

**ISLAMIC RELIGIOUS SCHOOLS  
IN SINGAPORE:  
RECENT TRENDS AND ISSUES**

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# ISLAMIC RELIGIOUS SCHOOLS IN SINGAPORE: RECENT TRENDS AND ISSUES\*

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As with many other Southeast Asian countries in the post-colonial era, Singapore has had to apply itself to the task of building, out of a plural society, an integrated and forward looking nation. The distrust and hostility between language and ethnic groups that once plagued Singapore had to be kept at bay and in its place, measures to bring about rapid economic and social development for its people. Indeed, the survival of the state was at stake if inter-ethnic tensions were not properly understood and steps taken to solve problems.

The political system that emerged in response to these challenges featured a government that relied on a centralization of authority and was prepared to engage in extensive social engineering to bring about orderly social change. The strategy was to bring legitimacy to a non-particularistic and an achievement-oriented elite, to build new institutions and institute new mechanisms to entrench supportive elements, and to isolate those seen as overly committed to ethnic-based loyalties.<sup>1</sup>

Education is one institution which has come in for sustained attention because it is easily the most manipulable of the major social institutions. It is highly valued, both from the government perspective that stresses the development of human resources as well as the maintenance of cultural and linguistic heritages, and from the individual's perspective of education as an invaluable avenue of social mobility. The basic governing ingredients are consistently at play, i.e.,

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centralization of authority, emphasis on rationalization and cost-effective management, and the steady erosion of the legitimacy of subgroups such as clans and castes, among others.<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps no other institutions in Singapore have been handled with as much sensitivity as religion. For a start, Singapore is constitutionally secular with no official religion in its constitution. However, religions are an acknowledged positive factor in Singapore society offering their followers valuable social ethos constructive to harmonious living. For this, religions are allowed room for expression, with each Singaporean given the freedom to practise their respective faiths. At least for as long as religions do not compete with each other and that religious beliefs do not contest the ideological and administrative practices of the government nor its ideological hold on the population.<sup>3</sup> To underline this point, religions are openly told to separate themselves from state politics as evidenced by the institutionalization of the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Bill in 1990.<sup>4</sup>

Precisely because of its ideological appeal that religion was never allowed to play a significant role in education. Its adoption into the national curriculum in 1982, which received much attention, was short-lived. Under this scheme, a Religious Knowledge course for all the major faiths was introduced as a component of the moral educational programme in government schools. By 1990, however, this course was phased out by the government, apparently heeding the findings of a government-commissioned, social scientific study of religion in Singapore which implicated Religious Knowledge programs in promoting religious revivalism and intensifying religious polarization among students which, if not

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<sup>1</sup> Gopinathan, 1979:395.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid:394.

<sup>3</sup> Chua, 1995:31.

<sup>4</sup> Under this bill, religious leaders commenting on social and political issues in their capacity as preachers are not allowed. Prior to the passing of this bill, the Christian Conference of Asia, which professed to be religious but found to be involved in politics, was de-registered in December 1987.

contained, could trigger inter-religious conflicts.<sup>5</sup> Henceforth, moral education was taught, as it has previously been, devoid of any religious basis.<sup>6</sup>

For the Muslims, religion is more than the teaching of moral education and basic life values. Islam projects itself as embodying a comprehensive belief system rooted in *tauhid* or the oneness of God, with something to say in the form of principle guidelines about every aspect of a Muslim's life. Such a perspective to education, however, has no place in the national curriculum. In recent years, more and more Malay-Muslim parents are looking to mosques and other private educational centers for a piece of religious teaching for their children. More significantly, a growing number are abandoning the conventional schools altogether in favour of an alternative school, one that can provide an integration of secular and religious knowledge under one roof. For this, they have turned to the Islamic religious schools, the madrasah.<sup>7</sup> The response to this growing trend of opting out of the national schools in favour of the madrasah has been a mix of delight, concern, and suspicion.<sup>8</sup> This paper is an exploratory study seeking to provide a description and analysis of the issues and concerns that have surfaced from this trend.

### **Background to Education Choices for Muslim Singaporeans<sup>9</sup>**

In Singapore, formal education for Muslims come in two main forms of orientations – the “secular” and “religious” schools. The “secular” schools are schools which are either run by the government or private institutions. They are

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<sup>5</sup> The Straits Times, 20 Apr 1989; Chua (1995) read the termination of the Religious Knowledge course as partly aimed at eliminating potential counter-ideologies.

