

**MUIS AND MENDAKI:
CURRENT AND FUTURE
CHALLENGES**

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FOREWORD

I am pleased to write this short foreword to introduce the Department's Seminar and Occasional Papers Series. The series provides the opportunity for staff members of the Department as well as scholars of Malay Studies in general to have their research findings on Malay subjects made known to a wider audience. It is also hoped that this initiative will provide the avenue for a beneficial exchange of ideas and viewpoints on Malay issues between town and gown.

The Department would like to thank Hotel Properties Pte Ltd for sponsoring the publication of the series.

Finally, it should be mentioned that the views expressed in the seminar and occasional papers series are those of the respective authors.

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Sometimes, when I am asked to look yet again at the situation of the Malays in Singapore, I feel that I am looking at one of those pictures where the dimensions are all mixed up to confuse the eye.

You follow the line of a staircase and think you are going down, but when you come to the end of the stairs you find you have been walking up the steps.

"The Malay Problem" is a bit like that, because there are those in my community who wonder if what they see actually exists.

They argue that the Chinese minority in the Malay archipelago, haunted by the insecurities of their immigrant origins, now have a problem with their exceptional economic success and are projecting it on to the locals. They point to the ceiling of expectation, the so-called glass ceiling that every Malay has heard of.

They ask how they should view discussion about the Chinese and Indian under-classes after being told that theirs is a culture of dependency, and that the ideal of meritocracy has been bent to accommodate them.

Or what to make of Sinda, and similar plans for the Chinese, after being told that special institutions had to be created to look after the Malays.

These questions are natural, even if mistaken. They are a distortion of perception, brought about by too much debate on one aspect of a National Problem. They are unnecessary, like the depression the debate has caused among the Malays.

Because, when I look at the complete picture, I find I am not looking at a Malay Problem or a Chinese Problem, but at a National Problem.

It cannot be otherwise, because every nation is the sum of its parts. The weaknesses of the Chinese, Malays and Indians are the weaknesses of Singapore as a whole. So are its strengths, by the way.

Which leads me to the three points I want to make in the next 20 minutes or so.

THE FIRST is that the Malays have long experience in evolving as a community through times of hardship, without polarising, and they are uniquely qualified to help other communities in Singapore.

THE SECOND is that the Malay community has assumed a full role in mainstream Singapore through the strength of its central institutions, the pillars of the Malay House.

THE THIRD is that the Malays will not tolerate a piecemeal or selective approach to an assumption of equal status, and that includes the right to enter mainstream politics for anyone who wants to.

I would add that unity is still the key to their progress. They have learned not only to stand tall but also to stand together. Another important theme that I want to stress is harmony with other racial groups.

But let me first run briefly over recent historical events to show how the Malays have coped with rapid economic and cultural change.

Thank God, the Malay experience of the 1960's is just a bad memory. That was when Malays thumped the tables as they debated the bewildering changes around them, and tried to come to terms with their own disorientation.

In 1970, they stopped accusing and pointing fingers at other people, and for the first time organised a seminar on national development.

This was a landmark, and it saw the Malays sitting together to address their problems in terms of a national framework.

Seminar followed seminar, each with a specific problem to solve - education most importantly and then other social problems. Each seminar produced a line of action, and a new talent for innovation.

For example, after the Singapore race riots of 1964-65, the energies that had been poured into processions in honour of the Prophet Muhammad's Birthday were later channelled instead into the Birthday Memorial Fund, which now supports the education of students up to tertiary level.

By this time, the Malays were the best organised in identifying their own difficulties, and the most active in tackling them.

And there was this very important feature which is often overlooked: there was no great polarisation of the community along economic or academic lines. They dealt with their community's problems as a community. The sense of oneness remained. I will deal with this later in reference to the Malay professionals.

The Malays also saw the need for a proper relationship with all sectors of the establishment, the political and non-political, the civil servants and the entrepreneurs.

