007, for example, Wong Kan Seng, then Minister of Home Affairs, reported that the government “came close to invoking the Act on several occasions to stop local religious leaders from mixing religion with politics and putting down other faiths”, but that after ‘warnings’ from the ISD these activities stopped.⁴⁸⁾ The use of warnings in itself illustrates the extraordinary latent power of the MRHA: simply threatening its use has become sufficient on its own to deter religiously-motivated political activity. The effectiveness of the MRHA warning tactic as a security mechanism can likely be attributed to the harshness of the MRHA. According to Section 18 of the MRHA, for example, there is no judicial review, and non-compliance with a warning can result in a restraining order.⁴⁹⁾

The Internal Security Act and the Sedition Act

The MRHA is not the only legal instrument used to police religiously-motivated political activities. It is complemented by the ISA and the Sedition Act, both of which, of course, have their origins in colonial models, like so much else in Singapore’s legal framework for the regulation of religion.

The MRHA and the Sedition Act are very similar in their terminology. Section 8 (1)(a) of the MRHA contains terms such as “causing feelings of *enmity, hatred, ill-will or hostility* between different religious groups” [emphasis added]. This echoes the phrasing of Section 3 of the Sedition Act, which defines ‘seditious tendency’ to include a tendency to “bring into *hatred or contempt* or to excite disaffection against the Government”, “to raise *discontent* amongst citizens or the residents in Singapore”, or “to promote feelings of *ill-will and hostility* between different races or classes of Singapore” [emphasis added]. It is noteworthy that in both Acts the truth and falsity of the speech is irrelevant: the truth of a statement is not a defense.

48) Wong Kan Seng, *Singapore Parliamentary Debates*, vol. 82, Written Answer to Parliamentary Question on Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act, question by Dr. Thio Li-Ann, February 12, 2007.

There have been at least three instances when Wong Kan Seng considered invoking the MRHA: one related to the 1991 General Election, when a Muslim leader urged Muslims to vote for a Muslim candidate; the next occurred in 1992, when a Protestant Christian pastor received a warning after he used his church publications and sermons to criticize Buddhism, Taoism and Catholicism; the third took place in 1995 when an Islamic religious leader condemned a Hindu belief that Ganesha could drink milk offerings, describing it as not a miracle but an act of Satan. Nirmala, “Govt Reins in Religious Leaders,” *The Straits Times*, May 12, 2001.

49) Tey Tsun Hang, “Excluding Religion from Politics and Enforcing Religious Harmony - Singapore Style,” *Singapore Journal of Legal Studies* (2008): 120.

The only consideration is the emotions the speech causes among citizens.

One striking difference between the MRHA and the Sedition Act relates to the question of when the Minister is allowed to act. The MRHA requires the Minister to have evidence that the alleged offender “has committed” or is “attempting to commit” the act. This is unlike the Sedition Act that has more of a preemptive nature only requiring a “tendency” or mere “likelihood to commit”.⁵⁰⁾ This means that the Minister can act earlier under the Sedition Act than the MRHA. The time advantage appears, however, to be negated through the potentially longer procedure under the Sedition Act. This requires a court trial, and that would likely take longer than the issue of a restraining order under the MRHA, which completely excludes judicial review.⁵¹⁾

There is another noteworthy difference: the Sedition Act does not explicitly refer to religion, although this does not mean that the Sedition Act has not been applied to religious activities. In *Public Prosecutor v Koh Song Huat Benjamin and Anor*,⁵²⁾ for example, the seditious tendencies in issue were two separate internet postings: one posting made anti-Malay and anti-Muslim remarks, while the other made only anti-Muslim comments. Both accused were charged (and convicted) under the Sedition Act, and no charges were laid under the MRHA. The case of the accused who made only anti-Muslim comments is interesting, as here there was only a religious nexus and no racial comment per se, so a charge under the MRHA would appear to have been more appropriate.⁵³⁾

Generally, the ISA provides the state with more powers to police activities seen as threatening the state than any other of the two statutes. The ISA is, in fact, based on a set of ‘Emergency Regulations’ passed in 1948, when Singapore was under colonial administration. In 1960, while Singapore was part of the Federation of Malaya, the ISA was enacted as a statute and Singapore retained it upon gaining independence, re-enacting it in 1985.

