Governing Muslims in Singapore’s secular authoritarian state

LILY ZUBAIDAH RAHIM

The governance of Muslims in Singapore has been strongly shaped by the secular authoritarian state’s commanding influence over Islamic institutions, such as the main religious bureaucracy Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura (the Islamic Religious Council), and reliance on draconian legislation, such as the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act (MRHA), the Sedition Act and the Internal Security Act. Inter alia, these laws attempt to inoculate religion against politics, regulate religious activity and restrain the development of an autonomous Muslim civil society. The contradictions associated with the MRHA and no-tudung (‘headscarf’) policy are analysed within the framework of the authoritarian state’s assertive secularism. The significance of localised socio-economic and political grievances in motivating a small number of Singaporean Muslims in supporting radical Islamist ideology is also considered.

Keywords: authoritarian state; Islam; secular

Authoritarian secularism

Singapore is the only country in East Asia to have preserved its authoritarian political structures, despite having attained the status of a First World economy. It has the distinction for being one of the few countries in the world to have devised legislation enforcing the separation of religion and politics—ostensibly in the interest of maintaining ‘religious harmony’. Indeed, more than 20 years after the introduction of the 1990 Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act (MRHA), Singaporeans are regularly reminded of the dangers associated with religion creeping into the public domain. In his National Day rally speech in August 2009, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong reiterated the importance of maintaining the separation of religion from politics in order to insulate the country from the visceral fault lines of race and religion (Straits Times, 11 January 2010). More controversially, former prime minister and current Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew lamented in 2010 that:

*Lily Zubaidah Rahim is Associate Professor in Government and International Relations at the University of Sydney. <(lily.rahim@sydney.edu.au)>
we were progressing very nicely until the surge of Islam came ... I would say, today, we can integrate all religions and races except Islam ... I think the Muslims socially do not cause any trouble, but they are distinct and separate. (Kwang et al. 2011: 228)

This essentialist crisis discourse, centred on reminding Singaporeans of the vulnerabilities associated with being a resource-poor and largely Chinese city state surrounded by larger, more densely populated, resource-rich and potentially hostile Muslim states to the immediate north and south, has reinforced the stature of the long-serving People’s Action Party (PAP) government as guardians of the predominantly Chinese populace. The discourse serves as an effective means of rallying the masses behind an ethno-nationalist rhetoric that rationalises draconian legislation, high defence spending and compulsory national service (Rahim 2009).

Taylor (2009: xxii) observes that in multi-religious democratic polities, secularism is inclined ‘to secure freedom of both belief and unbelief as well as equality between citizens’. Historically, secularism in European liberal democracies was directed towards not just curbing the influence of religion, but also checking the power of the centralised modern state. Today, there are a variety of religion–state–society paradigms. At one end of the spectrum, there is the ‘high wall of separation’ laïcité model of France, and the related assertive secular variety of Turkey and other authoritarian secular states such as Singapore. Passive secular varieties include the established religion model found in democracies such as Sweden, Denmark and Norway. These varieties include the positive accommodation model practised in secular democracies such as the Netherlands, Belgium, Switzerland and Germany, and the ‘respect all, positive cooperation, principled distance’ (Stepan 2010: 2) model of secular democracies in India, Indonesia and Senegal. Stepan notes that most passive secular democracies exhibit the ‘twin tolerations’ principle, which generally affords freedom of religious individuals and groups to publicly advance their values in civil society institutions, and to sponsor organizations and movements in political society, as long as their public advancement of these beliefs does not impinge negatively on the liberties of other citizens, or violate democracy and the law, by violence or other means. (Stepan 2010: 3)

There are distinct similarities between the assertive secular variety of the authoritarian Turkish Kemalist state and the Singapore state. This variety is designed to allow the state to control religion rather than remove it from the public sphere. Typical of authoritarian states, the education system is tightly centralised, and religious education and institutions are under the control of the state. Public policy related to religion is determined in a top-down fashion. Dissenting voices, particularly of religious and ethnic minorities, are typically suppressed. In the case of Turkey, governed by the Islamist-oriented Justice and Development Party since 2001, there has been a shift away from the assertive
secularism variety championed by Kemalist nationalists who dominate the military and judiciary. This shift can be attributed to the significant democratic strides experienced in the past decade (Kuru 2009). Democratisation thus appears to have moderated Turkey’s assertive secularism and fuelled the shift towards the passive secular variety found in many secular democracies. By contrast, Singapore’s authoritarian state has remained entrenched within the assertive secular paradigm.