<sup>6</sup> The Religious Knowledge subjects, though no longer taught in national schools, are still being offered at the GCE 'O' level examinations.

<sup>7</sup> The Straits Times, 1 Mar 1998a.

<sup>8</sup> Berita Harian, 15 May 1999.

<sup>9</sup> Based on the 1990 Census of Population, Muslims in Singapore are mostly made up of Malays (85.2%) and Indians (12.2%) with almost all Malays (99.6%) professing Islam as their religion (Kuo & Tong, 1995). Since the madrasahs use the medium of Malay, apart from Arabic and English, Indian Muslims who are not literate in Malay have no access to a madrasah education in Singapore.

secular in orientation in that religion and religious subjects are not the core issues in the curriculum. Students sit for the government examinations from primary to pre-university levels and the major subjects are English, Mathematics, Science and the Humanities. Majority of Muslim students attend this type of school.<sup>10</sup>

The “religious” schools for the Muslims are those that are privately-funded. They come in the form of the madrasah where students either study full-time or part-time. While part-time madrasahs are run in the mosques as part of the latter's service to the Muslim community, the full-time madrasahs are separate educational establishments. There are six full-time madrasahs in Singapore (Al-Arabiah, Aljunied, Al-Irsyad, Al-Maarif, Alsagoff and Wak Tanjung). These institutions focus on religious education although some also teach secular subjects preparing students for national examinations.<sup>11</sup> The madrasahs have little direct contact with the Ministry of Education (MOE). Instead, many cling to their traditional links with overseas Islamic institutions. For example, Madrasah Aljunied, the second oldest Islamic school here, has special ties with Cairo's prestigious Al-Azhar University, which enable its students to gain direct entry. KUSZA in Trengganu, and lately JAIPETRA in Kelantan, are additional educational establishments which madrasah students can opt for for their higher religious education.

### **Madrasah: Background and Development**

The madrasahs here are mainly set up by philanthropists just after the turn of the century. They are private schools, receiving no funding from the Government. Many began as Islamic religious schools for boys but as enrolments declined in the '50s and '60s, many started taking in girls. In fact, one madrasah converted into an exclusively girls' school. At their peak, there were at least 50

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<sup>10</sup> The category of 'secular' government schools include Malay-medium schools which used to represent another option for Muslim students, but these schools began to lose their appeal in the '70s due to the limited career prospects of Malay-educated graduates compared to that of their English-educated counterparts. Due to declining enrolment, these schools subsequently stopped admitting new students from 1983. They are now no longer in operation.

<sup>11</sup> The Straits Times, 1 Mar 1998b.

such schools, many run as informal village seminaries with just one or two teachers teaching basic religious knowledge.<sup>12</sup>

For a long time since their founding, all the existing six madrasahs focused their efforts on the teaching of religious studies and Arabic language at primary level with a few providing education up to secondary level. A handful of students who successfully completed the primary-level continued to the secondary-level, with the majority leaving the institution after completing their primary education.<sup>13</sup> Some students who complete their secondary education in the madrasah continue their studies abroad. When they return, most end up as religious teachers teaching at the full-time or part-time madrasahs,<sup>14</sup> while others work with government institutions dealing with the Muslims' welfare such as the *Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura* (MUIS)<sup>15</sup> and the Syariah Court.<sup>16</sup>

The expansion of the secular education system and the resettlement of villagers into high-rise Housing and Development Board (HDB) flats in new towns led to a decline of the madrasah. At their lowest point between the '70s and early '80s, they were not just the preferred schools for parents who wanted a religious education for their children but also a place of last resort for those who did not make it through the streaming system in the government schools.<sup>17</sup> This latter group of students have ceased enrolling in the madrasahs since 1994 after MOE put in place a system that caters to the needs of students of all levels of academic ability, effectively keeping these students in school for at least ten years.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> The Straits Times, 1 Mar 1998a; see Zahoor Ahmad F. Hussain, 1967, and Ahmad Mohd Ibrahim, 1967, for a historical account of the madrasahs.

<sup>13</sup> Abu Bakar Hashim, 1989: 27.

<sup>14</sup> Ahmad Mohd Ibrahim, 1967:13.

<sup>15</sup> A statutory board established in 1968 when the Administration Law Act (AMLA) came into effect. Its primary role is to look after the interests of Muslims in Singapore.

<sup>16</sup> But openings in these institutions are limited. In recent times, madrasah graduates with tertiary qualification started their own businesses ranging from private tuition centres, travel agencies catering to *haj* needs, trading of halal meat, to traditional medicine (Berita Harian, 27 Mar 1998).

