(Re)imagining the Muslim Identity in Singapore

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Abstract

This paper discusses how the Singapore government attempted to (re)imagine the Muslim identity in Singapore based on the crisis of the Jemaah Islamiah (JI) arrests in 2002. The paper argues that the government sought to resolve and manage the crisis using the combined apparatuses of the mass media, education and administrative regulations. The paper further analyses the constraints and challenges faced by the government in the process of (re)constructing and sustaining the Singapore Muslim identity. The attempt by the Singapore government provides a useful example of how the government of a multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-lingual country has responded to internal terrorist threats by (re)imagining the Muslim identity, and the problems and controversies such a (re)imaging process generates.

Introduction

A Muslim community existed in Singapore as far back as the nineteenth century. At that time, the Muslims were mainly South Asians and Arab Muslims who were converted under the influence of the Malay Sultans. When Singapore was founded as a British trading post and colony in 1819, the British government recognised the Malay sultans as guardians of the Islamic faith. That was the beginning of a close link between the Muslim and Malay identities in Singapore. The conflation of religious and ethnic identities was reinforced by the ruling party, the People's Action Party (PAP), when Singapore became independent in 1965. The PAP government adopts an accommodationist approach in nation-building where the different ethnic groups are encouraged to retain their own religious and ethnic identities while demonstrating their allegiance and loyalty to the

nation (Hussin 2004). As religious institutions are regarded by the government as having no legitimate role in political debate and activity, the values conveyed by these religious institutions are seen as appropriate to the private sphere only (Chua 1985). The conflation of ethnic and religious identities in Singapore is evident in the state-initiated curriculum for citizenship education, known as National Education (NE).[1]

The link between ethnic and religious identities is supported by the fact that in Singapore 64.4 per cent of Chinese are either Buddhists or Taoists, 99.6 per cent of Malays are Muslims, and 55.4 per cent of Indians are Hindus. Among the ethnic communities in Singapore, the Muslim identity is most closely identified with the Malay identity (Alatas et al, 2003; Kadir 2004a). As long as the Malay/Muslim community confines its religious beliefs to the private sphere, the government is content to leave any religious discussions and debates to the religious leaders (Ling 1987; Chua 1995; Tan, 2007a). This had been the case for Singapore Muslims for many years until, in 2002, the Singapore government embarked on a 'Singapore Muslim Identity project'. What factors account for this construction of Muslim identity in Singapore? What is a Singapore Muslim identity, and what constraints and challenges does the government face in the (re)imagining process? These are the questions this paper hopes to address.

Imagining Singapore

Benedict Anderson, in his book, Imagined Communities (1991) argues that nations are political communities created through the process of imagining. He points out that 'nationalism has to be understood by aligning it with the large cultural systems that preceded it, out of which – as well as against which – it came into being' (Anderson 1991: 12). This imagining is conditioned by the historical and geographical circumstances in which it evolved (Mac Laughlin 2001). Anderson (1991) further avers that the instilling of nationalist ideology is achieved through apparatuses such as the mass media, the educational system and administrative regulations. In the process of (re)imagining, the nation (re)constructs its sense of nationhood and national identity continuously (Anand 2000; Koh 2005).

A number of writers have observed that Singapore is an imagined – or more precisely, an imagining – community (e.g.

Bokhorst-Heng 2002; Koh 2005; Tay 2004). The Singapore government prefers the interventionist approach in constructing a common Singaporean identity through active social engineering and political socialisation (Hussin 2004). In particular, a set of secular shared values known as 'Our Shared Values' is promoted by the government in Singapore for all Singaporeans. These Shared Values are: (1) nation before community and society before self; (2) community support and respect for the individual; (3) fhe family as the basic unit of society; (4) consensus in place of conflict; and (5) racial and religious harmony. To preserve ethnic and religious harmony, the religious commu- nities are free to practise their religious beliefs as long as they are not involved in politics and do not cause any inter-religious or inter-ethnic tensions and conflicts.[2]