In 1981, Singapore's political and non-political leadership got together and MENDAKI, the premier umbrella organisation for the upliftment of the Malays and other Muslims, was born.

MENDAKI's main focus has always been education but it has involved itself intimately with every problem that the Malays have encountered, and the congress of 1989 expanded its scope to tackle economic and social-cultural issues.

MENDAKI is a composite administration which provides a measure of coordination for its 14 member organisations, although each organisation has its own speciality and agenda and complete autonomy in deciding policy.

For example, the Jamiyah takes care of missionary work (bearing in mind that Malay and Muslim are practically synonymous terms in Singapore), the Majlis Pusat deals with culture, the KGMS with the concerns of teachers and Malay education.

Over and above this the Islamic Religious Council, MUIS, has a special link with MENDAKI and all its members.

Lately, there has been a heartening strengthening of cooperation between MENDAKI and its member groups and the government's dollar-for-dollar funding is opening up much wider areas for future collaborative projects.

But while I am talking about niche organisations, I want to deal with one very sensitive issue - the representation of professionals in the Malay community.

Because of the community's great stress on education, it has been a point of pride whenever our professionals and academics have returned their skills to the community, repaying the communal effort that helped them to achieve success.

This sense of oneness with the community, even among those who are most successful, is one reason why professionals and academics have not spun away from

the community. Perhaps this, and a disliking for elitism, is what made it so difficult, for so long, to get the Malay/Muslim professionals into a specialised group.

We at MENDAKI have a growing complement of professionals, especially in the economic and administrative fields, but there was no specialised grouping of professionals until the Association of Muslim Professionals was formed.

This is a very positive development. The Malay professional class - I hope you will forgive me for using such a value-laden word as "class" - this stratum of executive skill is of growing importance to the Malays. The professionals are a locomotive force, and as long as they continue to stay in touch with the community they will continue to establish new norms of achievement among the Malays, and new goals to aim for.

If the AMP can achieve this, it will have earned the right to be considered one of the pillars of Malay society.

What it must NOT allow is any disturbance of the unity that has been key to Malay progress.

I mean the Malays have agreed that to tackle disadvantage they must be united in action - and take a full place in the national structure. Through their institutions they are at last assuming that equal status AND enjoying the benefits that accrue from operating within the national structure.

Nobody claims, for instance, that the money MENDAKI receives from the government is tainted. The Malays, like other Singaporeans, have a right to it and these resources are poured into the community through MENDAKI's educational, social, cultural and even religious programmes.

But the Malays cannot demand cooperation from the wider society if they also opt to work apart from the established framework of Singapore. The right to participate in mainstream framework of Singapore. The right to participate in mainstream Singapore must include the right to participate in its politics, for anyone who wants to.

There is no moral logic in accepting funds from the government - in apparent cooperation - and then, because you don't like its politics, ostracizing members of your own group who are associated with it. I am talking, of course, about Malay MPs who have joined the PAP.

I wrote an article recently that there was a period when Malays who joined the PAP as candidates for election were considered to have "sold out".

But today more Malays accept that they can be legitimately represented by politicians who have ventured outside the community boundaries. The last election proved the point.

I would say that Malay MPs in the PAP are between a rock and a hard place - damned if they do and damned if they don't.

If these MPs chose instead to stay outside of mainstream politics, or public office, in which direction would they be leading their people? In effect, they would be keeping them OUT of the mainstream and on the sidelines.

Think back to the days when Malay MPs were left with little option but to leave their own grassroots organisations. Not an edifying experience.

There was bitterness then, and some of it still lingers, but it was a point of departure. Pray God we don't go back to the days when we considered ourselves a race apart.

We have come a long way from the heart-rending experiences of the 1960s, through the insecurities of the 1970s and the hard climb of the 1980s. And still we have barely reached the foothills.

For the 1990s, we must be sure that we are all climbing by the best and safest route to the summit, and that we do not become separated. Our successes have come through united action.