<sup>17</sup> Zubaidah Ghani & Fauziah Soeratman, 1975: 45; see also The Straits Times, 1998a.

<sup>18</sup> The Straits Times, 28 Apr 1995.

There has been a strong revival of the madrasah since the late '80s, with all reporting record enrolments.<sup>19</sup> In 1986, there were 135 Primary 1 pupils in the various madrasahs. In a recently completed enrolment exercise for all the madrasahs, about 460 pupils will attend Primary 1 in the year 2000 (Table 1). Each year more than twice that number apply for the limited places. This year, about 2000 applications were received for the 460 places available.<sup>20</sup> Overall, there are more than 4000 students studying full-time in the six madrasahs (Table 2).<sup>21</sup>

Year	1986	1987	1988	1989	1998	1999
No.	135	216	299	382	390	460

*Table 1: Primary 1 places offered in the madrasahs*

Year	1991	1992	1993	1994	1998	1999
No.	2011	2780	3054	3054	3800	4000

*Table 2: Total student enrolment in the madrasahs*

### **Government Concern**

The trend did not go unnoticed. At a Malay community event in December 1997, the Minister for Education, Rear-Admiral Teo Chee Hean, referred to it obliquely when he noted that more Malays were opting out of the mainstream schools. Based on his ministry's estimate, 500 Malay Primary 1 pupils or 5 to 6 per cent of the cohort opt out of the system every year.<sup>22</sup> This compares with 1.5

<sup>19</sup> An account of the increasing popularity of the madrasahs is explored in later sections of this paper.

<sup>20</sup> The number who actually applied may be smaller since one applicant may apply to more than one madrasah to increase the chance of getting into one.

<sup>21</sup> Collated statistics from three sources: (i) *Berita Harian*, 18 Mar 1999, (ii) *The Straits Times*, 1 Mar 1998, (iii) Zainah Alias (1998).

per cent and 4.5 per cent among the Chinese and the Indians respectively. Those who opt out, he cautioned, would not receive the quality education necessary for good jobs, and would not be able to integrate well into the social and economic system.<sup>23</sup>

The government's interest in the issue has sparked a deluge of letters from the community with many reading murky meanings into the ministers' statements: Was the Government hinting that change was around the corner for the madrasah system? Will the madrasahs be shut down?

The issue of the madrasah surfaced again earlier this year through letters from the Press Secretary to Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew<sup>24</sup> in the midst of the debate on the relevance and impact of the Special Assistance Plan (SAP) schools<sup>25</sup> on Singapore's multi-racial fabric. The madrasahs of today are likened to the privately-funded Chinese schools of the bygone era whose students could not fit into the economy and secure good jobs.<sup>26</sup> Many became disaffected and rebellious with some falling to the influence of radical social reformists, namely the communists.

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<sup>22</sup> The percentage of Malay-Muslim students from a cohort specifically enrolling in the madrasahs, as opposed to mainstream schools, is 3.5 percent (The Straits Times, 18 Jun 1999).

<sup>23</sup> The Sunday Times, 28 Dec 1997.

<sup>24</sup> The Straits Times, 24 April 1999.

<sup>25</sup> SAP schools are bilingual institutions intended to enable good pupils to offer two languages at first language level namely English and Chinese, to preserve the character of traditional Chinese schools, and to meet the charge that the education authorities were indifferent to the decline in standards in Chinese. These schools are given additional resources, including good bilingual teachers. The SAP schools policy drew criticism from both English-educated Chinese and the minority groups who charged that non-Chinese students who do not offer Chinese language at first language level would not have access to these good schools with better resources, and that bright Chinese pupils concentrated in such schools will not have an adequate opportunity to mix, on a daily basis, as students, with members of other races. A more significant argument is the perception that these bright students are destined for future leadership positions in government, industry and other vital sectors, and their socialization in a "Chinese" environment would limit their understanding of the values, expectations and norms of the other communities (Gopinathan, 1998:30; see also The Straits Times, 11 Mar 1999).

<sup>26</sup> Mostly set up by clan associations and private individuals, the Chinese-medium schools were brought into the fold of the MOE who then determined the curriculum taught in these schools. In return, the schools receive financial assistance from the Ministry through the Grant-in-Aid Regulations. The established among these schools were later converted to SAP schools and the



The contention of the Senior Minister's Press Secretary was that because the madrasahs concentrate on religious education, with Islamic Theology, Islamic Jurisprudence and Arabic as major subjects, the students would not be able to acquire the critical foundation skills like English, Mathematics, Science and Information Technology<sup>27</sup> that are necessary in an economy that favours knowledge workers. The students' identification with their fellow Singaporeans will also be weak because they have not shared a common experience in the government schools. Unable to be full participants in Singapore's economy, nor fit into Singapore's mainstream society where English is the common language, it is feared that they will be disadvantaged and become a 'problem', like the old Chinese school students.