In a recent paper on imagining the Singapore nation, Aaron Koh (2005) points out that the Singapore government uses the press to (re)mediate and contribute to the process of nationhood, and the apparatus of schooling and curriculum intervention to sustain the recourse to patriotism and nation- identity making. Koh also applies the concepts of crisis construction and crisis management to the imagining process in Singapore:

> In short, Singapore's nationalism is mobilised in terms of 'crises' and 'crisis management'. Ideologically, crisis construction works to mobilise a collective will and a concerted effort of a nation coming together to absolve crises, while 'crisis management' remains the prerogative of the political elites, since the success in absolving and managing crisis will continue to give the political elites the legitimacy to rule (Brown 2000). Imagining Singapore as a nation is therefore cast in an imagination of crisis (Koh 2005: 84).

Drawing on Anderson's (1991) and Koh's (2005) ideas, the next section explains how the imagining of the Singapore Muslim identity originated from a crisis, and how the Singapore government managed the crisis using the mass media, education and administrative regulations.

Crisis Construction: Jemaah Islamiah (JI) Arrests

In two incidents which took place in the wake of the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States and before the Bali bombing in October 2002, fifteen members of a Muslim group, Jemaah Islamiah (JI), were arrested in December 2001, followed by another twenty-one of them in August 2002. JI is a terrorist organisation formed by Indonesian cleric Abdullah Sungkar. It has cells all over Southeast Asia and Australia, and its aim is to create an Islamic Caliphate or Daulah Islamiyah in Southeast Asia through violent means. The JI members in Singapore were arrested for attempting to commit violent attacks against western embassies and Singapore key points. The initiative to blow up western embassies came from Al Qaeda with which JI has links. The leader of JI in Singapore is Ibrahim Maidin, an Indian Muslim who is a part-time religious teacher. It was reported that he was inspired by the Afghan mujaheedin struggle and has arranged for some JI members in Singapore to be trained in Afghanistan (for more details, see Tan 2002; Desker 2003).

The arrests naturally put Singapore's Muslims in the spotlight and created a sense of uncertainty among Singaporeans. An analysis of a widely publicised speech made by then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong on October 2002 for a group of community leaders after the arrest of JI members will show how the government attempted to mobilise a collective will and a concerted effort of a nation coming together to resolve a crisis. Goh began by reminding his audience of the seriousness of the crisis: 'the terrorists are shifting their theatre of operations to Southeast Asia. . . . [t]errorism is . . . here at our doorstep' (Goh 2002a). Noting that the threat posed by the JI was 'very real, and very serious', he framed the problem as a national problem, not just a Muslim problem. He explained:

> It is a national problem because the JI threatens our national security, our national cohesion, and also our economy. And while the JI members are Muslims, and claim to be advancing the cause of Islam, they do not represent our Muslim community (Goh 2002a).

To drive home the extent of the JI threat to Singapore, Mr Goh proceeded to outline the threats to national security, social cohesion

and the economy in Singapore. He pointed out that JI aimed to turn Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia and the southern Philippines into an Islamic region using terror and violence. The JI plan for bomb attacks against civilian targets, if successful, would have killed and injured many Singaporeans, and 'caused fear and panic, and aroused anger and retaliation against our Muslim community'. Secondly, he noted that the JI arrests could lead to non- Muslim Singaporeans looking at the entire Muslim community with suspicion, and refusing to employ Muslims in the workplace. The Muslims, for their part, might perceive the JI arrests, together with the global fight against terrorism, and the United States' attack on Iraq, as a conspiracy against their religion. The mutual distrust and fear could lead to segregation along ethnic and religious lines, and was 'detrimental to our society and to nation building'. Thirdly, the economy would be affected as foreign investors and tourists might be deterred from going to Singapore, and the livelihood of Singaporeans would be affected. By highlighting the severe consequences of the JI arrests, Goh wanted to remind Singaporeans that they were facing a national crisis. What was expected of Singaporeans was to respond to the crisis collectively as a nation. He called for all Singaporeans – Muslim and non-Muslim – to work hand in hand to promote ethnic and religious harmony.