Regulation of religion

In Singapore, state intervention in the administration of Islam, Sikhism and Hinduism is demonstrated by its appointment of many office-bearers in statutory bodies which have been established to manage these faith communities (Tan 2007: 446). Sensitive to the power of religion to mobilise and motivate, the PAP government has thus selectively co-opted and harnessed the potential of religion in driving its state-building objectives (Tan 2008: 66–7).

Even though faith communities have been prohibited from engaging in political activities, they have been expediently encouraged to work with the PAP government. For example, the government has been careful to engage in managed consultations with major religious organisations when implementing policies that directly impact on religious morality. State-managed consultations on controversial issues such as the MRHA, regulation of madrasas (Islamic religious schools), liberalisation of gaming laws and bioethics research have been accorded considerable publicity. However, once the proposed law or policy is implemented, the public and civil society are expected not to campaign against it, even though they may have opposed the proposal.

In Singapore, religious beliefs are strongly divided along ethnic lines. Of Malays, 99.6 percent are Muslims; 66.4 percent of Chinese are Buddhists and Taoists; 55.4 percent of Indians are Hindus; and 50 percent of ethnic minorities (referred to as ‘others’) are Christians. Malays are thus the most homogeneous ethnic community in religious terms. This has led to the categories of ‘Malay’ and ‘Muslim’ being used synonymously with the Muslim identity and treated as integral to Malay identity. Unlike other ethnic communities in Singapore, Malay ethnicity and Islam have been conflated—an anomalous phenomenon that is not even practised in the Middle East, where there are sizeable Arab Christian communities. It is worth noting that the Malay Muslim community has remained on the socio-economic and political margins of society, even before Singapore’s political independence in 1965. In particular, economic and educational disparities between the Malay and Chinese communities have not narrowed in critical areas such as university enrolments, average monthly household income and ownership of private houses and apartments. Malays are also under-represented in senior positions in the armed forces, police, intelligence services and the judiciary.
Following the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, and the subsequent detention of alleged Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) militants in Singapore, the secular authoritarian state has been particularly vigilant in policing the local Muslim community, whilst ostensibly promoting inter-religious understanding via initiatives such as the Inter-Religious Confidence Circles (IRCCs) and the Declaration of Religious Harmony (DRH). This vigilant policing is strongly driven by apprehensions that the secular foundations of regional states such as Malaysia and Indonesia have been subverted by ‘creeping Islamisation’—demonstrated by the ability of some Islamist parties and organisations in attaining considerable electoral support, extending the reach of sharia (Islamic) law and incrementally Islamising secular political parties.

Maintaining a watchful eye on regional and international influences, the PAP government is well equipped to pre-emptively move against any perceived threat. Tan (2007: 444) notes that since 11 September 2001, ‘close scrutiny, interventionist surveillance and ultra-sensitivity to internal security concerns are hallmarks of the government’s policy towards religion’. In particular, the increased level of Muslim religiosity in Singapore has been securitised as the community is perceived to be susceptible to radical Islamist propaganda (ibid.).

The 1965 Administration of Muslim Law Act (AMLA) exemplifies the intrusion of the state into the religious sphere. Inter alia, the Act facilitates the management of Muslim affairs, such as the collection of zakat (annual obligatory tax), administration of mosques, management of wakaf (bequeathed) land and coordination of haj (pilgrimage) activities. The AMLA allows for the repeal and re-enactment of laws which relate to Muslims. Despite considerable community disquiet, the AMLA’s amendment in 1998 provides for the concurrent jurisdiction of sharia and civil courts, thereby allowing Muslims the choice of seeking redress on matters such as custody, maintenance claims and division of matrimonial property in either court.

