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The Reform Agenda for Madrasah Education in Singapore

Charlene Tan

Abstract

As governments in many countries review their education systems to optimise their human capital in an age of globalisation, religious schools such as madrasahs (Islamic or Muslim schools) have also come under state scrutiny. This paper examines the Singapore government's reform agenda for madrasah education in the country. It argues that the Singapore government advocates a reformist Muslim view of madrasah education that emphasises the learning of academic subjects such as English, Mathematics and Sciences, and raising the academic standards of the madrasah so as to increase the economic prospects of madrasah graduates. To carry out its reform agenda, the government presented the 'problem' faced by madrasah students within an economic survival rhetoric. It then made tactical changes to 'solve' the 'problem' by relying on the Compulsory Education Act, providing generous state support to raise the academic standards of the madrasahs, and revamping the madrasah system.

Globalisation has intensified the optimisation of human capital, commodification of education and convergence of education reform rhetoric across countries. As governments in many countries attempt to reform their education systems to prepare their citizens to meet the challenges of globalisation, religious schools such as madrasahs (Islamic or Muslim schools) are not left out of the picture.¹ This paper examines the Singapore government's reform agenda for madrasah education in the country. Singapore is a multi-ethnic country with more than 4 million residents, comprising Chinese (78 per cent), Malays (14 per cent), Indians (7 per cent) and other races (1 per cent) (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2000). Among the ethnic groups, the Malays are the most homogenous with 99.6 per cent of Malays who are Muslims. The rest of the Muslims (about 15 per cent) comprise people of Chinese, Eurasian, Arab and South Asian descent. Although Singapore's Muslim population is small in absolute terms, it is the largest Muslim minority in Southeast Asia in percentage terms (Funston, 2006).

Muslim children in Singapore can choose to receive full-time education at a secular national school or a madrasah. Each madrasah has its management committee whose members are appointed by the Ministry of Education (MOE) in consultation with Majlis Ugama Islam (MUIS) (Islamic Religious Council of Singapore). MUIS, the highest bureaucracy in charge of Muslim matters in Singapore, is a statutory body to advise the President of Singapore on all matters relating to Islam in the country. There are six full-time madrasahs in Singapore that offer primary, secondary and pre-university education. A total of 4256 full-time students from age 7 to 18 were enrolled in the

madrasahs in 2003 (Ministry of Education, 2005). This accounts for about 4 per cent of the total Muslim students in Singapore. Both religious subjects such as Quranic Study and Arabic language, and academic subjects such as English and Mathematics are taught in the madrasahs. Full-time students at the madrasahs are encouraged to apply for admission to overseas Islamic universities, although some prefer to further their studies in secular polytechnics, universities and other educational institutions in Singapore and overseas. This paper examines the Singapore government's reform agenda for madrasah education in the country. As the topic is set against the backdrop of globalisation, the next two sections discuss the relationship between globalisation, education and the Singapore state; and the Muslims' responses to globalisation and madrasah reform.

Education and the Singapore State in an Age of Globalisation

Globalisation is a process of growing inter-connectedness aimed at creating a world system that shifts many former national concerns to the world geopolitical stage (Moten, 2005). It involves the rapid acceleration of cross-border flows of capital, goods, services, people and ideas (Green, 2007). Some major effects of globalisation, though vary widely from country to country, include internationalisation, denationalisation of economies, weakening of the nation state, and commodification of education (Ohmae 1995; Green, 1997, 2007; Gopinathan, 2007). Given the value of intellectual capital in a globalised economy, states aspire to develop citizens who are linguistically competent in English, effectively multi-cultural, adept at critical and creative thinking, and well-versed in information and communication technology (ICT) skills. The ideal citizen should also be an expert problem-solver who has the drive to innovate, learns continuously, thinks globally but is rooted locally. It is therefore imperative for government policies to stress upgrading human capital through promoting access to a range of skills, especially the capacity to learn (OECD, 1996). Convergent education reforms across countries include neo-liberal measures and the trend towards decentralisation in education (e.g. see Green, 1999; Marginson, 1999; Angus, 2004; Steiner-Khamsi & Stolpe, 2004; Tan & Ng, 2007).