What is interesting about the speech is how Goh categorised the Muslims into 'moderates' and 'extremists'. To Muslim Singaporeans, he cautioned that 'if Islamic extremism grows in your midst, this will cause them [non- Muslim Singaporeans] to look at you with disquiet'. While praising some Muslim groups for speaking out against the acts of terrorists, he encouraged Muslim leaders to study the ideology of Al Qaeda and JI so as to 'to insulate our Muslims against the influence of such extremists'. Addressing the non- Muslim Singaporeans, he said: 'If you let unfounded suspicion affect the way you behave towards Muslim Singaporeans, this will build up resentment among Muslims, and turn even moderate ones against the society'. It is clear from the speech that the 'extremists' are Muslims who are supportive of the teachings of Al Qaeda and JI, while the 'moderates' comprise all other Muslims who do not belong to the first group.

This labelling of Muslims as either 'moderates' or 'extremists' is prevalent in a number of speeches made by government leaders. Another good example is Mr Goh's National Day rally address in

the same year. In a speech that was both broadcast on national television and published in the national newspapers, Goh told the Muslim community that they had to choose between the 'extremists' and the 'moderates':

> Within the Islamic world, some religious leaders are pushing Muslims down an extreme path, while others urge a moderate path. Which path Singapore Muslims choose will have an impact on the cohesion of our country. It will also decide the community's future development – whether the community continues to progress, or stagnates (Goh 2002b).

Goh then urged the Muslims in Singapore – the 'moderates' – to stand up against those who advocate intolerance and extremism, and not allow the extremists and militants to set the Islamic agenda. He also expressed his wish to see Muslim leaders take the lead in protecting the Muslim community from religious teachers who spread extremist views. He envisioned the Muslim community in Singapore as one that is progressive, economically developed, and well integrated into multi-racial, multi- religious Singapore – all hallmarks of 'moderate' Muslims.

Although we have only examined two government speeches, they are representative of the Singapore government's attempt to mobilise the people through a national crisis. The spotlight was on the ideological battle between the 'extremists' and the 'moderates' within the Muslim commu- nity in Singapore. Whereas it had been politically expedient for the government to leave it to the religious communities to manage their religious identities and beliefs, the JI crisis has changed the government's approach towards the construction of Muslim identity. The JI incident signalled to the government that there was a perceived conflict between the religious and national loyalties and duties for some Muslims (the JI members). As the Muslim identity was linked to the JI crisis, it was no longer a private matter but a national concern. To help Singapore Muslims choose the path of the 'moderates', there was an urgent need to go beyond the conflation of Islam and the Malay community to (re)imagine a Muslim identity that was privileged by the government.

Crisis Management: The Mass Media, Education and Administrative Regulations

The construction of a crisis provided the platform for the government to rally all Singaporeans together and to (re)construct the Singapore Muslim identity in particular. Throughout the process of crisis management, the Singapore government took the lead in its attempts to capitalise on the mass media, education and administrative regulations to mediate, construct and sustain the identity-making of the Singapore Muslims.

Mass Media

Having used the media to introduce a national crisis through well- publicised speeches and dialogues with community leaders, the media was then used to construct and perpetuate a Singapore Muslim identity. Responding to the government's call for Muslim leaders to condemn the JI terrorist acts, in Ocotber 2002 122 Muslim organisations publicly condemned terrorism and rejected ideological extremism, while reinfor- cing their commitment to religious harmony in Singapore. This statement was published in the local newspapers and praised by the then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong as a 'very important statement' that 'will reassure Singaporeans that Singapore Muslims are committed to peace and nation building' (Goh 2002a).