Once again these recent statements created anxiety among the general public with some writers to the local daily, *Berita Harian* and *The Straits Times*, questioning the validity of comparing the madrasahs with the SAP schools.<sup>28</sup> Some went on to suggest that the government should consider giving financial assistance to the madrasah in line with its stand on keeping ethnic components in Singapore intact.<sup>29</sup> While the political leaders' critical yet non-committal stance towards the madrasah may be conceivably perplexing, it is not difficult to read the government statements as indicative of its uneasiness that a religious-based education, which is effectively isolated from mainstream funding, is drawing the crowds. It is a subtle warning that religious chauvinism and Islamic parochialism as a potential by-product of the global religious revivalism will not be tolerated in multi-racial and multi-religious Singapore.

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language of instruction changed to English except for the teaching of Chinese language and literature.

<sup>27</sup> At least three of the madrasahs offer these subjects, and some madrasah students have succeeded in gaining entry into the local polytechnics and universities because of this. The Press Secretary's concern should be read as targeting the majority of madrasah students who do not progress beyond secondary education for reasons that are explored in pages 13 to 16, and are without the relevant qualifications to land themselves jobs nor entry into vocational institutions, a recourse which less academically able students of government schools have .

<sup>28</sup> *The Straits Times*, 14, 17 & 28 (two letters) April 1999; 17 May 1999.

<sup>29</sup> *Berita Harian*, 24 Apr 1999; see also page 17 for a discussion on what such a request entails.

## **Making Sense of the Issues**

In attempting to make sense of the increasing popularity of madrasah education, and the associated concerns that it generates, it is useful to consider two variables, the parents and the managers of the madrasahs, who have a direct interest in the madrasah issue.

### ***1. Parents' Perspectives***

The madrasah is clearly the natural choice for parents who genuinely want their children to be schooled in the religious disciplines with the hope of making them the future *asatizah* (religious teachers) or *ulama* (Muslim theologians).<sup>30</sup> Children of these parents have formed the traditional market for the madrasahs. It is not clear, however, to what extent they form the majority at the present time.

More interesting is the group of parents who look to the madrasah for the ideal, all-encompassing Islamic education that provides for an integration of both secular and religious knowledge. Currently, Muslim students attending government schools go to the mosques during outside school hours once or twice a week for their religious instruction. From the point of view of the comprehensiveness of Islam, this arrangement is inadequate and unsatisfying to parents who genuinely believe that there should not be a differentiation between secular and religious knowledge and that Islam as a way of life, including observing the five daily prayers, should not be separated from the rest of a child's education.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, the madrasahs are attracting more well-educated and vocal parents who are genuinely convinced of madrasah education.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Berita Harian, 16 Jan 1998a.

<sup>31</sup> Zainah Alias, 1998:35.

<sup>32</sup> Among the well-educated parents spoken to include a teacher holding a senior teaching position in a government school who decided on a madrasah education for his two daughters, a lecturer awaiting to be conferred a doctoral degree whose eldest son and two daughters are now in the madrasah. There have also been reports in the local daily of engineers and lawyers opting for the madrasah for their children's education (The Straits Times, 1 Mar 1998b).

On a related note, the madrasah's appeal may stem from the need to combat the encroachment of 'undesirable' foreign values that come with the capitalist developments and modernization in Singapore. In one study, almost half of parents interviewed see the need to equip their children with religious values in the face of modernization, with many citing the madrasah school culture as offering the environment in which their children can be insulated from the influence of negative social values associated with modernization such as drug abuse, sexual permissiveness, youth gangsterism, and consumerism, among others.<sup>33</sup> One can therefore interpret parents' interest in madrasah education as a reaction to the problems of modernization, relying on religion as a moral check and on the madrasah as a security for their children.

