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**DRAFT**

Creating “Good Citizens” and Maintaining Religious Harmony in Singapore

Charlene Tan

**Abstract**

This paper discusses how the concept of “good” citizens in Singapore is linked to the principle of harmony, characterised by collectivism and a strong interventionist government. The value of religious harmony is actively promoted by the Singapore government and supported by the religious leaders. This paper argues that the principle of religious harmony helps to ensure that there are relative peace and tolerance among the various religious communities. But with religious revivalism and continual terrorist threats from some Muslim groups, it has become increasingly difficult for religious believers in Singapore to balance their national and religious identities, loyalties and duties. The on-going challenge for the Singapore government is to promote a conception of “good” citizens that takes into consideration the multiplicity and complexity of religion and citizenship.

**Introduction**

Singapore was founded as a British trading post and colony in 1819 and was granted self-government in 1959. It became part of the Malaysian Federation in 1963 and gained independence in 1965. As a city-state with over 4.2 million people, Singapore is a multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-lingual country with 76.8% Chinese, 13.9% Malay, 7.9% Indian and 1.4% Others. Singapore has been described as a “nation of believers” (Lim & Low, 2005) and it is easy to see why. The 2000 national census reports that 85 per cent of the population profess to belong to a religion. A majority of the population are Buddhists (42.5%), followed by Muslims (14.9%), Christians (14.6%), Taoists (8.5%) and Hindus (4.0%) (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2000). There are also adherents of other religions (0.6%) as well as those who profess to have no religion (14.8%). Religious identity in Singapore is closely linked to ethnic and cultural identities. 64.4 per cent of Chinese are either Buddhists or Taoists, 99.6 per cent of Malays are Muslims, 55.4 per cent of Indians are Hindus, and about half of “Others” are Christians.

This religious diversity is complicated by a renewed interest in religion both internationally and locally. A counter-effect of globalisation is religious resurgence where people assert their own identity, culture and religion (Hawazi, 2000). A revival in religion is seen in a growing number of well-educated young Singaporeans in their late 20s and early 30s opting out of well-paying careers to go into full-time ministry (Chong, 2005a). Among the religions, Christianity has the highest number of converts due to the active evangelistic work of mega-churches which target at young people. There is also Islamic resurgence in Southeast Asia and the Re-Islamisation in Singapore (Desker, 2003; Kadir, 2004; Millard, 2004). In the case of Singapore, this can be observed from the Muslims’ attire, diet, religious observances and social interactions.

This paper discusses how the concept of “good” citizens in Singapore is linked to the principle of harmony, characterised by collectivism and a strong interventionist government.
The value of religious harmony is actively promoted by the Singapore government and supported by the religious leaders. This paper argues that the principle of religious harmony helps to ensure that there are relative peace and tolerance among the various religious communities. The maintenance of religious harmony is illustrated in three recent events in Singapore: the proselytising efforts of Singaporean Christians, the arrest of members of Muslim group Jemaah Islamiah (JI), and the response to the publication of Prophet Mohammad cartoons in Denmark. But with religious revivalism and continual terrorist threats from some Muslim groups, it has become increasingly difficult for religious believers in Singapore to balance their national and religious identities, loyalties and duties. The paper explores three key challenges in Singapore as the government continues its efforts to create “good citizens” and maintain religious harmony.

Citizenship, Harmony and Religious Harmony in Singapore

Harmony in Singapore

In Singapore, a good citizen is principally thought of as one who promotes and preserves harmony in society. The concept of harmony is prominently featured in Asian societies (e.g. see Feinberg, 1993; Grossman, 2004; Tan, 2004, 2006) and reflected in the citizenship education in Asia (e.g. see Chew, 1998; Cummings, 2001; Thomas, 2002; Lee, 2004a, 2004b; Ahmad, 2004; Roh, 2004). Lee (2004a) posits that the focus on harmony originates from a concern for preserving harmonious relations with the universe and one another in society as a fundamental philosophy of life. A key feature of harmony is the preference of collectivism to individualism. Asians tend to emphasise the value of harmonious social relationships, while their counterparts in the West tend to seek truth through the conflictual progress of interests, identities and ideas (Asad, 2006). In a comparative study on the citizenship values in Singapore, Malaysia and China, Kennedy (2004) notes that what is common in these three countries is that “the emphasis for citizens is not so much the rights they enjoy but the responsibilities they have towards family and the community” (Kennedy, 2004, p. 15).