As regards actions motivated by religion, or to be more precise, extreme Islamic beliefs, the ISA has been invoked in the case of Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), a militant Islamist group whose network spans Muslim Southeast Asia. JI’s political agenda

50) Tey Tsun Hang, “Excluding Religion from Politics and Enforcing Religious Harmony - Singapore Style,” *Singapore Journal of Legal Studies* (2008): 130.

51) Tey Tsun Hang, “Excluding Religion from Politics and Enforcing Religious Harmony - Singapore Style,” *Singapore Journal of Legal Studies* (2008): 131.

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

53) Tey Tsun Hang, “Excluding Religion from Politics and Enforcing Religious Harmony - Singapore Style,” *Singapore Journal of Legal Studies* (2008): 132.

seeks the creation of a *Daulah Islamiyah Nusantara* (Nusantara Islamic State) comprising Malaysia, Indonesia and the Southern Philippines, into which Singapore, Brunei and some other Muslim-populated regions would also be incorporated.⁵⁴⁾ There have been several waves of arrests, with two major operations. In December 2001, 13 people were detained and in August 2002 another 18 people were detained.⁵⁵⁾ By 2006, 36 people were under Orders of Detention,⁵⁶⁾ five were under Suspension Direction⁵⁷⁾ and 19 under Restriction Orders.⁵⁸⁾ While several have since been released, a number are still detained.⁵⁹⁾

It is noteworthy that no trials followed these arrests and instead detention seems to have been deliberately used in order to avoid public trials, as the:

spectacle of public trial against alleged Malay Muslims accused of extremism and terrorism might polarize the different communities in Singapore to an unacceptable degree. People are bound to take sides and the side that they take is likely to follow the racial and religious divide.⁶⁰⁾

The ISA was therefore used by the government to avoid religious conflicts not just in a direct sense by preventing offenders from acting in public life or by punishing them, but also in a less direct, but perhaps even more effective, way by depriving them of a public forum.⁶¹⁾

54) Government of Singapore, “Jemaah Islamiyah Arrests and the Threat of Terrorism” (White Paper presented to the Parliament, Cmd. 2 of 2003, January 7, 2003), 8.

55) Government of Singapore, “Jemaah Islamiyah Arrests and the Threat of Terrorism” (White Paper presented to the Parliament, Cmd. 2 of 2003, January 7, 2003).

56) Section 8 ISA. An Order of Detention (OD) is made by the Minister allowing for a detention of up to two years.

57) Section 10 ISA. A Suspension Direction is a direction made by the Minister to suspend the operation of an existing OD subject to the execution of a bond and to such conditions as the Minister sees fit. These conditions can include restrictions in respect of a person’s residence, employment, movements and activities.

58) Section 10 ISA. A Restriction Order (RO) allows the Minister to place conditions on a person restricting the person’s activities within and outside the country. Ministry of Home Affairs, “Singapore Government Press Statement on Release of 5 JI Detainees & Detention of 5 JI Members,” June 30, 2006.

59) According to Human Rights Watch, 30 people were still under Orders of Detention and 25-30 people under Restriction Orders as at April 2008. Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2009: Singapore* (2008).

60) Michael Hor, “Terrorism and the Criminal Law: Singapore’s Solution,” *Singapore Journal of Legal Studies* (2002): 43.

61) This might also have been one of the reasons why the MRHA was not used against JI. The government appeared to be taking pains to conceptually distinguish terrorist threats per se

Despite reassurances offered by many Muslims who publicly restated their allegiance to the Singaporean state, the JI arrests left the PAP government even more concerned about the overall sensitivity of religion and security. It repeatedly re-iterated its fears that religiosity would lead to ethnic division and, ultimately, conflict.

In keeping with a world-wide trend, over the last three 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. Increasingly Muslim women will not shake hands with men. The generation of convivial and easy-to-get-along-with Muslim leaders in the region has given way to successors who observe a stricter Islamic code of conduct. My original concern was over the growing separateness of our Muslim community, as Singaporean Muslims tended to congregate for their social and extra-mural activities in their mosques, instead of in multi-racial community clubs. What came as a shock was that this heightened religiosity facilitated Muslim terror groups linked to Al-Qaeda to recruit Singapore Muslims into their network.⁶²⁾

Implied in this whole discourse is the underlying fear that the increased religiosity found among Singaporean Muslims is undermining the social cohesion of Singapore, or to put it another way, that Singaporean Muslims are separating themselves from the other ‘Singaporeans’ and, implicitly, becoming hostile to them and to the state.⁶³⁾ This problem is approached through political measures aimed at creating and then strengthening a national Singaporean identity that comprises the Muslim Malay minority.