In response to the challenges of globalisation, the Singapore government has introduced education reforms under the banner of 'Thinking Schools, Learning Nation' since 1997. To support this globalisation-driven vision, the government has introduced an array of measures to promote critical and creative thinking, the use of information technology in education, citizenship education, and administrative excellence. Decentralisation is evident in the various policy initiatives to encourage greater flexibility and choice in the educational programmes, and greater autonomy at the school level (Tan & Ng, 2007; Tan, forthcoming). A neo-liberal education agenda is evident in these education reforms in Singapore with an accent on greater choice, curricular and structural flexibility, intense inter-school competition, the entry of private capital in education services, greater devolution and autonomy for schools (Gopinathan, 2007). But the adoption of neo-liberal education strategies does not mean that the Singapore state has weakened its control due to pressures brought about by globalisation. On the contrary, the Singapore state has remained strong and highly interventionist in its economy and social reform (Green, 2007; Gopinathan, 2007; Koh, 2007, Tan, 2008a). The justification of state power is the government's ability to promote and sustain economic development (Hill & Lian, 1995; Wee, 2001; Tan, 2008b). Given the overriding goal of the government to ensure continuous economic growth for Singapore, all aspects of social

life are open to state administrative intervention. [Chua \(1995\)](#) observes that “no sector of social life, no matter how ‘private’, cannot be so administered as to harness it to serve the goal itself” (p. 68).

I have elsewhere argued that Singapore has continued to be successfully ‘developmentalist’ – a term that refers to a state gaining legitimacy through its ability to promote and sustain development (Tan, forthcoming). Such a state combines “steady high rates of economic growth and structural changes in the productive system, both domestically and in relation to the international economy” (Castells, 1997, p. 276; also see Castells, 1992; [Johnson, 1982](#); White & Wade, 1988). The Singapore government makes tactical changes through its public policies to anticipate, influence and take advantage of globalisation (Bellows, 1995, as cited in Koh, 2007). Tactics are “forms of governmentality” (Foucault, 2000) which are “disciplinary measures to regulate and script the Singaporean habitus for the necessary conditions of capitalising on the ‘good’ but castigating the symbolic ‘ills’ of globalisation” (Koh, 2007, p. 197). Koh (2007) notes that governmentality is deployed not only through administrative apparatus such as the use of laws but also a range of multiform tactics that are carefully re-worked and translated into rationalised practices. By presenting ‘problems’ within a survival rhetoric and/or a discourse on crisis, the Singapore government provides ‘plans that work’ to the ‘problems’ identified ([Koh, 2007](#); [Tan, 2008a](#)). A recent example of the Singapore government casting the globalisation challenge for Singapore within a survival rhetoric are the comments by Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew that small states will always be vulnerable to global events due to the highly interconnected globalised environment. He stated: “They are not masters of their own destiny. They perform no irreplaceable functions in the international system because if they do not exist, the world will carry on as before” (as cited in Peh, 2008). The Singapore government’s solution, he added, includes “optimising its limited manpower through education” (as cited in Peh, 2008).

Muslims’ Responses to Globalisation and Madrasah Reform

How then do Muslims respond to the tides of globalisation? A number of Muslim writers have pointed out that Islamic thought is compatible with the major ideas associated with globalisation, modernisation and development (e.g. see Ahmad, 1980; [Saeed, 1999](#); Moten, 2005; Alatas, 2005; [Sikand, 2005](#); [Dangor, 2005](#)). Islamic scholars reject fatalism and the lack of achievement motive (Alatas, 2005), and support economic growth, scientific and technological advances, increasing social mobility, and political participation. Believing that all knowledge comes from God and arrives to humans through various channels, it is obligatory for all Muslims to pursue knowledge and for Muslim societies to cultivate the various branches of knowledge (Alatas, 2006). There is no distinction between ‘religious’ and ‘secular’ knowledge or learning in Islamic thought – they are integrated and not mutually exclusive ([Douglass & Shaikh, 2004](#)). The traditional and modern secular education that now obtains in the Muslim world, Dangor (2005) avers, is “a later development – a legacy of colonialism” (p. 521).