Established in 1968, the Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura (MUIS) is a state-sponsored religious bureaucracy with statutory-board status that has centralised Muslim affairs. It administers the zakat collection, wakaf land and haj pilgrimages, and manages nearly 100 mosques. It also administers the Mosque Building Fund, which collects financial contributions from working Muslim Singaporeans for the building and maintenance of mosques in housing estates. The MUIS has the power to approve nominees to mosque management committees and provides the text of Friday mosque sermons.

Instructively, the president of Singapore, on the recommendation of the prime minister, appoints all key office-bearers in the MUIS, including the mufti (Muslim religious leader). The chairman of the MUIS is none other than the PAP Minister-in-Charge of Muslim Affairs. The Muslim community’s perception of the MUIS as a body unduly influenced by the state was articulated in 2003 by Uztaz Hasbi, president of the Singapore Islamic Scholars and Religious Teachers’ Association (PERGAS). He pronounced that PERGAS had to serve as the moral anchor for Muslims in Singapore as the ‘MUIS could not do it...
MUIS is a statutory board, they must serve the interests of the state. It is our responsibility to serve the interests of the Muslim community’ (cited in Kadir 2007: 150). Similarly, many Muslim community organisations are subjected to government influence by their reliance on state funding and the dominant position of PAP politicians in these organisations. For example, the chairman of the Muslim self-help organisation Mendaki is the PAP minister Yaacob Ibrahim. Several PAP Members of Parliament (MPs) are also on Mendaki’s board of directors.

**Constitutional guarantees and legislative restrictions**

Singapore’s constitution provides for freedom of speech, assembly, association and religion. In particular, Article 12 guarantees equality before the law and freedom from racial and religious discrimination; Article 14 provides for freedom of expression; and Article 15 affords Singaporeans the right ‘to profess and practise his religion and to propagate it’ (Rahim 2003: 12). Article 16(2) and Article 16(3) provide for every religious group the right to establish and maintain educational institutions and offer instruction or take part in any ceremony or act of worship of a religion other than their own; while Article 15 affords the right to religious freedom and practice—this right is subject to citizens not engaging in any act contrary to the law relating to public order, public health or morality. This conditional right allows the PAP government to determine ‘appropriate’ religious activity.

Numerous laws and administrative policies have restricted the constitutional and civil rights of Singaporeans on the grounds of national security and public order. Many of these laws and administrative policies, such as the Internal Security Act (ISA), Societies Act and Sedition Act, were initially designed by the British colonial authorities in their cold war campaign against communist and other radical nationalists. The PAP government not only retained these illiberal laws and policies, but expanded their scope and reach. Significantly, these laws and administrative policies have been criticised by international organisations, such as the International Commission of Jurists, Amnesty International, Asia Watch and Human Rights Watch, for their failure to conform to international law.

The existence of detention without trial laws has made it problematic for the Singapore government to ratify the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966), and contradicts its ratification of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). These draconian laws have also made it problematic for the formation of a national human rights commission—long established in neighbouring Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines, and in the process of formation in the regional grouping of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. Despite Singapore’s ratification of the Universal
Declaration of Human Rights, the PAP government remains uneasy with the human rights ideals enshrined in the declaration (Yong 2008).