The value of collectivism underpins the citizenship education in Singapore. The form of citizenship education in Singapore is civic republicanism which focuses on passive, responsible, rule-following citizenship (Hill & Lian, 1995; Gopinathan & Sharpe, 2004; C. Tan, 2007a). This is contrasted with the tradition of liberal individualism which defines citizenship in terms of one’s rights, entitlements and status. A “good citizen” in Singapore is generally interpreted as one who contributes to society and supports a set of prescribed values. The Singapore government, led by the People’s Action Party (PAP), has advocated a set of secular shared values (known as “Our Shared Values”): (1) Nation before community and society before self; (2) Community support and respect for the individual; (3) The family as the basic unit of society; (4) Consensus in place of conflict; and (5) Racial and religious harmony. Consistent with civic republicanism, the approach adopted for citizenship education in Singapore is the transmission approach. This approach constructs “good citizens” as those who are fitted into an established social and value system for the sake of maintenance. To achieve this, well-defined knowledge is transmitted and desired values are inculcated (Lo & Man, 1996). This is contrasted with the reflective-inquiry approach which focuses on nurturing abilities necessary in the consensus building effort of a democratic society. These abilities include reasoning, deliberation, decision-making, and conflict-resolution in individuals.

Another feature of harmony in Singapore is a strong interventionist government which plays an active role in economy and society (Wee, 2001; Asad, 2006). This follows
logically from the emphasis on collectivism where there is an underlying appeal to authority. The Singapore government does not see its primary role as building strong political institutions for active citizenship but providing strong political leadership for its citizens whose duty is to support the leadership (Koh & Ooi, 2002; Gopinathan & Sharpe, 2004). The justification of state power is the government’s ability to promote and sustain economic development (Hill & Lian, 1995; Sim & Print, 2005; Koh, 2005). 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 serve the goal itself” (p. 68). Such interventions include setting up match-making organisations to promote more marriages and increase the national birth rates, introducing incentives to encourage more graduate mothers to have more children, and implementing racial quotas for public housing to ensure racial integration.

Religious Harmony in Singapore

Religious harmony is a logical extension of harmony in Singapore. Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong asserts that “maintaining harmony, peace, that’s the first requirement” and that “in Singapore, we have to maintain our social harmony and religious harmony at all costs” (Lee, 2006). The government’s approach towards religion is described as “religious pragmatism” (C. Tan, 2007a, p. 30) where religious values are seen mainly as of instrumental worth to promote national unity and maintain national identity. Collectivism is underscored as religious believers in Singapore are constantly reminded that their religious beliefs and practices should not be at the expense of religious harmony. The government confines religious views and institutions to the private sphere as they are perceived as having no legitimate role in political debate and activity (Chua, 1995; Hill & Lian, 1995).

The government also actively intervenes to maintain religious harmony through two main channels: legislation and education. The Singapore government has passed various laws to enforce religious harmony. The Penal Code considers the following as offences: injuring or defiling a place of worship, disturbing a religious assembly, and uttering words or sounds to deliberately wound religious feelings. The Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act, passed in 1989, stipulates that no religious groups should be involved in politics and that religious organisations are not to stray beyond the bounds of educational, social and charitable work. The Sedition Act states that words to promote feelings of ill will and hostility between different races and classes of the population would be considered seditious. A recent example of the enforcement of the Sedition Act is the case of two Chinese non-Muslim youths who were convicted in court for posting inflammatory remarks against Muslims. The two men (aged 27 and 25 years old) were jailed for spewing vulgarities at the Muslim Malay community, comparing their religion to Satanism (Chong, 2005b). The Declaration of Religious Harmony introduced in 2003 serves to remind all people of Singapore that religious harmony is vital for peace, progress and prosperity in their multi-ethnic and multi-religious nation and that they should ensure that religions will not be abused to create conflict and disharmony in Singapore. Underlining these legislative measures is the official distinction between the public and private domain for religious institutions. The government also uses education to promote religious harmony to all students in Singapore, especially through National Education (NE) (Tan, forthcoming). NE aims to develop in all Singaporeans national cohesion, the instinct for survival, and confidence in the future. One of six messages of NE is the preservation of racial and religious harmony. The government promotes religious harmony by infusing it into the formal curriculum through subjects such as Civics and Moral
Education, Social Studies and History, as well as outside the classroom via sports and enrichment programmes.