Traditionally, Muslim scholars divided knowledge into two kinds – the rational sciences (*al-‘ulum al-‘aqliyyah*) or intellectual sciences, and the traditional sciences (*al-‘ulum al-naqliyyah*) or revealed knowledge (Alatas, 2006). Alatas (2006) explains that the first is knowledge that arises from man’s capacity for reason, sense perception and

observation, and includes disciplines termed as ‘modern’ today: logic, physics, metaphysics, geometry, arithmetic, medicine, geography, chemistry, biology, music, astronomy and science of civilisation. On the other hand, traditional sciences refer to knowledge that is devolved to man via Revelation. Another way to classify knowledge is to distinguish between knowledge that is ‘useful’ or ‘harmful’ (Sikand, 2005). Advocated by Muslim reformists in India, useful knowledge consists of all knowledge that leads to piety as well as worldly and social welfare, while harmful knowledge is anything that leads to irreligiousness and immorality. The positive attitude Muslims have towards knowledge explains why the Islamic civilisation between the ninth and fourteenth centuries was characterised by scientific and technological syntheses (Moten, 2005). But what many Muslims object to is the association of modernisation, secularisation and globalisation with ‘Westernisation’ as this is perceived to rob the *ummah* (Muslim community) of its religious and cultural heritage (Moten, 2005). This objection has led some Muslims to champion for the ‘Islamisation of knowledge’ so that Muslims can participate in modernity within an Islamic worldview.²

Muslims are also generally not averse to madrasah reform. A number of reforms to ‘modernise’ Muslim education are based on the assumption that Islam is not incompatible with modernity. For example, in Indonesia that has the biggest Muslim population in the world, the government has attempted to develop “a body of Muslim *ulama* [scholars] who are at home with the ‘modern ethos’ and, as a result, are more development-oriented, progressive and tolerant” (Saeed, 1999, p. 177). Likewise, in the case of India where Muslims are a minority, reformists have attempted to ‘modernise’ the madrasahs in order to recover a holistic Islamic understanding of knowledge (Sikand, 2005).

But a key debate among Muslims in reforming madrasah education is the place of academic subjects vis-à-vis religious subjects in the madrasah curriculum. The ‘traditionalists’ have either resisted any attempt to introduce academic subjects in the madrasah, or allow limited learning of these subjects with priority given to religious subjects. Some traditionalists argue that knowledge of elementary English, basic mathematical problems, and basic social sciences are helpful for the madrasah students to function in the modern world but such learning should neither threaten nor dilute the religious character of the madrasahs (Sikand, 2005). On the other hand, ‘reformists’ are Muslims who believe that madrasahs should be ‘modernised’ through the learning of academic subjects within an Islamic framework so that the graduates, whether as future religious leaders or professionals holding secular jobs, are empowered with the wherewithal to provide answers to modern questions and challenges in a globalised world. The different stands of the traditionalists and reformists rest in their contrasting views on the role of madrasahs. The traditionalists see the mission of madrasahs as solely or primarily developing religious leaders and teachers for the Muslim community. On the other hand, the reformists believe that madrasahs should go beyond training future religious teachers and leaders to include equipping their graduates with the skills for employment in globalised economy, albeit within an Islamic worldview. To achieve this, some reformists suggest two streams of madrasah education:

In the first stream, students who want just a modicum of religious education and would then prefer to go on to join regular schools would be taught basic religious

subjects along with ‘modern’ disciplines. The second stream would cater to students who wish to train as professional *‘ulama*, and would focus on ‘religious’ subjects, teaching ‘modern’ disciplines only to the extent necessary for them to interpret Islam in the light of contemporary needs (Sikand, 2005, p. 228).

In the following sections, this paper will argue that the Singapore government advocates a reformist Muslim view of madrasah education that emphasises the learning of academic subjects such as English, Mathematics and Sciences, and raising the academic standards of the madrasah so as to increase the economic prospects of madrasah graduates. To carry out its reform agenda, the government presented the ‘problem’ faced by madrasah students within an economic survival rhetoric. It then made tactical changes to ‘solve’ the ‘problem’ by relying on the Compulsory Education Act, providing generous state support to raise the academic standards of the madrasahs, and revamping the madrasah system.