The Sedition Act provides for criminal offences relating to race and class. These include defiling a place of worship, disturbing a religious assembly, and uttering words or sounds to deliberately wound religious feelings. It is thus an offence to promote feelings of ill will between the different ethnic groups or classes of the population. Under the Societies Act, the registration of a society is not automatic, but subject to inquiry by the Registrar of Societies. This requirement provides the government with a powerful means of proscribing religious groups deemed to be prejudicial to public peace, welfare or good order. As the Societies Act prohibits the political engagement of organisations not specifically registered for that purpose, it has been effective in intimidating and threatening the non-registration or deregistration of civil society actors who have been overtly critical of government policies. Faith groups that have run foul of the government’s nation-building agenda and suffered deregistration include Jehovah’s Witnesses and the Unification Church, which were deregistered in 1972 and 1982, respectively. The former were deregistered because the government does not recognise their conscientious objection to military service. Their publications are banned under the Societies Act and Undesirable Publications Act.

Suffice to say, draconian legislation such as the ISA has strongly engendered a culture of fear. Initially used by the British against communists and radical nationalists in the tumultuous colonial and immediate post-colonial era, the ISA allows for renewable detention without trial for two-year periods. The ISA has been invoked against those deemed to be acting in a manner prejudicial to Singapore’s security. The Act is typical of governance by the ‘rule by law’ in authoritarian states, where the executive routinely overrides the other arms of the state such as the judiciary and legislature. It allows the executive the right of not having to provide evidence against detainees to the courts. These executive privileges are based on the premise that the public has faith in the integrity of the executive and state security agencies to conduct due diligence.

Constructed narratives: ‘religious conflicts’ and ‘Marxist conspiracies’

The narrative of ‘religious conflicts’ in the 1950s and 1960s has been regularly highlighted by the PAP government to justify draconian administrative policies and laws in the name of national interest, public order or security. For example, the Hertogh riots in December 1950 have become somewhat of an icon in the authoritarian state’s characterisation of Singapore society as being susceptible to destabilisation along religious and ethnic lines. According to the official narrative, the Hertogh riots, which left 18 people dead and 173 injured, were triggered by a custody dispute over a girl of Dutch ancestry who had been raised by a Malay Muslim family during the Japanese occupation and married under
sharia law. However, religion was only one of many factors that contributed to the riots. Aljunied’s (2008: 22) study suggests that the riots were strongly fuelled by the Muslim community’s myriad grievances, which included a low regard for the colonial authorities, the influence of radical ideas, the effects of socio-economic marginalisation, press sensationalisation, and the ineffectiveness of the police force and other colonial security agencies.

In 1964, a skirmish during a procession commemorating the Prophet Muhammad’s birthday sparked off a riot which left 33 dead and 600 injured. Like the Hertogh riots, the 1964 riot was not only religiously based, but strongly fuelled by the political bickering between the PAP and Alliance leadership in the contest for Malay electoral support during the tumultuous merger years. This political tension was aggravated further by Indonesian agents provocateurs based in Singapore and inflammatory journalism. Without the existence of genuine Malay socio-economic and political grievances, the provocation of these myriad forces would not have been effective (Rahim 2008: 107).

Twenty-two social activists were detained without trial under the ISA in 1987 for allegedly engaging in a Marxist conspiracy and attempting to overthrow the Government. Instructively, these so-called Marxist conspirators were associated with the Student Christian Movement of Singapore, the National University of Singapore Catholic Students’ Society, the Singapore Polytechnic Catholic Students’ Society, the Justice and Peace Commission of the Catholic Church, and the Catholic Welfare Centre (Tsun 2008: 123). Many were engaged in social work activities on behalf of migrant workers, opposed the introduction of the 12-hour work shift, and campaigned against the eugenics-based Graduate Mothers’ Scheme, Gifted Education Program and elitist Special Assistance Plan schools (Barr 2008: 228–9).

Writing about the 1987 detentions more than a decade after the event, human rights advocate Geoffrey Robertson, QC (Queen’s Counsel) contends that the detentions were strongly driven by Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew’s anxiety over liberation theology, particularly after Marcos was toppled in the Philippines. Political turbulence in the Philippines had apparently instigated Singapore’s Internal Security Department to closely monitor all Catholics who espoused ‘subversive’ ideals such as liberation theology. Lee had also urged the Vatican to send an archbishop who would be inclined to deter priests from engaging in politics (Robertson 1999: 238).