**Religious Harmony and Religious Revivalism in Singapore**

*Religious Proselytising*

The importance of religious harmony is seen in a recent case of religious proselytising from Christians in Singapore. The whole episode illustrates the unequivocal stand of the government in upholding secularism, and the religious leaders’ readiness to maintain religious harmony. In one of the regular chats with her teacher on MSN Messenger after school hours, a twelve year old student (Primary 6) was persuaded by her teacher to go for his church’s service. When the girl told him that her parents who are not Christians may object, the teacher replied that it was not up to her parents to decide, and that she was free to make up her own mind. That incident prompted a friend of the girl’s mother to complain to the press (Thio, 2005). Arguing that teachers, as educators and authority figures to be respected in school and in society, should be the ones to inculcate tolerance and respect for other cultures and religions, she questioned: “As most teachers are young educated adults and they form a large percentage of Christians in Singapore, are they allowed to impose their personal values, morals and principles on their pupils?” (Thio, 2005). That letter sparked a flurry of response letters to the press, commenting on the issue and complaining of similar instances of attempted Christian conversions (Au Yong, 2005; Yeo, 2005). It was revealed that there was already uneasiness from other religious groups about the evangelistic efforts of Christians in public institutions. A Buddhist leader even urged the Government to review whether schools and hospitals needed clearer guidelines on proselytising and bedside conversions (Li & Kwek, 2005).

The government’s response to that incident reflects the official stand on religious harmony. The Ministry of Education in Singapore swiftly issued an official reply, stating its stand as follows:

> The Ministry of Education takes a firm stand on religious proselytising by teachers. Our schools are secular, and teachers should not be engaged in proselytising their students. Otherwise we face a real risk of undoing the multicultural and multi-religious sensitivity and harmony that Singapore has built up over the years, and which our schools seek to cultivate in each new generation (Wong, 2005a).

The government’s reply reinstates the importance of harmony – to uphold the value of collectivism and maintain the demarcation between public and private sphere. The Ministry of Education also states that it will not hesitate to take action against any teacher found to have engaged in proselytising (Wong, 2005b). To demonstrate the resolve of the government in preserving religious harmony, it announced that the Christian teacher who attempted to evangelise his student in a school had been “warned” and “counselling” by his principal, and he was “remorseful about his actions” (Wong, 2005b). At the same time, various religious leaders also articulated their support for the government’s stand on religious harmony. Religious organisations such as the National Council of Churches, the Catholic Church in Singapore, and the Singapore Islamic Scholars and Religious Teachers Association (Pergas) “unanimously rejected proselytising in school” (Au Yong, 2005). Apparently, the message of religious harmony in Singapore is effectively conveyed by the government to the religious leaders.
Jemaah Islamiah (JI) Arrests

The imperative to maintain religious harmony by the government with the support of the religious leaders is further seen in two events concerning the Muslims in Singapore. The first incident was the arrest of 15 members of Muslim group Jemaah Islamiah (JI) in December 2001 and another 21 of them in August 2002 for attempting to commit massive attacks against western embassies and Singapore key points. The existence of a transregional terrorist brotherhood is demonstrated in the JI networks in Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Philippines and Australia. The aim of JI is to create an Islamic Caliphate or Daulah Islamiyah in Southeast Asia through violent means. In response, the government stepped up security measures by protecting key installations such as hotels and embassies, conducting regular exercises among the security agencies, and putting in place precautions such as scans and checks for major gatherings. The government also introduced a number of initiatives and measures to ensure that religious harmony is not jeopardised. After the arrest of 13 terror suspects from JI in 2001, the government formed the Inter-Racial Confidence Circles (IRCCs) which are community groups in every constituency to build trust among the ethnic groups. Another government initiative is Harmony Circles (HCs) which are groups in schools, workplaces and other local organisations tasked to organise activities to promote inter-religious understanding. On the part of the Muslims, 122 Muslim organisations publicly condemned terrorism and rejected what they perceived to be ideological extremism, while reinforcing their commitment to religious harmony in Singapore. In supporting the decisive actions of the government, most Muslims in Singapore also reaffirmed their belief in peaceful co-existence with adherents of other religions in a multi-religious country.

Publication of Prophet Mohammad Cartoons in Denmark

The second incident is the controversy over the publication of Prophet Mohammad cartoons in Denmark in 2006. The publication has led to worldwide protests and violence from Muslims who consider such an act sacrilegious. It is interesting to note that the muted response of Singapore Muslims was distinctly different from the aggressive protests of Muslims in Europe and the Middle East. The Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura (MUIS) or the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore, which is the highest bureaucracy in charge of Muslim matters in Singapore, issued a statement that “[w]e are fortunate and deeply appreciative that in Singapore, the media and the community at large have always been mindful of sensitivities… and have helped to promote racial and religious harmony ” (quoted in Zakir, 2006). Other prominent Muslim organisations such as the Singapore Islamic Scholars and Religious Teachers Association (Pergas) and Association of Muslim Professionals (AMP) also issued statements condemning the publications of the cartoons and objecting to any form of violence by Muslims who have responded emotionally to the issue. The president of the Singapore Islamic Scholars and Religious Teachers Association (Pergas), while empathising with the virulent reactions of Muslims elsewhere, maintained that “there are better and more decorous ways to deal with the issue, like through diplomacy” (quoted in Zakir, 2006). Commenting on the issue, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong stated the unwavering stand of the government on religious harmony:

We would not have allowed it [the cartoon] in Singapore. We are a multiracial society, we must respect one another’s religions, we must not deliberately insult or desecrate what others hold sacred because if we want to live peacefully together, then
we must live and let live, there must be tolerance, there must be mutual respect (Lee, 2006).