The ‘Problem’: The Economic Survival Challenge of Madrasah Students in Singapore

By presenting the problem faced by madrasah students within an economic survival rhetoric, the Singapore government hopes to draw the Muslims’ attention to the bleak prospects of madrasah graduates. The government is concerned about the future of madrasah students who do not choose to become religious teachers and leaders, yet lack the minimum academic qualifications to qualify for secular institutions and employment. The government highlighted the high dropout rates in the madrasahs: 71 per cent in 1996, 60 per cent in 1997 and 65 per cent in 1998 (Chee, 2006). Between 50 and 65 per cent of each cohort of madrasah students do not make it to Secondary 4 (Mukhlis, 2006). He asked a group of Malay-Muslim leaders: “If the madrasahs were training 100 or 200 students a year, I think we can live with that. But if you are training 400, 500, 1000, 2,000 in full-time madrasahs or in full-time religious education supplemented by some secular subjects, what will be the future of the Malay community?” (as cited in Khairudin & Hussin, 2005, pp. 257-258). Aggravating the economic survival challenge for madrasah students is the fact that the madrasahs have become increasingly popular with Muslim parents since the 1980s (Tan, 2007). In 1986, there were 135 Primary 1 students enrolled in the madrasahs but the number rose to 464 students in 2000. The total student population rose from over 2000 in 1991 to about 4500 in 2001. The number of applicants to the madrasahs has constantly outstripped the number of places offered in the six madrasahs. For example, there were about 800 students who applied to study in the six madrasahs but only over 400 were accepted in 2001 due to logistical and physical constraints in the madrasahs (Mukhlis, 2006). There are also about 350 Malay Primary 1 students who left the national secular schools to join the madrasahs every year.

There are a number of reasons to account for the popularity of madrasahs among Muslims in Singapore. The strong revival of the madrasahs since the late 1980s reflects the Islamic resurgence in Southeast Asia and the Re-Islamisation in Singapore (Desker, 2003; Kadir, 2004; Millard, 2004). This is evident in the Muslims’ attire, diet, religious observances and social interactions (Tan, 2007). Religion has always been of great importance to the Muslims in Singapore. A National Survey on Religion in 1989 reported that 95 per cent of Muslims view religion and religious education as important, the

highest among the religious groups in Singapore (The Straits Times, 8 April, 1989). A Gallup survey of 1000 households in 2000 showed that Malays identified chiefly with religion, while Chinese identified primarily with ethnicity and neighbourhood (Kadir, 2004). Also, the air of uncertainty brought about by globalisation has drawn the Muslims even closer to Islam that acts as a security blanket to alleviate their fears, and provide direction and hope (Mukhlis, 2006; also see Mir Zohair, 1997). Consequently, more parents are keen to send their children to madrasahs for them to have an “all-encompassing Islamic education” that not only offers academic and religious knowledge but also the freedom to perform religious duties and rituals such as the *solat* (prayers) and putting on the *tudung* (headgear) for the girls (Mukhlis, 2006, p. 40). These parents believe that such an education will shield their children from undesirable moral values associated with ‘modernisation’ (read ‘Westernisation’). A study shows that almost half of Muslim parents interviewed perceived madrasah school culture as insulating their children from negative social values such as drug abuse, sexual permissiveness, youth gangsterism and consumerism (Zainah, 1998, as cited in Mukhlis, 2006). It can be observed from the above reasons that while there are parents who send their children to the madrasahs with the hope that their children will become religious teachers and leaders, the increased enrolment in madrasahs is largely due to parents who want their children to learn both academic and religious subjects in an overtly Islamic environment. In other words, they want their children to be good Muslims who excel in both religious and academic subjects.

Responding to the changing expectations from the Muslim community, all the six madrasahs in Singapore have been providing both religious and academic subjects with different amount of curriculum time for academic subjects, ranging from 30 per cent to 60 per cent. The varying curriculum time devoted to academic subjects is due to the different ways the leaders of the madrasahs see the role of their madrasahs. For example, one madrasah in Singapore has incorporated academic subjects into its curriculum since 1966 as it believes in preparing their students for the job market (Aljunied, 1970, as cited in Chee, 2006). In contrast, another madrasah is unequivocal in fulfilling its vision to mould students to become Islamic scholars. It states its philosophy as such: “Mastering of the Arabic language is a pre-requisite for the understanding of the Al-Quran and Hadiths (Prophetic Traditions), the two fundamental sources of Islamic Jurisprudence, less in importance, is the acquisition of knowledge in the secular sciences”.