Islam and National Identity: The Political Mechanism of Policing Religion

The general question regarding Islam and a national identity is whether the from Islam and Muslims. Using the ISA and not the MRHA may have been intended to avoid emphasizing the religious connotations of JI’s activities (and, in any case, the ISA gave the state more power to act).

62) Lee Kuan Yew, “Speech” (Paper presented at the 1st Munich Economic Summit, Munich, Germany, June 7, 2002).

63) Some authors distinguish between increased religiosity among Muslims and increased alienation among Singapore’s different religious groups, instead preferring to focus on social disintegration. Tan, for instance, even claims that religiosity is not a political concern but acknowledges that the lack of social cohesion is a legitimate state concern. Eugene K.B. Tan, “Norming “Moderation” in an “Iconic Target”: Public Policy and the Regulation of Religious Anxieties in Singapore,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 19, no. 4 (2007): 444.

Muslims living as minorities can co-exist within secular societies, or whether they will destabilize these societies due to a perceived incompatibility of values arising by reason of Islam's implicit claim to be both a temporal and spiritual authority.⁶⁴⁾ This issue came briefly to the forefront during the discussion surrounding the Declaration of Religious Harmony and whether the society or the state of Singapore were secular. The wording in the declaration did not provide a definitive solution to that issue. Muslim Singaporeans thus negotiate a careful balance between their religious obligations and their obligations as Singaporeans. In the Singaporean context, the state takes an active role in prescribing what constitutes a Muslim Singaporean identity through its bureaucratic institutions.

Malay and Islam are holding a special position in the legal framework of the Singapore. Article 152 of the Constitution of Singapore states that

The Government shall exercise its functions in such manner as to recognize the special position of the Malays, who are the indigenous people of Singapore, and accordingly it shall be the responsibility of the Government to protect, safeguard, support, foster and promote their political, educational, religious, economic, social and cultural interests and the Malay language.

Furthermore, the 'religious interests' of the Malays are also safeguarded by Article 153 of the Constitution, which provides for a Council to advise the President on "matters relating to the Muslim religion".

This 'particular' attention to Islam and Muslims is a win-lose situation. Muslim needs and interest are vital policy considerations for the government while it does allow for a closer scrutiny of Muslim affairs by the government. This close control is exerted, for example, through bureaucratic institutions. The most important one is the Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura (Islamic Religious Council of Singapore or MUIS). MUIS has statutory authority under the Administration of Muslim Law Act⁶⁵⁾ and is officially under the direct purview of the Minister-in-charge of Muslim Affairs. It is also, however, integrated into the structure of the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports, almost as if it were a bureaucratic arm of that Ministry.⁶⁶⁾

64) Khaled Abou El Fadl, "Islamic Law and Muslim Minorities: The Juristic Discourse on Muslim Minorities from the Second/Eighth to the Eleventh/Seventeenth Centuries," *Islamic Law and Society* 1, no. 2 (1994); Olivier Roy, *Globalised Islam: The Search for a New Ummah* (London: Hurst & Company, 2004).

65) Administration of Muslim Law Act, Cap. 3, Rev. Ed. 2009.

66) Jaclyn Ling-Chien Neo, "The Protection of Minorities and the Constitution: A Judicious

MUIS is intended to set the Islamic agenda in Singapore for the governing PAP by shaping Muslim religious life and promoting a ‘Singaporean Muslim’ identity. Its main purpose is thus, in reality, to regulate relations between the PAP elite – who are overwhelmingly non-Muslim and predominantly ethnic Chinese – and the Singaporean Muslim community. In this role, MUIS has the difficult task of negotiating these sometimes conflicting interests of the two groups.

Following the events in the early 2000s, such as September 11 and the JI threats in Southeast Asia, the Singaporean government decided to take a more pro-active stance in creating a Singapore Muslim identity. The then Minister in-charge of Muslim Affairs, Yacoob Ibrahim, for example, said:

[p]ractices of the Malay community, which have evolved naturally, became the subject of scrutiny [...] A community, which had hitherto lived peacefully with other communities found itself the subject of discussion by all – with some participants taking their reference points from outside the Singapore context. The local context did not matter as we were swathed with exciting stories of terrorism and extremism prefaced by the word ‘Islamic’ supplied by overnight experts. There were increased concerns and questions about the implications of overt symbols and signs of Muslim identity and beliefs. Some wondered why Muslims needed to consume food that was halal (or permitted) as though it was a radical behavioral departure. Observing religious practices became a sort of shorthand for hovering at the edge of terrorism.⁶⁷⁾