Various religious groups such as the Buddhist Lodge, Hindu Endowment Board and the National Council of Churches of Singapore also publicly supported the Muslims by denouncing the publication of the cartoons. Relating the relative restraint of Muslims in South-east Asia to the cultural value of harmony, Vatikiotis (2006) argues that “communal harmony is something citizens of the region tend to value at the expense of personal freedom” (Vatikiotis, 2006).

**Key Challenges for Singapore**

There is evidence to suggest that the value of religious harmony underscored by the government has been successfully inculcated in most Singaporeans. A survey of 1025 Singaporeans by Community Development Feedback Group found that many Singaporeans are happy that there is racial and religious harmony in Singapore (“Why can’t we kawan-kawan?” The Straits Times, 17 January 2004). In her research with 2779 students aged 12-18, Chew (2005) found that Singapore adolescents generally possess a high level of religious tolerance and are careful not to utter offending phrases. 76% said that they do not ever talk about religion so as to avoid possible cause of conflict.

However, the presence of religious harmony does not mean that there are no religious tensions and challenges for the religious believers. Given the intersection between national and religious identities, dilemmas and conflicts could result from the multiple duties and loyalties a religious believer faces as a citizen of a country. Added to these is that many citizens have local and global ties and commitments beyond those to the nation-state (Jackson, 2003). This means that tensions between the national loyalty of citizens and trans-national loyalty of religious believers may arise. Another implication is that the potential clash between national and religious loyalties also blurs the distinction between the public and private sphere. The current trend of religious revivalism has led to an emphasis on individualism where one searches for personal meaning, identity and fulfilment. This means that individuals may find it increasingly difficult to put national interests above the personal desire to take one’s faith seriously – even if it means to express one’s religious views in the public arena. Political leaders need to rethink the traditional models for managing religious diversity which is based upon the distinction between the public and the private (Chidester, 2000).

In the case of Singapore, there are three key challenges faced by religious believers and the government in the current climate of religious revivalism. The first challenge is the need for individual religious believers to balance the duty to be “good citizens” by promoting religious harmony, and the duty to be obedient religious believers by proselytising to others. This tension is particularly felt by Christians in Singapore who are growing rapidly in numbers. In his study of Christianity, Tong (2004) notes that many young English-educated Chinese have moved away from traditional Chinese religious practices to Christianity. The number of Christians has risen from 10.3 per cent in 1980 to 18.7 per cent in 1988 (Kuo & Quah, 1988). Currently half of the Christians are converts, compared to 90 per cent of Buddhists, Muslims and others who adopt the respective faiths of their parents (Li, 2005). It has been reported that Christians are perceived as over-aggressive in promoting their faith in public institutions such as government schools, hospitals or offices. In the case of schools, it is instructive to note that up to half of teachers in Singapore are Christians, according to the web-site of the Teachers’ Christian Fellowship (Li & Kwek, 2005). The dilemma felt by
Christians is how to share their faith to others, especially their students, without offending religious sensitivities. After all, evangelism is a key thrust of Christianity; as the Methodist Bishop Dr Robert Solomon said: “We have always maintained that evangelism is part of our Christian faith. If you’re a good Christian, you have to tell others about Jesus Christ.”