The ‘Solution’: Towards a Reformist View of Madrasah Education in Singapore

The Minister-in-charge of Muslim Affairs Yaacob Ibrahim urged Muslims in Singapore not to retreat from the modern world, but to understand the world around them and contribute to its development. For Muslims to be “self-reliant, independent, creative and progressive”, he exhorted them to “take the best of the modern world and use this together with our cultural traditions, our heritage and our belief in Islam” (Yaacob, 2002). Reminding the community that globalisation affects all Malay-Muslims, he added that they need to have the courage to leave comfort zones and seize opportunities (Goh, 2007). Significantly, he encouraged Singapore Muslims to be ‘reformist Muslims’ - Muslims who “recognise the importance of embracing science and technology, being innovative and generating new ideas, just as it used to be in the heydays of Islamic

civilisation” (Yaacob, 2002). It should be pointed out that the reformist tradition in Islam is not new to Singapore - the country was a regional hub for the reformist movement in the early twentieth century (Funston, 2006). The reformists even founded a madrasah in 1908 that ambitiously combined the learning of religious and modern academic knowledge (Roff, 1994). But the reformists’ madrasah was closed down shortly due partly to “rumblings of disapproval from the religious traditionalists about its more ‘Westernised’ education system” (Chee, 2006, p. 9).

It appears that the government is attempting to persuade the Muslim community in Singapore to accept the reformist tradition by stressing the importance of learning academic subjects for survival in a globalised economy. Rather than just ensuring basic competence in subjects such as English, Mathematics and Sciences, the government aims to ensure a sufficiently high academic standard for madrasahs so as to increase the economic prospects for madrasah graduates. The government, recognising the religious significance of madrasahs as institutions tasked to train future Muslim scholars and teachers, assured the Muslim community that it has no intention of closing down the madrasahs. What it recommends, instead, is the adoption of two streams of madrasah education - a smaller group trained to be religious teachers and leaders, and a bigger group with the minimum academic competence to proceed to secular institutions of higher learning and employment. The former Prime Minister pointed out that Muslims must do well in English, Mathematics and Science as these subjects have “the most application and relevance for university and polytechnic education” (Ministry of Information and the Arts, 2001, p. 4). He reiterated this point when he said that “[i]n Singapore, we have insisted that the Madrasahs or religious schools include a secular curriculum that will enable its graduates to make a living” (Goh, 2004). Then Minister-in-charge of Muslim Affairs encouraged the madrasahs to produce “not only religious teachers but also scholars who can deal with economics, science and technological issues at national and international levels” so that they can “lead the community in these areas in years to come” (as cited in Noor Aisha, 2006, p. 75).

To implement a reformist view of madrasah education with a premium placed on academic achievement, the government relied on the Compulsory Education Act, provided generous state support for teacher training at the madrasahs through MUIS, and launched a Joint Madrasah System. The Compulsory Act, implemented in 2003, requires all children to complete the mandatory six years of primary education in national secular schools that are under the Ministry of Education (MOE) (Ministry of Education, 2008). All children will sit for the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) at the end of six years. Parents who fail to enrol their children in primary schools shall be subjected to counselling, mediation, fines and, in the extreme case, a jail term. Madrasahs are not national schools and Muslim children attending madrasahs can remain in the madrasah only if they meet the minimum performance benchmarks set by MOE: the average PSLE aggregate scores of Malay students in the two highest performing academic streams in the six lowest-performing national schools. Madrasahs that meet the PSLE benchmark twice in a three-year period from 2008 can continue to take in Primary 1 pupils (Zakir, 2007a). Otherwise they will be posted to another madrasah where the students meet the PSLE benchmark, or be transferred to a national school. Noting that the Muslim community in Singapore only needs a small number of religious leaders and teachers each year, the government also caps the total enrolment of madrasahs at 400 each year

beginning from 2003. Although the Compulsory Education Act did not specifically target madrasah education only, its implementation means that madrasahs now have to devote more curriculum time to academic subjects, especially English, Mathematics and Science. By expecting the madrasahs to meet the academic benchmarks set by the government, it is hoped that all madrasah students will complete their primary education and possess the minimum academic standards to choose either the religious or secular path for their secondary education.