The renewed interest in madrasah education is likely also to do with the government's recent emphasis on reviving traditional values and returning to the cultural roots of the respective communities in order to counter individualism – an emphasis on individual selves and unwillingness to make self-sacrifice for the social good – which no doubt sprang from the increasingly consumerist orientation in Singapore society. While the government has carefully steered the Chinese to accept Mandarin and through this medium appreciate Confucian ethics (a non-religious set of values) in order to regain for the Chinese the moral and philosophical strength that have galvanized them into a strong and vibrant society that they are today, the Malay-Muslims are relatively left to their own doing. Islam, very much entrenched in Malay culture and society, and which currently enjoys a worldwide resurgence, seemed a likely source from which the Malay-Muslims seek for moral strength and carve their own cultural identity.<sup>34</sup> One manifestation of this identity is the increasing willingness among Muslim women to cover the *aurat* or to observe a particular code on modesty which invariably refers to which parts of the body may be left exposed or unclothed.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Zainah Alias, 1998:36; see also Berita Harian, 16 Jan 1998b.

<sup>34</sup> Mukhlis Abu Bakar, 1997:27.

<sup>35</sup> The madrasahs' uniform allowing girls to cover their *aurat* and the observance of the five daily prayers as part of the madrasahs' culture are pulling factors that attract parents to the madrasahs (Zainah Alias, 1998:41).

It might perhaps be useful to note that the Muslims have stood at the lower end of the socio-economic ladder<sup>36</sup> despite over a decade of self-help efforts to improve their long-term prospects.<sup>37</sup> The constant public reminder in the media of the Malay-Muslims' 'worrisome' state in the midst of strides made by the other communities may draw them closer, if they are not already, to the religion into which they were socialized as children. As often, for the Muslims, Islam acts as an anchor in times of uncertainty, a "security blanket" that alleviates their fears, and provides solace, stability, direction and hope.<sup>38</sup>

The tendency to search for strength, security and a wholesome education within Islam should not be detached from the preeminent place that the *umma* or Islamic community occupies in Islamic theory. Both the Islamic notion of *umma* and the alien, Western, secular notion of territorial nationalism involve a peoples' sense of "we-ness", togetherness, group identity and group loyalty due to shared heritage. But while "nationalism" attempts to engender solidarity among people living within the territorial boundaries of a particular nation-state, the Islamic *umma* rises above narrow national interests and is concerned with improving the welfare of, and forging a sense of solidarity and strength among, Muslims all over the world. While this pan-Islamic vision seems utopian and difficult to achieve today,<sup>39</sup> it nevertheless figures prominently in the minds of many Muslims.

Thus parents who send their children to the madrasah do so for a variety of reasons. While some want to see their children grow up as religious teachers or scholars, others simply want their children to acquire a 'balanced' education without needing to forgo either the secular or religious knowledge. In fact, they hope for their children to be equally successful, if not very successful, in their secular subjects so as to allow them to enter into professional courses at the

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<sup>36</sup> The 1990 Census of Population found Muslims (inclusive of Malays, Indians and other races) to be negatively associated with the level of education and that a high percentage of them were found in the ranks of those in the blue-collar occupation (Kuo & Tong, 1995).

<sup>37</sup> This is not to ignore the progress made by the Malay-Muslims over the same period (Berita Harian, 25 Oct 1997).

<sup>38</sup> Husain, 1997:108.

<sup>39</sup> Chubin, 1997:30.

university.<sup>40</sup> But whichever category they belong to, they share the belief that success for their children is defined as happiness in this world and the world hereafter, and that to them the madrasahs offer a conducive environment in which to acquire that kind of perspective to life.

## **2. Madrasahs' Perspectives**

Departing from tradition, the madrasahs of today have instituted changes in the orientation of their curriculum, partly in response to changing realities and demands of the day, and partly due to greater exposure to different fields of knowledge and the corresponding willingness to impart these knowledge. Hence, apart from the religious subjects, some have incorporated the teaching of English, Malay and Mathematics with others topping these with the Sciences in order to improve the students' knowledge repertoires. In part, these changes contributed to the attractiveness of madrasah education.<sup>41</sup>

It is clear, however, that different madrasahs view the introduction of these additional subjects differently. Madrasah Aljunied, for instance, which jealously guards its reputation as a centre for the training of future *ulama* and religious teachers, view the minimal introduction of English, Malay and Mathematics as enriching its religious curriculum, citing literacy in the English Language and improved numeracy as a means to better appreciate modern technology and to reach out to a more sophisticated society.<sup>42</sup> But the time and resources devoted towards the teaching and learning of these subjects are intentionally limited and are not intended to adequately prepare students for national examinations.

Other madrasahs, while retaining their core competency in the teaching of religious subjects, place increasing importance on the secular subjects. Their aim

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<sup>40</sup> Feedback from parents attending the "Meet the Parents" session of Madrasah Irsyad, 29 May 1999.