The only way to safeguard this progress is to consolidate and guarantee the integrity of the Malays' central institutions: the pillars.

There are many pillars in the Malay community: our religion, the niche organisations within and outside MENDAKI, our Mosque Building Programme which has given us many concrete symbols of Islamic pride, and important abstracts like our sense of history and our identification with the soil of Singapore.

But the four pillars that most give strength and shape to the community are MENDAKI; the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS); Berita Harian and the increasingly strong column of Malay leaders.

I feel compelled to state something here, because of my association with the first three. I have joined them because I feel they are the channels through which most can be achieved in the Malay community. Anyone who thinks that I am seeking to promote my own image by promoting them is a mile wide of the point.

The fact is that if these central pillars are threatened, the whole structure will fall.

THE FIRST, and the one that bears the most weight, is MENDAKI. MENDAKI represents not only its own history. It is the consummation of everything the Singapore Malays have fought for over the last 30 years.

It has been the standard bearer of Malay pride throughout the community's struggle for upliftment and assertion of its dignity.

More than that, it is part of the Singapore establishment and an institution of national standing.

I do not say this because of the deep emotional attachment that many Malays have for MENDAKI, or because of the respect that other communities show to it. I am referring to its achievements. And some of these are grand achievements, as I hope to show you.

MENDAKI is the central pillar of the Malay/Muslim edifice, describing the community's basic dimensions and what it can achieve. And it provides the mechanisms through which to achieve success.

It provides a comprehensive programme for the upliftment of the Malay/Muslims in terms of educational, socio-cultural and economic development.

It has taken a comprehensive approach to education, providing incentives at every level of competence, and enrichment for all in the schooling process.

Its recently-announced five-year plan for the community is based on its principal motivation, compassion, and it is deeply concerned in helping poor families break the cycle of deprivation.

At another level, it is beginning to provide corporate leadership to the community, through MENDAKI Holdings. Tabung Haji or the Pilgrimage Fund and MENDAKI

Travel and Tours are typical of the initiatives that are part of MENDAKI's long-term economic strategy - financially sound and working for the good of the community. Soon, MENDAKI Holdings will be involved directly in running promising businesses.

MENDAKI's travel agency was set up to protect the material standards, and level of dignity, at which Singapore Muslims might make the pilgrimage to Mecca.

But the jewel in our crown is the MENDAKI Growth Fund. This is not just an outlet for Malay disposable income. It provides a vehicle for financial investment that is morally acceptable in Islam. The response of the community to this fund was phenomenal. We expected \$10 million in the first year. We got \$30 million in the first month.

Malays in Singapore welcomed it as proof of their economic muscle. Malays throughout the region welcomed it as a signal triumph for all Malays.

Having said that, I have to admit that MENDAKI has NOT always been well-advised in its actions. It has NOT always stayed in touch with its own constituency. But it has been constant in its values and it articulates the deepest sentiments of the Malay/Muslims.

It has inspired the community and provided a focus for action in that most Muslims throughout the country now subscribe \$1 a month to MENDAKI through a CPF

check-off or through GIRO payments. This is not subscription. This is commitment, and it still provides the bulk of MENDAKI's money.

No other Malay/Muslim organisation has such a track record of major undertakings. It is the premier Malay/Muslim organisation thanks to years of selfless work by its veterans and my predecessors.

THE SECOND great pillar of the Singapore Malays, is MUIS which, as you know, is the main channel of Islamic administration in Singapore. It provides advice to Muslims on Islamic practice through religious rulings by its Fatwah Committee, but it is not entirely taken up with the affairs of the Hereafter.

The cause of inter-religious and inter-racial harmony in Singapore is a preoccupation of MUIS, which acts as a window on the wider world, constantly reviewing the international Muslim experience on questions of religious, racial and cultural tolerance.