To help the madrasahs raise their academic standards, MUIS, with the Muslim community's support, has spent around S\$21 million on teacher training, student enrichment programmes, curriculum review and financial grants (Zakir, 2007a). Since 2004, MUIS has spent about S\$1.5 million training more than half of the 220 teachers at Singapore's six madrasahs (Ho, 2007). Courses taken by madrasah teachers include diploma of education (with Edith Cowan University), a specialist diploma in English, Mathematics and Science (with the National Institute of Education in Singapore), a specialist diploma in teaching and learning (also with the National Institute of Education), and a workshop on counselling in school (Arshad, 2008; MUIS, 2008). Through these courses, the madrasah teachers acquaint themselves with the curriculum of mainstream schools and learn how to teach academic subjects especially at the upper primary level. The government also announced that MUIS will set aside S\$700,000 to help all six madrasahs prepare their pupils for the PSLE in 2008 through enrichment and remedial programmes and teacher training, among others.

To further promote the implementation of two streams of madrasah education, MUIS succeeded in persuading three of the six full-time madrasahs in Singapore to be part of the 'Joint Madrasah System' to be implemented in 2009 (Zakir, 2007b). The aim is to raise the academic standards of the madrasahs through specialisation in either primary or secondary education. Only one of the three madrasahs will focus on primary education while the other two will have only secondary classes. Of the two madrasahs providing secondary education, one will offer a purely academic track with academic subjects largely similar to national schools. The aim is for the graduates to proceed to secular institutions - junior college or polytechnic and then to academic universities. The other madrasah offering secondary education will provide two tracks: the 'religious track' and the 'hybrid track'. The former is for students keen on Islamic tertiary education where they will apply for pre-university Islamic studies and then enrol in Islamic universities. On the other hand, the 'hybrid track' allows students to study both religious and academic studies to qualify them for Islamic colleges and universities as well as secular institutions such as junior college, polytechnic and universities. It is clear from the madrasah revamp that the government is actively pushing for two streams or tracks of madrasah education with a focus on channeling more madrasah students to the academic track.

That MUIS managed to persuade the three madrasahs is unsurprising due to its close relationship with them. MUIS has taken over the appointment of the management of two of the madrasahs when they asked MUIS to help them raise funds for a new building and to find an alternative location (Mukhlis, 2006). Another key motivating factor for the three madrasahs to agree to revamp their curriculum is the promise by MUIS that it will support them with funds, teachers, administrative systems and management teams (Zakir, 2007b). All the madrasahs have been struggling with financial

matters for many years, and the implementation of Compulsory Education has added to their strain to improve their pupils' academic results. Commenting on his madrasah's involvement in the Joint Madrasah System, a religious leader said that "We can focus on educating students, and not worry about getting teachers and parents to help raise funds" (Zakir, 2007a). MUIS also announced that the salaries of the teachers at the three madrasahs would rise to around 70 per cent or 75 per cent of what teachers in national schools are paid. Some of the teachers will also be selected for more advanced training, and experienced teachers from national schools will be hired to teach at these madrasahs (The Straits Times, October 30, 2007).

An Example of Curricular Changes in a Madrasah in Singapore

It is helpful to look at one madrasah in Singapore to understand how its curriculum has been affected by the government's reform agenda.³ Like the other five madrasahs in Singapore, the madrasah is registered under MOE as a private school. Its Management Committee members are appointed by MOE on a two-year term. It is also the madrasah chosen by MUIS to focus on primary education under the Joint Madrasah System. Starting from 2009, it will expand its enrolment to take in half of the 400 Primary 1 students in madrasahs. The chairman of the madrasah describes the madrasah as a "modern madrasah" with a curriculum that "takes cognisance [of] the current unique context of the Muslims in Singapore as well as the challenges posed by 21st century, modern and globalised city-state" (information from its website). Its commitment to the two streams of madrasah education is seen in its school manual:

The Madrasah remain committed towards producing religious elites, ie *asatizah* [teachers] and *ulama* [scholars], for the community. However, the Madrasah strongly feels that religious elites of the future has to be in touch with modern sciences and contemporary challenges in order to be able to offer solutions and be of benefit to the community. As such, the Madrasah offers an integrated curriculum encompassing both academic as well as Islamic sciences. This model has proven to be successful as seen from the products that the Madrasah has produced. *Alhamdulillah*, the Madrasah's alumni excel in both Religious as well as Academic pathways doing well in both Islamic and Academic Universities (School Manual, n.d., p. 10).