The project to (re)imagine the Singapore Muslim identity began in April 2002 when Dr Yaacob Ibrahim, Minister for Muslim Affairs, Community Development and Sports, used the mass media to announce the introduc- tion of a 'New Malay Identity'. A few months later, he announced the launch of the Singapore Muslim Identity Project to be spearheaded by Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura (MUIS) or the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore. MUIS was established in 1968 as a statutory body to advise the President of Singapore on all matters relating to Islam in Singapore. All its office-bearers are appointed by the government. The project aims to recognise and crystallise what Singapore Muslims stand for in the context of a multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-lingual society. It also claims to debunk 'extremist' teachings by certain Muslim groups outside Singapore, such as the teaching that Muslims can only live in a Muslim-majority nation (Yaacob 2006). It is noteworthy that the project continues the government's rhetoric of warning the Singapore Muslims against

the 'extremists'. Mr Yaacob described 'extremists' as Muslims who 'are pushing for a narrow and rigid interpretation of Islam' and 'do not wish to find solutions that would make Islam relevant to the changing times' (Yaacob 2002). Cautioning that 'the Muslim community in Singapore cannot afford to be trapped in the past', Yaacob urged Muslims in Singapore not to retreat from the modern world, but to understand the world around them and contribute to its development. 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).

Underlying the Singapore Muslim Identity project is a vision of a 'Muslim Community of Excellence' in Singapore. Ten qualities are listed as the desired attributes of Muslims in Singapore (MUIS 2004): an ideal Muslim is one who:

1. holds strongly to Islamic principles, yet is adaptable to change;
2. is morally and spiritually strengthened to face challenges;
3. is enlightened about Islamic history and civilisation;
4. believes that a good Muslim is also a good citizen;
5. is well adjusted in living as a full member of secular society;
6. is progressive, beyond rituals or form;
7. is enlightened and appreciates the richness of other civilisations;
8. is inclusive and practises pluralism;
9. is a blessing to other communities; and
10. is a model and inspiration for others.

Again, this vision is set against the backdrop of the distinction between 'moderates' and 'extremists'. Dr Yaacob explains:

> To become a Community of Excellence, we have to be self-reliant, independent, creative and progressive. We should be able to take the best of the modern world and use this together with our cultural traditions, our heritage and our belief in Islam. We must reject the path of the extremists. The path of progress for the Singapore Muslim community must be one where we seek the best of the world around us, while remaining true to our culture and religion (Yaacob 2002).

Dr Yaacob announced that these attributes listed in the Muslim Community of Excellence would be woven into the various MUIS initiatives for the Muslim community. A number of print materials have been produced by various Muslim organisations to disseminate these attributes among the Singaporean public (Tan 2007a). One such publication is a booklet entitled 'Muslim, Moderate, Singaporean' by a Muslim missionary organisation and the Al-Khair Mosque in 2003; it sets out six principles of moderation as guidelines for Singapore Muslims. In September 2003, the Singapore Islamic Scholars and Religious Teachers Association (Pergas) organised the Convention of Ulama (Muslim scholars) and published a book entitled 'Moderation in Islam in the context of the Muslim community in Singapore'. Counter-ideological materials on Islamic issues were also produced by the Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG), a group consisting of a group of Muslim scholars approved by the government to counsel the JI detainees in 2003. RRG also gave public talks on religious teachings such as the conception of jihad for the Muslim community. Some mosques and Muslim organisations in Singapore also organised interfaith forums and dialogue between the Muslim and non-Muslim communities. For example, a talk on 'Understanding Islam' was organised by the People's Association Malay Activity Coordinating Council (Mesra) specially for non-Muslims to understand the beliefs and practice of Islam in the Singapore context.