To be sure, the 1987 ISA arrests have had a profound impact on the PAP-dominated state’s regulation of religion. Roundly criticised by the international community for the alleged physical and psychological abuse of detainees, the government initiated a constitutional amendment that would henceforth exclude the process of judicial review from all preventative detention cases under the ISA. Not long after, the MRHA was introduced, enforcing the ‘separation’ of religion from politics and thereby ensuring that those in religious authority do not challenge the PAP government’s political authority. Religious
institutions also began to actively monitor the activities of their congregations, priests, imams and ministers ‘to ensure that they stayed within the comfort zone of the government’ (Barr 2008: 229).

Re-regulating religion

What is so unique about Singapore’s multi-religious society that justifies its status as one of the few countries in the world to legislate the separation of religion and politics? Why has the Sedition Act only been invoked against those alleged to have caused religious ill will, despite the existence of the MRHA? What political purpose does the MRHA serve in Singapore’s authoritarian state?

The city state has not been immune from the global religious revivalism. In the 1980s, the PAP leadership expressed concerns about the growing number of Singaporeans converting to Christianity despite its systematic promotion of Confucianism. This trend was thought to have the potential of unsettling religious harmony due to the numerical decline of faiths such as Hinduism and Buddhism. This concern was confirmed by a 1986 Internal Security Department report which highlighted the prevalence of inter-religious tensions, incidence of aggressive proselytisation, and exploitation of religion for political and subversive purposes (Sinha 2005: 27–8). Justifying the need for legislation to pre-empt the escalation of religious tensions, the Minister of Law, S. Jayakumar, advised that: ‘To contemplate legislation after the damage is done will be too late. Violence would have occurred. People killed. Deep feelings of resentment and wounded feelings would divide our society’ (Straits Times, 1990b). The minister had essentially echoed the PAP government’s view that, as religion is prone to disorder and instability, only assertive secular approaches can prevent this religiously generated disorder (Tong 2007).

During the carefully managed debate on the proposed MRHA, opposition politicians and members of the Muslim and Christian communities sought clarification on the motives for the proposed legislation and the unbridled power of the Minister of Home Affairs in the legislation. At a forum organised by the Evangelical Fellowship of Singapore, the congregation was keen to know why the proposed legislation was needed, in view of existing legislation which addressed religious strife (Sinha 2005: 31). The president of the Graduates’ Christian Fellowship warned that the proposed bill would curb discussion of sensitive topics in its seminars and generate fear that any discussion of sensitive topics might be reported to the government (ibid.). The presidents of the Adult Religious Students’ Association and Muhammadiyah Association were concerned that the proposed bill would prohibit Muslims from countering deviant teachings within their community. Other Muslim organisations wondered what constituted legitimate missionary activity (Lai 2008: 625).
The Singapore Democratic Party criticised the proposed bill for representing ‘an invasion of politics into religion’. Similarly insightful was the observation of opposition MP Chiam See Tong, who dismissed the proposed bill for enabling the PAP government to ‘tighten control over every aspect of Singapore life’, even further stifle political dissent and use the bill as ‘an instrument of repression’ (Sinha 2005: 33). Another salient criticism centred on the ambiguity of the terminology in Sections 8 and 9 of the proposed bill. This includes terms such as ‘religious harmony’, ‘harmful conduct’, ‘appropriate religious behaviour’, ‘ill will’, ‘carrying out activities to promote a political cause’, ‘carrying out subversive activities’ and ‘exciting disaffection’ (ibid.).

The ambiguous wording of the bill has only reinforced suspicions that the PAP government is intent on restraining religious leaders and faith-based social activists who, like the 1987 Catholic ‘Marxist conspirators’, venture beyond the narrow political parameters permitted to civil society. Importantly, the bill serves as a stern reminder that political activity must be restricted to secular activity, and is thus not the appropriate domain for religious leaders and others associated with faith communities.