To prepare students in the madrasah to meet the academic requirements of Compulsory Education from 2008, the madrasah has introduced a few main curricular changes. First, the medium of instruction for all subjects except Arabic for Primary 1 to 6 students is English. This is a major change from the past where the medium of instruction, except for English and Malay lessons, was Arabic. The purpose for this change is to give the primary students a firm foundation in English since it is one of the core academic subjects that all primary six students have to sit for at the PSLE. The madrasah believes that a good command of English will also help its graduates who will be future Islamic teachers and leaders propagate the religion fluently and confidently in English.

Secondly, the madrasah adopts the MOE syllabi for English, Mathematics and Science, and increases the curriculum time for academic subjects so as to help its students to be on par with the national school students. Prior to the change, the curriculum time for academic subjects and religious subjects was about 50-50 at the primary level. Under the new curriculum, about 60 per cent of the curriculum time is planned for academic subjects and 40 per cent for religious subjects. There were also preparations made to focus on improving the students' academic performance. All the primary 6 pupils were banded into High Ability, Middle Ability and Low Ability. The curriculum time for religious subjects was suspended four weeks prior to PSLE so as to help pupils focus on preparing for the PSLE. Remedial and extra lessons for English, Mathematics and Science were also provided. Pupils who did not score well in the school's preliminary exams were required to attend extra classes. Those who did well were required to revise their work at home using the worksheets given by the madrasah. Enrichment lessons in English were also provided by the teachers and external consultants where the students learned about setting goals, time management, and exam strategies. Writing workshops and other workshops for Mathematics and Science were conducted for both students and interested parents. Underachievers' programme and High-achievers' programme were also introduced for Mathematics.

There are also changes in terms of preparing the teachers at the madrasah to teach academic subjects. Teachers attended various training courses, programmes and workshops to equip them to teach using the MOE syllabus and materials, all funded by MUIS. Out of a total of 44 teachers, about one-third (16) have received professional training. The latter have obtained Diploma in education (Dip Ed) from Edith Cowan University, and Diploma in English, Mathematics and Science (Dip EMS) from the National Institute of Education in Singapore. The Heads of Departments and Vice-Principals have also attended leadership training at the same institution. Most teachers also continued to upgrade their knowledge and skills by attending various specialised courses such as 'Guidance and Counseling Course' organised by the National Institute of Education; 'English Writing Skills' by the British Council; 'Teaching Science and Mathematics through Stories' by the National Book Development Council of Singapore; 'Character Development' and 'Essential Skills for Beginning Teachers' by the Singapore Teachers' Union. As these curricular changes were just implemented, it is too early to assess if the changes for the pupils and teachers will indeed raise the academic standards of the pupils and help the madrasah meet the benchmarks at the end of 2008. More studies need to be conducted on the pupils' experiences in classroom learning, the effectiveness of training for teachers, their responses to such training, and the extent to which the training has changed pedagogical practices.

Conclusion

What is interesting for future developments is the likely response of the other three madrasahs that have chosen not to be part of the Joint Madrasah System. Unlike secular national schools, all the madrasahs in Singapore are registered as private schools which are not under the jurisdiction of MOE. Since the beginning, the leaders and teachers in the madrasahs have enjoyed a high level of autonomy over the planning and running of the madrasah. Neither MOE nor MUIS has much control or influence over the curriculum

and assessment at the madrasahs as the students sit for internal examinations set by the madrasahs and the madrasahs work directly with the Islamic universities overseas. Although the Administration of Muslim Law Act was passed in 1966 for MUIS to control the madrasahs, the Act was not enforced due to lack of manpower from MUIS and resistance from the madrasah leaders. As the PSLE is set and assessed by MOE, requiring all madrasah students to sit for the examinations and expecting them to meet the PSLE performance benchmarks will give the government some control and influence over the curriculum and assessment in the madrasahs. Mukhlis (2006) points out that “MUIS’s overture towards the madrasah has been viewed with suspicion, seen as imposing, and interpreted as interference by the Government in the affairs of the madrasah” (p. 53). The reformist view of two streams of madrasah education may be unacceptable to traditionalists who believe that the mission of madrasahs is to nurture religious leaders and teachers, and not to prepare them for the workforce. The promise of funds and other forms of assistance to ‘modernise’ the madrasahs has also been viewed with caution by some madrasah leaders who are aware that such help comes with the price of state interference by the state and weakening control by the madrasahs (Sikand, 2005). Aware that it still needs to work hard to negotiate and persuade the other three to participate in the madrasah revamp, the Minister-in-charge of Muslim Affairs publicly expressed his desire that the remaining three will consider joining the new Joint Madrasah System (Zakir, 2007b). It is hoped that MUIS’ continual commitment to train teachers from all the six madrasahs may persuade these three madrasahs to accept the reforms by MUIS in the future. Time will tell if the Singapore government is able to attract the other three madrasahs to accept its agenda of reform. More research needs to be done on the concerns and responses of these three madrasahs, the traditionalists, and the majority of the Muslim population in Singapore to the government’s attempt to influence madrasah education.