The then President of MUIS, Haji Maroof Salleh, observed that

[n]ot only did it [the Muslim-Singaporean community] have to grapple with the shocking revelation that some members of the community were involved in insidious activities that threatened society’s peace and harmony, it also had to contend with unrelenting public scrutiny over the tenability of Islamic practices in a modern, secular and multiethnic polity.⁶⁸⁾

MUIS therefore developed the ‘Singapore Muslim Identity’ (SMI) project in early 2005, with the slogan of building a ‘Muslim Community of Excellence’

Balance,” in *Evolution of a Revolution: Forty Years of the Singapore Constitution*, ed. Kevin Y.L. Tan and Li-Ann Thio (UK: Routledge, 2009), 256.

67) Yacoob Ibrahim, “Speech by the Minister for Community Development and Sports and Minister in-Charge of Muslim Affairs” (Paper presented at *Wee Kim Wee Seminar on Cross-cultural Understanding*, Singapore Management University, August 2, 2003).

68) MUIS, *MUIS Annual Report 2002: Making the Quantum Leap* (Singapore: MUIS, 2002).

developing ‘ten desired attributes of Muslims’. Their ideal Singaporean Muslim:

1. holds strongly to Islamic principles while adapting to changing context.
2. [is] morally and spiritually strong to be on top of the challenges of modern society.
3. [is] progressive, practices Islam beyond forms/rituals and rides the modernization wave.
4. appreciates Islamic civilization and history, and has a good understanding of contemporary issues.
5. appreciates other civilizations and is self-confident to interact and learn from other communities.
6. believes that good Muslims are also good citizens.
7. [is] well-adjusted as [a] contributing member of a multireligious society and secular state.
8. [is] a blessing to all and promotes universal principles and values.
9. [is] inclusive and practices pluralism, without contradicting Islam.
10. [is] a model and inspiration to all.

These deliberately general and all-inclusive aspirations were also reflected in the titles of the annual reports of MUIS, such as ‘Moving Ahead in Synergy’ (Annual Report 2003); ‘The Fabric that Binds the Community’ (Annual Report 2004); ‘Staying Focused, Embracing Change’ (Annual Report 2005); ‘Going the Distance: Taking Stock, Looking Ahead’ (Annual Report 2007) and ‘Forging the Singaporean Muslim Identity’ (Annual Report 2007), the latter being an implicit reminder to Muslims that the challenge of reconciling religious identity and the national identity has not yet been completed.

In 2005, then Deputy Prime Minister and Coordinating Minister for Security and Defense, Tony Tan, commented somewhat patronizingly on the progress the Muslim community had made in regards to reconciling their religious and national identities, saying that

[t]he Singapore Muslim community has made great strides in forging a unique Muslim identity shaped by a deep conviction in Islam and fostered by Singapore’s unique context of a pluralistic and progressive society and a globalized and secular state. The Singapore Muslim identity is rooted in the principle that Muslims faithful to Islam can play an important and integrative role as active

citizens in a secular Singapore. [...] Singapore's context of a multi-religious society and modern, globalized and secular state is unique. It exerts an influence over the religious life of the Muslim community. A Muslim community's integration with other communities in a secular state is key to reducing suspicion and mistrust.⁶⁹⁾

The onus was, however, not only on Muslims to show allegiance to their Singaporean identity. As then Prime Minister Lee Hsien Long observed,

we must know that this is not a Malay-Muslim problem. This is a national problem and non-Muslims also have to play your part, for example, by preserving the space for minorities in the majority-Chinese society by upholding the ideals of meritocracy and equal opportunity and treatment, regardless of race, language and religion and by clearly distinguishing the small number of extremists who are a threat to us from the majority of moderate, rational, loyal Muslim Singaporeans with whom we work together to tackle a shared problem. And this way, we can build confidence and trust between the different communities and the best time to do that is now when we don't have a crisis. This is because building trust takes time and it requires frequent interaction between leaders and members of the public and between leaders of different groups and it underlines the importance of our integrating our housing estates, our schools, National Service and everyday life.⁷⁰⁾

In order to foster a public dialogue on these issues, the government realized that more was needed than coercive legal sanctions. These could address the Islamist terrorist threat from a security perspective, but would not assist in creating the elusive inter-racial and inter-religious dialogue PAP saw as essential to creating 'religious harmony'. In the 2003 Remaking Singapore Committee's Report,⁷¹⁾

69) Tony Tan, "Enhancing Singapore's National Security," in *Parliamentary Speech by Deputy Prime Minister and Coordinating Minister for Security and Defense* (Singapore, 2005).