As the MRHA has never been invoked, many Singaporeans are inclined to view it as yet another initiative to stymie potential nodes of resistance to the PAP’s political hegemony. Singaporean academic Tsun (2008: 120) purports that: ‘It [the MRHA] expresses the ideological position of the government, underscores the political leadership’s deep distrust of the electorate and opposition. More importantly, the Act serves to cleanse religion from the central political space’. Instructively, the government has not explained why religious issues conducted in the private arena are considered less combustible than those aired in public forums. The government has also failed to explain why, or how, religious debate in the political arena is more inflammatory than arenas such as newspapers (Sinha 2005: 26). Furthermore, pre-existing legislation such as the ISA, Sedition Act and Societies Act can readily be invoked to deal with religious conflict. Under these Acts, the minister is already vested with the power of restraint. In order to specifically address the issue of religious conflict, the Sedition Act could have been amended to include the word ‘religion’, rendering obsolete the need for an MRHA (Tsun 2008: 130).

Following the managed consultations with various interested parties, including religious leaders, opposition politicians and lay people, the MRHA was passed in 1990, even though the Singapore constitution makes no mention of the separation of religion and politics. As a constitutional court does not exist, the judiciary is notoriously compliant and subjected to executive influence, and opposition parties remain relatively weak, the constitutionality of the MRHA has remained untested. It is worth noting that attempts by some Indonesian politicians to introduce a Singapore-style MRHA in 2003 were resoundingly rejected by the multiparty Indonesian parliament on the grounds that the proposed legislation would have vested the state with too much power in terms of interpreting and regulating religion (Assyaukanie 2008: 161–2).
Echoing the logic of the MRHA, the DRH was introduced in 2003, following the alleged discovery of a bomb plot supposedly hatched by the militant Islamist grouping JI in December 2001. In order to mitigate perceptions that the DRH was another PAP initiative separating politics from religion, consultations were undertaken with representatives from the major religious groups to review drafts of the ‘soft law’. Thio Li-Ann (2004: 420, 34) notes that the DRH constitutes a soft law norm which lacks legal status ‘but which exerts some degree of legal impact and influence in shaping state–society relations’ and is ‘subject to looser internal “sanctions” to induce compliance, such as peer pressure or generated expectations’.

The no-tudung policy

The tudung (‘hijab’ or ‘headscarf’) has become one of the most contentious sites of conflict between Muslims and non-Muslims, and among Muslims around the world. The issue has been at the centre of heated national debates in states as diverse as Great Britain, France, Turkey, Germany, Australia and Singapore. As schools are commonly viewed as sites that reflect and shape the character of the nation state, they have long been ideological battlegrounds in determining the nation-building agenda. In countries where wearing the tudung in school remains contentious, it is not just national identity, but also national secular identity that is deemed to be at stake (Abraham 2006: 170). For politicians from conservative political parties in the West, who have long held reservations about the propriety of multicultural social policies, the tudung is commonly viewed as a ‘Trojan Horse’ or a slippery slope, which will, if there is not vigilance, undermine public education and the cohesion of society. Moreover, allowing some Muslim girls to wear the tudung is expected to compromise the ability of other Muslim girls to choose not to wear it (Fetzer and Soper 2005).

The no-tudung policy for schoolgirls in Singapore has raised questions pertaining to the rights of religious minorities in the secular authoritarian state, its multicultural or multiracial credentials, the rights of children to education, the actual religious obligations of Muslim women, the perceived threat of Islamic revivalism and the national security agenda of the predominantly Chinese society in an overwhelmingly Muslim region. Fuelled by insecurities associated with the ‘War on Terror’, paranoia underpins much of the state’s response to Muslims campaigning against the no-tudung policy. This paranoia appears to have been augmented by the fear of political Islam, fear of difference, fear of weakening the Sino-centred national identity and, perhaps most significantly, the PAP government’s fear of loosening its grip on power.