Education

To further support the vision of a Muslim Community of Excellence in Singapore, and in particular, to prepare Muslim students to be adaptable to change and face the challenges of a knowledge-based economy, the government introduced the Compulsory Education Act for all students and curricular changes for Muslim students in madrasahs (Islamic religious schools). Muslim children in Singapore could choose to receive full-time education at a secular national school or a madrasah.[3] There are six full- time madrasahs and twenty-seven part-time mosque madrasahs in Singa- pore. The madrasahs aim to produce religious elites to lead the community in religious matters, while mosque madrasahs provide part-time basic Islamic education to students who attend national schools. That the madrasahs have received a lot of public attention from the government is due to their relatively high drop-out rates and poor academic performances. Statistics

show that fifty to sixty per cent of each cohort of madrasah students do not progress to Secondary Four, and they also do not perform as well as their Muslim counterparts in national schools (Tan 2007b). Unlike national schools, which focus on the teaching of academic subjects such as English, Mathematics and Science, the priority of the madrasahs is the teaching of Islamic subjects, with academic subjects given between thirty and sixty per cent of curriculum time. The government has questioned whether the curriculum time allocated for academic subjects is sufficient to equip the students with the knowledge and skills for a knowledge-based economy. It does not help that the madrasahs are not as well equipped as the national schools in terms of resources, facilities, qualified teachers and materials to help their students excel academically (Noor Aisha and Lai 2006). Adding to the concern of the government is the fact that the six full-time madrasahs have been very popular with Muslim parents who wish to send their children to these institutions, with many applicants being turned away due to limited capacity.

Enforced from 2003, the Compulsory Education Act requires all children in Singapore to complete the mandatory six years of primary education in secular national schools under the Ministry of Education (MOE). All children are required to sit the final examination known as Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) at the end of the six years. Since madrasahs are not national schools, the Act means that Muslim children attending madrasahs may be forced to leave the madrasah to study in a national school. After discussions with the Muslim community, the MOE made a special provision for the madrasahs: they may continue to enrol primary students as long as all their students sit the PSLE and meet the minimum performance benchmarks (these are the average PSLE aggregate scores of Malay students in the two highest performing academic streams in the six lowest-performing national schools). If these benchmarks are not met, they will be posted to another madrasah where the students meet the PSLE benchmark, or be transferred to a national school. The Act will only apply to the madrasahs from 2008. The implementation of the Compulsory Education Act means that madrasahs now have to devote more curriculum time to academic subjects, especially English, Mathematics and Science (Tan 2007b; see Tan and Kasmuri 2007 for a case study of a madrasah in Singapore).

To help the Singapore Muslims to possess the desired attributes listed under the Muslim Community of Excellence, MUIS initiated a new curriculum for the madrasahs, costing S$7.3 million. MUIS claims that the new curriculum ensures that the needs of students attending madrasahs are met in Singapore's fast-advancing multi-racial and multi-religious society. The goal is to prepare them for the future as forward-thinking religious leaders or professionals in another field of their choice. Special attention is devoted to the strengthening of the teaching of English, Mathematics and Science in the madrasahs so as to equip Muslim students with the life skills needed to get ahead in a competitive environment. Instead of Arabic, the main medium of instruction in the madrasahs will be English. This project aims to produce the syllabi, textbooks and materials for twelve years of education from primary 1 to pre-university 2, involving 156 books and seventy-two teachers' guidebooks. MUIS hopes to persuade the madrasahs to use the new curriculum from 2008.

The government has also introduced a number of curricular changes for part-time Islamic education. Part-time Islamic education is for Muslim students who are enrolled in national schools but would like to receive religious instruction outside school hours at the mosque madrasahs. The review of part-time religious education, led by MUIS and encompassing the curriculum for pre-school children up to adults, aims to improve the teaching of religious subjects so that Muslim students will remain or become 'moderates'. Commenting on the curriculum review, Dr Yaacob Ibrahim, the Minister-in-Charge of Muslim Affairs, noted that the teaching methods and materials have to change to keep the interest of the young. Otherwise, 'they risk missing out on the fundamentals and subsequently being led astray by someone disguising himself as an expert in religion' (Yaacob 2006). Under SIES, there are programmes catering for different age groups from five years old onwards. MUIS plans to roll out the various programmes in phases. It has already announced a few part-time programmes for children and youths such as 'Learning Islamic Values Every Day' or 'aLIVE', 'Teens aLIVE', 'TweensAlive' and 'YouthAlive'.