The next challenge is for Muslims in Singapore to balance their national and religious loyalties and obligations. Muslims in Singapore are influenced by the global resurgence of Islamic fervour, like Muslims around the world. The worsening relationship between Muslims and the West has an impact on Asia including Singapore. Some Muslims are faced with the conflict between the national loyalty of citizens and the trans-national loyalty of religious believers. For example, it has been observed that there was a clear difference between Malay-Muslim Singaporeans and other Singaporeans in their views on the war led by the United States in Iraq. While the non-Muslim Singaporeans were split about the war, there was “overwhelming opposition to the war” from the Muslims due to their empathy with their fellow Muslims in Iraq (Lee, 2003). Islamic religious teachers in Singapore also noted that some Muslims in Singapore are sympathetic to the arguments from the Jemaah Islamiah (JI)’s. (Hussain, 2005). This group of people believes that the Singapore government is opposed to Islam, that Muslims in Singapore are oppressed, and that Muslims should not mix with non-Muslims. The danger is that they may become militant and support the agendas of the terrorists. The dilemma faced by some Muslims also has implications for religious harmony in Singapore. Community leaders observed that the JI arrest has led to distrust towards Muslim Singaporeans (Zakir & Kwek, 2006). To promote religious harmony, the government has called upon the “non-extremist Muslims” to speak out against the “extremists” in Singapore. However, Singapore Muslims themselves are uncomfortable with this dichotomy between “extremists” and “non-extremists”. A Singapore Muslim academic writes that “the simplification between the ‘fundamentalist Muslims’ and ‘moderate Muslims’, is not only conceptually untenable but also echoes the anxiety of the war against terror, be it in the mass media, and in the present day scholarship” (Azhar, 2006, p. 1, also see Kadir, 2004). Such a categorisation also does not give room for Muslims who do not support terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda and JI (i.e., they are not “extremists”), but are reluctant to heed the government’s call to speak up against them because they perceive that speaking up against the “extremists” is tantamount to supporting the United States. While interventionist measures such as arresting the terrorists and regulating Islamic teachings are still needed, it is necessary for the Singapore government to let Muslim leaders take the lead in engaging their fellow Muslims, and address social concerns and grievances faced by the Muslim community such as the issue of educational marginality of Malay-Muslims in Singapore (C. Tan, 2007b).

There is also a need to promote a form of active citizenship within a culture of accountability and participatory decision-making in Singapore. While “passive, responsible, rule-following citizenship” has been successfully implemented in Singapore for the past few decades, such a model may not serve the needs of Singapore in the future. As pointed out earlier, the rules are set by the leaders in the People’s Action Party (PAP) which is the only political to rule Singapore since her independence in 1965. The overarching concern of economic success has led PAP to scrupulously maintain an honest reputation for Singapore in order to attract foreign investments. Such an effort has not gone unnoticed: a 2006 survey of 1476 expatriates by the Political and Economic Risk Consultancy (Perc) reported that Singapore is the least corrupt among 12 Asian countries, Australia and the United States (Zakir, 2007; A. Tan, 2007). Perc notes:

Singapore has consistently topped our annual survey as the country where expatriates consider the problem of corruption to be least. The Singapore Government has
worked hard to nurture this reputation and it is well deserved (quoted in A. Tan, 2007, p. 1).

Commenting on the importance of economic progress for Singapore, a prominent political leader said that the real question Singaporeans should ask themselves in judging the government is whether the policies have given them “more opportunities to lead a fun and happy life” and “a safe and secure future” (quoted in Sim, 2006a). However, a political culture where citizens are not encouraged to ask questions and participate actively in policy-making may leave open the possibility of corruption when a different political party or leader takes over. There are also indications that Singaporeans themselves want to have a greater stake in policy-making, beyond just having “more opportunities to lead a fun and happy life” and “a safe and secure future”. A survey shows that six out of 10 wants the Government to consider religious beliefs when making policy (Low, 2005). The respondents believe that national policies and debates on issues such as stem-cell research, organ donation and casinos are intricately linked to their moral and religious considerations (Lim 2005). In view of the desire of Singaporeans, including religious believers, to have a greater stake in public decision-making, the political leadership may have to be more open to contrary political perspectives and views, and engage the citizens in various nationwide initiatives (Tan, 2006).

Conclusion

This paper has argued that the principle of religious harmony, with its emphasis on collectivism and an appeal to a strong interventionist government, helps to ensure relative peace and tolerance among the various religious communities. The conception of “good citizens” entails that citizens in Singapore should put the interests of the community and society before self; and look to the government for the leadership and initiative. As illustrated in the case of religious proselytising, the JI arrests, and publication of the Prophet Mohammad cartoons, the religious leaders were united in upholding religious harmony through the use of restraint and logic. But with religious revivalism and continual terrorist threats from some Muslim groups, it has become increasingly challenging for religious believers to balance their national and religious identities, loyalties and duties. This paper has argued that the challenge for religious believers, especially Christians, is to perform their civic duty to maintain religious harmony while fulfilling their religious commandment to proselytise at the same time. On the other hand, the Muslims in Singapore face the challenge of balancing their national and religious loyalties and obligations in face of Islamic resurgence and fundamentalism. The on-going challenge for the Singapore government is to promote a conception of “good” citizens that takes into consideration the multiplicity and complexity of religion and citizenship. This is a daunting task for the government of a multi-religious society where religions will always be potential fault-lines.

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