MUIS is now working to promote this Islamic World View - which is very progressive and cultured, by the way, and something ALL Singaporeans could embrace without difficulty. Certainly we Muslims must embrace it because it is part of our liberal tradition. It is not bounded by any horizon and it is entirely in keeping with Singapore's situation in a complex, modern setting.

One should not underestimate how this flow of impressions from all over the world can speed the development of a well-educated and confident community. It is a vital intellectual food and in the case of the Malays underlines the fact that they are part of a huge international fraternity of amazing variety.

The lessons to be drawn from this by multi-racial, multi-cultural Singapore are not hard to identify. MUIS also has a great economic potential that it is now trying to develop into a powerful positive force.

So MUIS is not entirely taken up with the Life after Death. Even in its religious concerns it takes into account the daily needs of Singapore Muslims.

It has just persuaded Singapore's five full-time madrasahs, or religious schools, to accept a uniform syllabus of normal academic subjects. This was a significant recognition by a deeply religious body of teachers of the need to prepare Muslim children for the realities of modern Singapore.

The concern of MUIS was to strike a balance between what the community realistically needs in terms of future supply of religious teachers, what is good for the children themselves - because not all of them will make the grade - and what is appropriate for Singapore.

The next step is to establish a uniform curriculum and better mechanisms to ensure that the child who is not obviously cut out to be the next Mufti will be sent for vocational education before it is too late.

And now for *Berita Harian*. This is very close to my heart because I was editor of *Berita Harian* and the Sunday paper *Berita Minggu* for fourteen years. The role of *Berita Harian* and *Berita Minggu* is the same as for other papers - to disseminate information and to put events into their social and political perspectives.

Berita Harian is the only Malay daily paper in Singapore but it is more than just a newspaper. It is the embodiment of the Malays' pride in having their own point of view and being able to express it in their own language and imagery. And often it is the only means by which Malays can make sense of the economic and political tides that wash around them.

The newspaper business, unfortunately, is largely a numbers game. If you have the readers, you have the advertisers, you have the money. *Berita Harian* does not have the readers, and it cannot support itself in the normal way.

But its value cannot be expressed in commercial terms.

Together with MENDAKI and MUIS it represents an enormous - probably unique - body of experience of how a depressed and disorientated community can struggle to its feet and get its bearings.

And finally, there is that column of leaders that I mentioned a while ago. This important pillar has not yet taken its final form. There is nothing monolithic about it. It is an amalgam of many building materials of different tolerances and ability. There is a lot of construction to be done before it can be a single solid support for the Malay House.

But the strength is there already. You can feel it in the debates among the Malay thinkers; the way dedicated groups can pool their energies in pursuit of a wider cause; the creative tensions between the large and small organisations; the rise of specialist movements, like the AMP, in response to particular needs, the strategic position of the Malay politicians.

When this column of leaders has been fully tested, and its various forces are working together, we shall have a construction of prodigious strength.

I say that all four pillars are of importance to ALL Singaporeans. Not just the Malays.

What do I mean by that?

I can recall when Malay meant social casualty. It meant dependant, it meant lazy, it meant unfocused, it meant unworldly.

Well, it doesn't anymore.

For the growing band of young Muslims who are coming forward to help MENDAKI in its community work, Malay means switched on. It means self-sufficient, it means aware, it means vision, it means concerned with reality but with reasonable limits on materialism.

For my children and for me it means able to extend the hand of friendship, not to take but to give.

And what we Malays can give is our unparalleled experience in dealing with hardship.

Much has been made of the need for a social glue in Singapore - and there is a need. Singaporeans should not be kept apart because positive values within one culture are wrongly perceived in another.

We need something outside those cultures which, at the same time, is common to all of them. We need to develop a truly national identity which pulls us together but which also allows people the cultural freedoms they need.

Well, how about an acceptance of diversity? That is not such a radical idea. The Malays have never been too fond of a culturally homogeneous Singapore because they are proud of their cultural identity and there is no need for us all to disappear into one cultural soup.