The Singapore government’s agenda at reforming the madrasahs parallels the efforts by governments to review madrasah education in their countries. In Great Britain, Prime Minister Tony Blair has proposed that madrasahs be regulated by the state. A number of European countries such as Germany and the Netherlands are also re-looking Muslim education in their countries and exploring the need for educational reforms. Over in Asia, India and China have introduced a number of curriculum changes in madrasahs. Educational reforms have also taken place in countries where Muslims are a majority. The Gulf Arab states and Malaysia have announced plans to reform their Islamic education. The Pakistan government has implemented measures to monitor the 6000 to 8000 madrasahs by requiring all Islamic schools to register with the authorities, teach modern subjects along with religious subjects, and restrict foreign students and teachers. While many of these madrasah reforms are largely driven by the desire to curb terrorist activities in the madrasahs, this is not the apparent motivation in Singapore. Rather, as this paper has pointed out, the ostensible motivation is economic survival consideration for the madrasah graduates who live in an increasingly competitive and globalised world. It is hoped that the emphasis on academic subjects will expose the madrasah students to ‘modern’ life outside the madrasah, and help them to integrate into a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society. However, it cannot be assumed that there is no desire by the Singapore government to have a hand in madrasah education to ensure that there is no pro-terrorist teaching taking place within the madrasah. The concern of such teaching

within Islam has been voiced by the former Prime Minister who cautioned that if employment opportunities and development are limited, “sooner or later any religion will turn inwards on itself” and this “will make it easier for deviant ideologies to take root” (Goh, 2004). Another interesting observation about the reform agenda of the Singapore government is its bold attempt to co-opt religious values into the official discourse and policy. While the Singapore government has been using language and culture as commodifiable resources to contribute towards national development, it has historically chosen to confine religion to the private sphere and doctrinal issues to the religious leaders (Tan, 2005, 2008b). The government’s adoption of the reformist view of madrasah education therefore signals the government’s changing tactic to use religion to influence the thinking and behaviour of the Muslim community in Singapore (see Tan, 2008a on the government’s attempt to re-imagine the Muslim identity in Singapore). It illustrates, once again, the ability of a successfully developmentalist state to optimise its human capital by making tactical changes in an age of globalisation.

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Notes

¹ Madrasahs are commonly described as ‘Islamic schools’ in public discourse in Singapore and in international literature. However, Douglass and Shaikh (2004) point out that it is more accurate to describe these schools as ‘Muslim schools’ rather than “Islamic schools” to indicate “the goal of living up to the standards of Islam, rather than implying its achievement” (p. 8).

² Originally conceived by Abdul Hamid Abu Sulayman in the late 1960s, the Islamisation project involves “a systematic reorientation and restructuring of the entire field of human knowledge in accordance with a new set of criteria and categories derived from and based on the Islamic worldview” (International Institute of Islamic Thought, 1987, p. 15, as cited in Dangor, 2005, p. 526). Commenting on the reformist efforts in India, Sikand (2005) avers that the ‘Islamisation of knowledge’ project represents both an effort and a great desire to promote an Islamic form of modernity for Muslims who live in a world where they are increasingly marginalised.

³ This madrasah is the study of a three-year university-funded research project that the author is involved in. The materials are based upon literature review of the madrasah’s school manual, website and textbooks; and interviews conducted with the English Head of Department, two teachers, and 30 primary 6 pupils in 2007. It should be noted that the research is at its preliminary stage and the effectiveness of curricular changes in the madrasah will only be known when its students sit for their Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) in 2008 as required by the Compulsory Education Act.