<sup>41</sup> Zainah Alias, 1998:51.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid:25-26; see also Abu Bakar Hashim, 1989:30.

has shifted from primarily producing *ulama* to producing workers and professionals who can participate actively in the economy at the same time morally attuned to their religious obligations. What has become an important undertaking is the preparing of 'Muslim' students with sufficient qualification for successful enrolment into higher education and useful participation in the modern economy.<sup>43</sup>

It would appear that the hopes and expectation of parents are partly met by the madrasah as it redefines its role and responsibilities. It is due to these changes instituted in the madrasahs since the late '80s, coupled with the perceived moral security that they provide in the face of modernization, that made the madrasah a popular choice of education for certain sections of the Malay-Muslim community. There are however shortcomings inherent in the madrasah system which many of the parents are willing to ignore.

### **The Challenges Facing the Madrasah**

Shifting the traditional role of the madrasah from being an institution for the training and development of *ulama* to one that trains its students beyond "religious" subjects to include those that would suit the demands of modern society, such as English, the sciences and mathematics, took place as recently as a decade ago. Such role expansion of the madrasah, as has been proposed, is the result of two major considerations: meeting parental expectation for an alternative education for their children that pivots around Islam, and fulfilling the national expectation to maintain its relevance and existence in the face of an economy that values skilled and knowledge workers. But it will be argued that the increase in infra-structural development and allocation of funds and resources as expected in any role expansion, have not moved in tandem with this expansion.

The madrasahs are faced with various obstacles. Despite the fact that since the early period of this century, the madrasahs in Singapore, especially Madrasah Aljunied, have been the centre of Islamic education for this region, these

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<sup>43</sup> Warita Irsyad, Dec 1997; As mentioned previously, a handful of students from Madrasah Al-

madrasahs continue to be inundated with problems. These include the economic value of madrasah graduates, the difficulty of recruiting qualified teachers, high dropout rates, the lack of standardization of syllabi, and financial problems.

These problems are not new; in fact they have been noted as early as 1966 by paper writers of a seminar organized by the University of Singapore Muslim Society (USMS).<sup>44</sup> They were again highlighted thirty years down the road in 1989 in another seminar organized by MUIS and the Singapore Malay Teachers Union (KGMS). The issues seem to have persisted and lingered on without being adequately resolved.

A key weakness of the madrasahs is their lack of funds, and hence resources and qualified teachers; most of the teachers are not trained in pedagogy, making standards rather patchy. In one madrasah, about S\$800,000 are required to finance its annual operations. Of these, only 50% are met through fees paid by students as well as miscellaneous grants disbursed by MUIS. The other 50% have to be met through fund raising efforts.<sup>45</sup> Recruiting teachers trained in pedagogy and at competitive salaries is almost impossible and would only divert more valuable scarce resources into fund raising.<sup>46</sup>

A related issue of much concern is the dropout rate which can be traced partly to poor pedagogical skills. A reported 50 to 65 per cent of each cohort of madrasah students do not make it to Secondary 4.<sup>47</sup> Those who succeeded admitted that they required tremendous outside help to survive and succeed in the system. The dropout rate may also be traced to the insufficient time allotted for the

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Maarif have in fact qualified for entry into the National University of Singapore each year.

<sup>44</sup> Hussin Mutalib, 1989:2.

<sup>45</sup> Personal communication with a madrasah official who requested for anonymity.

<sup>46</sup> There are instances of National Institute of Education (NIE)-trained teachers who voluntarily left the government schools after having served their bond in favour of teaching in the madrasahs despite facing a 30-40% cut in their salaries. Their number, however, is small.

<sup>47</sup> According to The Straits Times (1 Mar 1998b), these students either drop out of full-time education or move to the secular system. The statistics do not, however, indicate to what extent this figure is attributed to students who enrolled in the madrasahs as dropouts of mainstream schools as has happened in the past until 1993 (see page 5), or that if the definition of 'dropout' includes students who opt to leave a particular madrasah for other religious institutions in Singapore or abroad; see also Berita Harian, 15 Jan 1998.

teaching and learning of each subject. A typical primary level madrasah, for instance, sets aside at most 50% of curriculum time for the teaching and learning of secular subjects which, in the government schools, would have taken up almost the entire time available. Any more than 50% would mean sacrificing the religious subjects, threatening the very basis for the madrasahs' existence. This is one dilemma which the madrasahs have yet to resolve.