Administrative Regulations

Administrative regulations also play a key role in the government's efforts to construct a Singapore Muslim identity that rejects the 'extremists' in favour of the 'moderates'. First, the government stepped up security measures to make it difficult for the 'extremists' to launch terrorist attacks. These measures include 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.

As mentioned earlier, a Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG) was formed in 2003 to counsel the JI detainees, produce counter-ideological materials and give talks to Muslims on religious 'extremism'. To regulate religious instructions and prevent part-time religious teachers such as JI leader Ibrahim Maiden from spreading JI teachings, MUIS announced that an Asatizah Recognition System would be introduced. This requires all asatizah or religious teachers to get the approval of a panel of government-approved religious leaders before they can preach in mosques or teach in madrasahs. The plan is for about 800 out of a total of 1,400 religious teachers to receive certificates of recognition from the Asatizah Recognition Board by 2007.

The government also introduced a number of initiatives and measures to ensure that religious harmony between Muslims and non-Muslims in Singapore was not jeopardised. After the JI arrests in 2001, the government formed the Inter-Racial Confidence Circles (IRCCs) – community groups in the constituencies designed to build trust among the ethnic groups. Another government initiative is Harmony Circles (HCs), that are groups in schools, workplaces and other local organisations tasked to organise activities to promote inter-religious understanding. Yet another initiative is the Community Engagement Programme which aims to build a network of people from all ethnic groups and religions in schools as well as other educational and social institutions.

Constraints and Challenges to the Imagining Process

Anderson (1991) avers that the imagining process by the state involves conflicts with religious affiliation which serves as the basis of very old and stable imagined communities. He writes:

> To different degrees, in different Southeast Asian colonies, the rulers were compelled to make messy accommodations, especially to Islam and Buddhism. In particular, religious shrines, schools, and courts – access to which was determined by individual popular self-choice, not the census – continued to flourish. The state could rarely do more than try to regulate, construct, count, standardise, and hierarchically subordinate these institutions to its own (Anderson 1991: 169).

This conflict with religious institutions is evident in the case of Singapore. There are a few constraints and challenges faced by the government in managing the JI crisis using the mass media, education and administrative regulations. The first is the problematic labelling of Muslims as 'moder- ates' and 'extremists' in the media, as this oversimplifies the realities that Muslims in Singapore face. Singapore Muslims themselves are uncomfor- table with this dichotomy (Kadir 2004a, 2004b). 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: 1). Such a categorisation also does not give room to Muslims who do not support terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda and JI, and are thus not 'extremists', but are also reluctant to heed the government's call for 'moderates' to speak up against the 'extremists' because they may not want to be perceived as 'liberal' Muslims singing the same tune as the United States. The dichotomy between 'moderates' and 'extremists' also ignores the different (and competing) Islamic schools of thought. For example, Sadaalah (2004) has identified four religious orientations within Islam: Secularism, Traditionalism, Modernism/Liberalism, and Fundamentalism/Islamism.

The measures taken by the government to reform full-time and part-time Islamic education are also not without their challenges and controversies. Although MUIS has spent more than S$7 million introducing the new curriculum, it has not succeeded in persuading all six full-time madrasahs to adopt it. To date, only one madrasah is using the MUIS curriculum in full. A major objection of those madrasahs that rejected the new curriculum is the use of English as the medium of instruction. These madrasahs prefer to continue using Arabic as the medium of teaching since it is the language of the Quran and Islamic subjects. Although all the madrasahs come under the administration of MUIS, the latter does not have the legal authority to enforce the change of curriculum. Coupled with this constraint is the fact that most of the madrasahs have traditional ties with Islamic universities outside Singapore such as the Al-Azhar University in Egypt. Since the priority is to prepare the graduates of madrasahs to enter these Islamic universities, there is little motivation and even less obligation for the madrasahs to adopt the new curriculum. The introduction of the Compulsory Education Act may serve to compel the madrasahs to devote more curriculum time to academic subjects, but the Act will only apply to the madrasahs from the year 2008. Besides, given the premium madrasahs place on educating Muslim children from a young age, one wonders if the madrasah leaders, Islamic leaders, and the Muslim community in Singapore would agree to any madrasah being closed down if it were unable to meet the performance benchmarks.