70) Lee Hsien Loong, "Speech by the Prime Minister" in *Community Engagement Programm* (2006).

71) The Remaking Singapore Committee was established in 2002. Its stated aim was to complement the work of the Economic Review Committee in designing and reviewing strategies for Singapore in the twenty-first century including 'revolutions in information-communications, biology, globalization and religious fundamentalism.' The members are from a diverse background: politicians, members of the public and private sector, tertiary organizations and voluntary organizations. Laurel Teo, "New Team to Take S'pore Beyond

Changing Mindsets, Deepening Relationships, it was stated, for example, that [t]ribal fault lines have been accentuated. Although race, language and religion have always posed challenges in Singapore's context, recent global trends point to an escalation in religious and ideological extremism. Even as we protect our country from potential physical danger, we need to ensure that these globalised ideological battles do not threaten our social fabric.⁷²⁾

The Singaporean government therefore moved to develop a 'soft approach' by introducing measures "to enhance inter communal ties, to keep terrorist elements from driving a wedge between Muslims and the rest of society".⁷³⁾ This policy is a variation on the 'soft authoritarian approach' to government, whereby power is concentrated in the political elite and the rest of society is carefully managed, a policy that has, of course, been advocated - and, indeed, implemented - consistently since early independence. In a parliamentary debate at the time it was argued, for example, that despite the belief that "in formal terms we have done most things correctly", in minority affairs, "societies are not built on such formal institutions [such as constitutional equality guarantees and meritocracy policy] alone. Feelings and attitudes are also important".⁷⁴⁾ This eventually led to the creation of Inter-Racial Confidence Circles (IRCC) and Harmony Circles and, at the constituency level, to the above mentioned Declaration of Religious Harmony.⁷⁵⁾

The IRCC and Harmony Circles were established at community level in order to provide a platform for confidence-building among the different communities, as a basis for developing, in time, deeper friendship and trust. Regular interactions will build up inter-racial and inter-religious rapport. They will also provide opportunities for all parties to address immediately racial and religious problems on the ground.⁷⁶⁾

the 5 Cs; New Remaking Singapore Committee Will Probe Political, Social and Cultural Norms to Help Prepare Nation for the Future," *The Straits Times*, February 15, 2002. The official committee website was originally available at www.remakingsingapore.gov.sg.

72) Government of Singapore, "Changing Mindsets, Deepening Relationships: The Report of the Remaking Singapore Committee," (2003): 10.

73) Tony Tan, "How We Tackle Terrorism," *Straits Times*, June 7, 2004.

74) K. Shanmugam, *Singapore Parliamentary Debates*, vol. 75, col. 2067, January 20, 2003.

75) Eugene K.B. Tan, "Norming "Moderation" in an "Iconic Target": Public Policy and the Regulation of Religious Anxieties in Singapore," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 19, no. 4 (2007): 449.

76) Government of Singapore, "The Jemaah Islamiyah Arrests and the Threat of Terrorism" (White Paper presented to the Parliament, Cmd. 2 of 2003, January 7, 2003), 23.

The IRCC thus organized activities among different constituencies, such as visits to places of worship and the celebration of different ethnic/ religious festivals in order to promote inter-ethnic and inter-religious awareness and knowledge. Political control is exerted as the IRCC operates under the supervision of Citizen's Consultative Committees, which are linked to the government. Furthermore, the IRCC members are appointed by their respective Members of Parliament from various religious, educational, social and business groups or organizations within the relevant Member's constituency.⁷⁷⁾

The political interest of the Muslim minority are furthermore represented through the existing PAP sanctioned apparatus. There have been several attempts to include the interests of the Malay/ Muslim minority in Singapore independently from the PAP: most notable the Malay nationalist PKMS⁷⁸⁾ (*Partai Kebangsaan Melayu Singapura* – Singapore Malay National Organisation) and the SNF⁷⁹⁾ (*Barisan Nasional Singapura* – Singapore National Front). However, the political success of these parties has been rather limited as none of them have a member in Parliament.⁸⁰⁾