The madrasahs also have no safety net for weak students. In a government school, less academically-inclined students would be channeled to a "technical" stream in which students take up vocational skills. They can move on to a vocational institute where they go through further training to equip themselves for blue-collar jobs. This alternative route is not available to madrasah students. This prompted a Muslim MP to consider the amount of "wastage" in terms of not equipping madrasah students with the necessary skills to compete in the job market and contribute to society as significant.<sup>48</sup>

An important point to note is that each madrasah is fiercely independent, has its own history, aims and orientation, and adopts and organizes its curriculum differently. Indeed, MUIS, which is empowered under the Administration of Muslim Law Act to control the conduct of the madrasahs,<sup>49</sup> has faced much resistance from the latter.<sup>50</sup> Partly because of this, attempts by MUIS to standardize the curriculum and the administration of the madrasahs have been difficult.

It is only in recent years that MUIS was reported to have gained some headway into the madrasahs after much convincing and persuasion. Since stepping in, MUIS has provided teacher-training courses, tried to coordinate the madrasahs' systems, and provide common examinations at Secondary 4. Since last year, all

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ahmad Mohd Ibrahim, 1967:16.

<sup>50</sup> The madrasahs have existed long before the establishment of MUIS. As an institution accountable to the government, MUIS's initial overture towards the madrasahs was suspected, seen as imposing, and interpreted as interference by the government in the affairs of the madrasahs. MUIS's slow bureaucratic process also contributed to the madrasahs' ambivalent liaison with MUIS.



the full-time madrasahs, except one, took part in a common enrolment exercise, and certain common subjects are taught as part of the syllabus. Common textbooks are also being introduced. The madrasahs have also agreed to set up a self-appraisal system, similar to that of government secondary schools. Lately, MUIS launched an ambitious plan to equip all the madrasahs with computer and IT facilities each with their own individual servers through the Madrasah IT Plan (MITP).<sup>51</sup>

Notwithstanding the efforts made, these measures may be considered peripheral unless consistently pursued and sustained. The successful coordination of these programs may be taken as a measure of MUIS' leadership, credibility and reliability given that its legitimacy over the madrasahs and the type of government resources and infrastructure available at its disposal to successfully manage the madrasahs are unlike that of MOE. Unless MUIS' leadership and wisdom are proven and acknowledged, even simple coordination can prove futile.

Badly needed financial injection, particularly towards the payroll of teachers and staff would have made a significant impact on the madrasahs. But it is unlikely that MUIS has the capacity to make a full financial commitment to all the madrasahs. The financial assistance which MUIS gives to all the madrasahs itself come from a limited pool dependent on public contribution such as *zakat* or tithe.

### **Possible Directions**

The government has mentioned in parliament that it has no intention of closing down the madrasahs, suggesting instead that changes be made to the system to ensure that all those who pass through them, including those who drop out, can get jobs.<sup>52</sup> But to improve the employability of madrasah graduates and dropouts by relying on existing sources of income will be extremely difficult,

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<sup>51</sup> The Straits Times, 6 Feb 1999.

<sup>52</sup> The Straits Times, 20 Mar 1998.

unless perhaps the madrasahs apply to invoke the Grant-in-Aid Regulations (1957)<sup>53</sup> and assimilate into the national educational structure, much in the way of the Christian mission and the former Chinese-medium schools. Under such a system, the madrasahs may have their own board of governors, are guaranteed of funding and assured of quality in the teaching of secular subjects. The catch is they will have to follow the MOE's guidelines closely, which means time devoted to the religious curriculum will be additional to (and not part of) those required for the teaching of secular subjects in the national schools.

Because time which can be devoted to the religious subjects is limited, the government-aided school idea is seen by the madrasah community as entailing too great a dilution of the religious component. More importantly, the desired integration of religious and secular education is seen to have to take a step backwards because the school curriculum must assume a neutral perspective in accordance with the requirements of the MOE.<sup>54</sup> In fact, the question of distinguishing between religious and secular education formed much of the reason for the madrasahs objecting to the receipt of government grant-in-aid since the '60s.<sup>55</sup>

There is reason to believe that a Muslim government-aided school idea may be rejected on other grounds. In the heat of the debate on whether to open up an all Malay SAP school for top Malay students, Malay-Muslim MPs have been quoted as not favouring the establishment of schools which attracts a high concentration of Malay-Muslim students based on the argument that Malay students will not push themselves when segregated in their own classes and denied the chance to interact with top students of all races.<sup>56</sup> One may conclude on this basis that a Muslim-run government-aided school will even be less desirable to the Malay-Muslim political leaders. Thus, on the strength of current ground

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<sup>53</sup> Ahmad Mohd Ibrahim, 1967:16.