The new curriculum for part-time Islamic education is less debatable but it is still too early to tell if the programmes are accepted and popular with the Muslim community. One should also bear in mind that these part-time Islamic programmes are not the only ones available to the Singapore Muslims. While almost all Muslim families provide their children with some form of Islamic education, they could send their children to any of the privately run Islamic organisations and centres that provide religious education, and not only to mosque madrasahs that offer the part-time programmes initiated by MUIS. They may also engage religious teachers to tutor their children at home.

Of the three apparatuses, it appears that the government has been most successful in using administrative regulations to construct a Singapore Muslim identity. The measures introduced by the government to counter the 'extremist' teachings of Islam testify

to a strong government which plays an active role in the economy and society. The justification of state power is the government's ability to promote and sustain economic development and preserve social cohesion (Hill and Lian 1995; Wee 2001; Koh and Ooi 2002; Gopinathan and Sharpe 2004). All aspects of social life are open to state administrative intervention so as to harness them to serve the national goals. But the dependence on administrative regulations alone is not enough to (re)imagine the Singapore Muslim identity successfully. While interventionist measures such as arresting terrorists and regulating 'extremist' schools are still needed, the govern- ment needs Muslims themselves to spontaneously speak out against the terrorists, and (re)construct a Singapore Muslim identity that they can truly identify with and believe in. The state-led and interventionist approach entails that the Muslim community plays a subordinate role in (re)imagin- ing itself. Unsurprisingly, not much is known about the Muslim community's perspectives on the (re)imaging of its own community. Few public attempts have been made by Muslim groups or individuals to take the lead in constructing the Muslim identity, and/or engage the state in critically reviewing the government-endorsed vision of Muslim identity. One of the few exceptions is the Association of Muslim Professionals (AMP) which has organised seminars and published writings in literature such as Karyawan. AMP aims to provide a channel for Muslims to reflect and debate on issues within Islam and the Muslim identity. However, AMP only represents the educated Muslim professionals which comprise a small segment of the Muslim community. Given the heterogeneity and increasing pluralism among the Muslims in Singapore in their understanding of Islam and their own identity (Kadir 2004a), more responses and alternative voices are needed from other Muslim groups and individuals. When it comes to ideological struggle – religious matters and doctrinal interpreta-tion – it is the religious leaders, not the government, that the religious followers look up to. This point has been acknowledged by former Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong himself who noted that 'the war against terrorism must be fought with ideas as well as with armies; with religious and community leaders as well as police forces and intelligence services' (Goh 2002b).

Conclusion

The paper discussed how the government endeavoured to resolve and manage the crisis of the JI arrests by using the combined apparatuses of the mass media, education and administrative regulations. It should be noted that the three apparatuses are not independent of one another; they support and reinforce one another for the government to push its national agenda of (re)imagining the Singapore Muslim identity. This paper has pointed out the constraints and problems faced by the government in regulating, constructing, and hierarchically subordinating the Muslim institutions to its own. Although the government has aggressively used the media to (re)imagine Singapore Muslims as 'moderates', the division of Muslims into 'moderates' and 'extremists' has not gone down well with Muslims in Singapore. The educational reforms led by MUIS have also been met with disinterest and resistance from most of the madrasah leaders. While the government has effectively used a number of administrative regulations to rein in the 'extremists', endorse religious teachers who are 'moderates', and promote inter-religious dialogue, these measures are top-down rather than bottom-up. What is needed in the post-JI era is for the Muslims to be empowered to take more initiative in formulating their own identity as Singapore Muslims, and decide on the nature and pace of change they desire for their religious institutions.