In 1988, the Singaporean government tried to ensure Malay/ Muslim political representation by establishing 39 Group Representative Constituency Scheme (GRCS). In these GRCS, parties had to nominate candidates who run as a multi-ethnic team with at least one representative of Malay origin. The evaluation of this program is ambivalent as officials claim that the scheme is providing more opportunities for the nomination of minority candidates yet numerical the increase of minority MPS is marginal at best.⁸¹⁾ Due to this rather insignificant improvement

77) Eugene K.B. Tan, "Norming "Moderation" in an "Iconic Target": Public Policy and the Regulation of Religious Anxieties in Singapore," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 19, no. 4 (2007): 449.

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

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

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

81) The number of Malay MP increased from 9 to 10 while the number of Indian MPs remained

of minority representation, there have been strong calls to abolish this scheme altogether.⁸²⁾ There are therefore strong reservations about this scheme with accusations that the unofficial objective was to “block the formation of ethnically based parties and create a greater electoral hurdle for opposition parties”.⁸³⁾ Furthermore, the community they are supposedly presenting often questions the alliance of these Malay MPs.

While many Malays are prepared to work with PAP Malay MPs for the benefit of the community, many find it difficult to regard them as overall leaders of the community for various reasons. Malays do not have any say over who among them should become PAP MPs, and the Malay MPs, in turn, have hardly any say as to who should be their leader. These are the prerogatives of the Prime Minister.⁸⁴⁾

These, arguably, soft approaches to manage religion in Singapore are complemented by a legal framework that adds significant ‘bite’ to the process of regulating religion and in particular preventing any influence of religiously orientated political criticism.

Conclusion

In 2006, the then Deputy Prime Minister and Coordinating Minister for National Security and Minister for Law, S. Jayakumar, celebrated what he saw as the overall success of the mix of ‘soft authoritarian’ social engineering, community organization and education policies that PAP had developed to deal with its persistent concern that religious differences could destabilize the tightly-controlled society it had constructed in Singapore. Discussing a recent survey conducted by the Ministry of Communications and Arts (MICA), the then Minister said:

I am cheered that 87% of people sampled in the MICA survey stated that they believed that Singapore citizens would stand united, regardless of race, religion or communities, in the face of a terrorist threat. I hope that in times of crisis, all Singaporeans will stand up

at 6 and the number of Eurasian MPs decreased from 1 to 0. Gordon P Means, “Soft Authoritarianism in Malaysia and Singapore,” *Journal of Democracy* 7, no. 4 (1996): 103, 107.

82) Lai Ah Eng, *Report on IPS Research Forum on Ethnic Relations in Singapore*, Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), 2002, 5. The paper is available at http://www.ips.org.sg/reports/erp_2002/rp_erpforumreport.pdf, last accessed September 24, 2010.

83) Gordon P Means, “Soft Authoritarianism in Malaysia and Singapore,” *Journal of Democracy* 7, no. 4 (1996): 103, 107.

84) Ismail Kassim, “Open Letter,” *The Straits Times*, November 18, 2000.

to be counted. In the meantime, we must redouble our efforts to build up resilience in the hearts and minds of our people in this fight against terrorism.

[...] Community and religious leaders also have a role to play in providing leadership in maintaining racial and religious harmony. Programmes such as the Community Engagement Programme help to bring them together, to enhance mutual understanding, and to establish lines of communications in the event of a crisis

Despite Jayakumar's enthusiasm, it seems that Singapore's PAP government feels it must continue to actively – and, if necessary, forcibly – 'keep the peace' between the different ethnicities and religions in order to maintain its idealized notion of social and religious harmony – and, of course, the depoliticized and 'sanitized' society that implies. It is also clear that in its efforts to be vigilant in pursuing these hugely complex objectives, the government has long identified Singapore's minority Muslim community as inherently a potential obstacle to its power goals. It is therefore careful to ensure that none of the sophisticated mechanisms it has created to enforce religious harmony result in real political power falling into the hands of Muslim institutions other than those it directly controls, such as MUIS.

The paradox is, however, that PAP's overtly top-down and typically paternalistic approach to managing Singapore's different religious communities can hardly foster an understanding between those communities that is built from the bottom-up, that is, that has strong support at the 'grassroots' level within those communities. The state's policies are, however, very effective in silencing, or at least muffling, any objection or dissent from those communities, such that the shortcomings of its approach are often hard to see. They are nonetheless significant.

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