<sup>54</sup> Presumably to accommodate non-Muslims who will have equal access to such government-aided schools

<sup>55</sup> Ahmad Mohd Ibrahim, 1967:17.

<sup>56</sup> The Straits Times, 28 Jan 1999.

sentiments and possible objection on the political front, the madrasahs look set to remain outside the control of the MOE, and hence its standards.

Nevertheless, it would be simplistic to deduce that the political leadership will simply close the matter on the madrasah. The madrasah remains a disquieting issue both for its economic and social ramifications, not least for the potential threat of religious parochialism emerging and undermining efforts at nation building. The conduct of madrasah graduates and that of the religious elite, many of whom are the product of the madrasah system, and whose opinion, by and large, are respected by the general Muslim population in Singapore, will partly influence how the madrasah issue is to be settled.

The political leadership is likely to continue to articulate its interest in the madrasahs, perhaps with more persistence via MUIS or through public statements either in the fashion of Rear-Admiral Teo Chee Hean's indirect inference of late 1997 or the direct press comments of the Press Secretary to the Senior Minister earlier this year. So far, Rear-Admiral Teo's statement seems to have no effect on reversing the trend as evidenced by the rising figures at the 1998 and 1999 madrasah registration exercise. It is still too early to assess if the Press Secretary's criticism will fare any better. In any case, it is hard to imagine the madrasah losing its appeal even in the face of a direct onslaught on its inadequacies.

As for MUIS, it will have little recourse but to obtain a firmer grip on the direction and curriculum of the madrasahs particularly those over which it has greater authority such as Madrasah Aljunied and Madrasah Al-Irsyad.<sup>57</sup> The prudent use of financial incentives via the *zakat* and other Muslim public funds cannot be ruled out if MUIS were to carry enough weight and influence. Much will also depend on how able and reliable a leadership MUIS can provide for the madrasah community and win over their confidence.

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<sup>57</sup> The appointment of the management of these madrasahs is now in the hands of MUIS after they encountered difficulties and required MUIS to step in – fund raising for a new building in the case of Madrasah Aljunied, and finding an alternative location for Madrasah Al-Irsyad.

Whatever the measures may be, any government-inspired change to the madrasah system is likely to be viewed with suspicion by the general Muslim community. Not to mention the psychological stress and a sense of loss that will bear upon the community should the madrasah be sacrificed.<sup>58</sup> Ground sentiments will continue to dictate how the political leaders and MUIS will act in initiating changes to the madrasah system in the future.

### **Concluding Remarks**

The madrasah is one issue that is cared about passionately within the Singapore's Muslim community, in contrast to the mood surrounding the issue of the former Malay-medium school. For the latter, doubts on the economic utility of Malay-educated graduates have led to its decline and eventual closure. In the case of the madrasah, although economic considerations remain strong, they seem to pale in comparison with the more powerful constant, Islam. Such resolve can be baffling, to the authorities in particular, considering that the education system which is abandoned in favour of the madrasah is reportedly one of the best in the world.

Additionally, to many Muslims, including those who do not send their children to the madrasahs, the madrasah is an important symbol of the religious freedom that they enjoy here and should continue to exist. In the words of Hj Maarof Salleh, the President of MUIS:

"The Muslim community wants the madrasah to remain . . . Madrasah education should continue to exist as it is our heritage of the past. It is also Singapore's pride as it epitomizes religious tolerance by preserving the unique features and identity of each

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<sup>58</sup> A complete closure of the madrasah is presently a remote possibility (although one might anticipate that the madrasah education system will be a subject of much scrutiny in order to address the government's concern). On this score, the governing party is likely to take heart the electoral reverses which it once suffered when the Chinese-educated mass showed their disapproval at the 1991 polls after a string of macro-economic and social changes that seemingly affected their status, culture and language. On the other hand, however, the weight of the Muslims is not significant, nor are the Muslims the centre of Singapore society, unlike the Chinese mass base. Nevertheless, the proximity of Muslim communities in Malaysia and Indonesia may have an important political bearing.

religion. The question now is what kind of madrasah education should we promote to meet our needs and to address the government's concern."<sup>59</sup>

The government's concern in turn, as inferred to in this paper, stems from the pragmatic considerations of personnel, social integration and ideological maintenance; features that mark the way Singapore manages the sensitive issues of religion and religious education and against which the madrasahs will continue to be evaluated.

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<sup>59</sup> *Berita Harian*, 17 Jan 1998.

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