The issues and challenges faced by the Singapore government are not unique to Singapore. In the aftermath of terrorist attacks by certain Muslim groups in various parts of the world, many governments are scrutinising their Muslim communities. These countries have to deal with not just the terrorist threats, but the inter-ethnic and inter-religious tensions and strife between the Muslim community and other communities. While these governments are quick to use administrative regulations to prevent and deal with terrorist attacks in their countries, they are less confident when it comes to the issue of Muslim identity. How can the government of a country, together with its Muslim citizens, (re)construct a conception of Muslim identity that is both acceptable to the Muslims and compatible with the country's political, social and cultural ideology? How can Muslims today be good Muslims in a modern world, a secular state and plural society? How can Muslims deal with their multiple identities,

especially when there is a potential conflict between the national loyalty of citizens and the trans-national loyalty of religious believers? The Singapore case study provides a useful example of how the government of a multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-lingual country responded to internal terrorist threats by (re)imagining the Muslim identity, and the problems and controversies such a (re)imaging process generates. Given that the terrorist threats will continue to loom large in Singapore and other parts of the world, it is likely the Singapore government will continue in its effort to sustain the Singapore Muslim identity. Accompanying the imagining process will be constant conflicts, negotiations and accommodation between the state and the Muslim institutions in Singapore.

Notes

[1]National Education (NE) was launched by the government in 1997 and it 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 promotion of greater understanding of different races and religions is achieved 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 co-curricular activities and enrichment programmes. Religious knowledge is taught in the Secondary 3 textbook for Civics and Moral Education (Curriculum Planning and Development Division 2001). The terms 'religious' and 'racial' are almost always used together, and little distinction is made between the two. The conflation of cultural and religious beliefs and practices is also evident on the official NE website. For example, the website on 'Racial Harmony' lists the Chinese cultural practice of using chopsticks and celebrating Chinese New Year together with the litany of religious festivals such as Vesak Day, Deepavali, Easter and Hari Raya Puasa (Ministry of Education 2002). In the description on the Hungry Ghosts Festival, the website explains that the Chinese believe that during the seventh month of the lunar calendar, the gates of hell are opened and all spirits are free to roam the earth and visit their living relatives for a month. This is inaccurate as not all Chinese subscribe to this festival which is more accurately described as a religious festival commemorated

by Taoists who are not necessarily Chinese. For more details, see Tan (forthcoming).

[2]To ensure that religion remains in the private sphere, the government passed a
Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act in 1989, stipulating that 'no religious groups be involved in politics' and that 'religious organisations not stray beyond the bounds of educational, social and charitable work' (cited in Attorney-General's Chambers 2006). The Declaration of Religious Harmony introduced in 2003 also serves to remind all people of Singapore that 'religious harmony is vital for peace, progress and prosperity in our multi- racial and multi-religious nation' and that they should 'ensure that religions will not be abused to create conflict and disharmony in Singapore' (cited in Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports 2003).

[3]In 2003, 4,256 full-time students aged from seven to eighteen were enrolled in the
madrasahs in Singapore (Ministry of Education 2005). This accounts for about four per cent of all Muslim students in Singapore. Both religious subjects such as Islamic Education and Arabic language, and academic subjects such as English and Mathematics are taught in the madrasahs. Primary students enrolled in these madrasahs have to sit two examinations: examinations on religious subjects set by the madrasah, and the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) at the end of the six years of primary school. Secondary and pre- university students at the madrasahs have to sit the examinations set by the madrasahs, and may choose to sit for the Cambridge Board General Certificate of Education (GCE) examinations. Full-time students at the madrasahs usually apply for admission to overseas Islamic universities, although those who obtain good academic grades at the GCE 'O' or GCE 'A' Level examinations could choose to go to the polytechnics or secular universities in Singapore. For more details, see Tan and Kasmuri (2007).

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