In many respects, Singapore’s intransigent no-tudung policy for Muslim schoolgirls bears many similarities to Turkey’s headscarf-restriction policy. Even though Muslims in Singapore are a minority and Turkey is a Muslim majority state, both states exhibit secular authoritarian tendencies. Despite the
secular nature of the Singaporean and Turkish states, they have acquired a strong degree of control over religious life and view secularism as essential to the centralisation of state power. Societal resistance to restrictions on the tudung has thus been viewed by many within the ruling elite as an assault on the integrity of the secular and modernising state—as enunciated by their authoritarian, modernising founding fathers Lee Kuan Yew and Kemal Atatürk. An Naim (2008: 197) has observed that this form of authoritarian state secularism is often ‘designed to enable the state to control religion rather than simply remove it from the public sphere’. However, unlike Singapore, the constitutionality of the banning of headscarves in schools and public institutions has been repeatedly challenged within Turkish institutions such as the Constitutional Court, and by the ruling Islamist Justice and Development government.

The Singapore government’s no-tudung policy for schoolgirls has been a long-standing source of grievance within the Muslim minority community. Muslim organisations and individuals have for many years lobbied the government to terminate the policy on theological, constitutional, human rights and educational grounds. PAP MPs have also privately lobbied senior government officials to terminate the policy (Straits Times 2002b). So, why has the Singapore government persisted with its no-tudung policy when opposition to the policy within the Muslim community is pervasive?

Singapore’s no-tudung policy is based on the premise that a strict code governing school uniforms promotes ethnic integration and social cohesion. The tudung is thus perceived as a symbol of exclusiveness that impedes students from social interaction and constitutes a threat to national integration. In justifying the policy, the Ministry of Education claims that: ‘The government seeks to expand the common space Singaporeans share. Schools require pupils to wear uniforms, regardless of race, religion or social status. Allowing exceptions would fragment the common space and invite competing demands from different communities’ (cited in New York Times 2002). Yet, in reality, the Ministry of Education has allowed exceptions in the school dress code. For example, Muslim girls have for some years been allowed to wear tracksuit pants for physical education classes. The tudung is also allowed in post-secondary institutions such as polytechnics and universities. Rather than promoting ethnic integration and social cohesion, the no-tudung policy has paradoxically contributed to the steady rise in madrasa enrolments. Parents who believe that the tudung is a fundamental requirement in Islam are inclined to educate their daughters in madrasas (Kadir 2005: 114). This conservative interpretation of Islam has been encouraged by the main Muslim bodies such as PERGAS, which contends that wearing the tudung is a religious requirement.

To date, the government has not provided any empirical evidence to support the presumption that allowing Muslim headscarves in primary and secondary schools impedes national unity. Indeed, some school principals contend that students who had donned the tudung in the past did not disrupt social
integration in class (Straits Times 2002a). Moreover, the government’s rationale for the no-tudung policy contradicts its enthusiastic support for and funding of the predominantly mono-ethnic Special Assistance Plan schools, which are geared towards maintaining Chinese culture. The policy of allowing Sikh schoolboys to wear the turban in national schools highlights the lack of even-handedness in the government’s no-tudung policy.

Critics of Singapore’s no-tudung policy have also pointed out that in many countries in the West, such as Great Britain, Australia and the United States, Muslim schoolgirls are permitted to wear the headscarf in public and independent schools. Even in France, where Muslim girls are not permitted to wear the headscarf in public schools, other religious emblems such as turbans, skullcaps and crosses have been banned, ostensibly to preserve the secular tradition of French society. Significantly, Singapore’s no-tudung policy may also be in breach of the Singapore government’s obligations to Articles 14, 27, 29 and 30 of the International Convention on the Rights of the Child, and Article 10 of the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women.

The contentious no-tudung policy came to a head in early 2002 when a handful of Muslim parents insisted on their daughters donning the tudung at primary school and dressing in a modified uniform. When the schoolgirls wearing the tudung were suspended for repeatedly flouting the school uniform policy, their parents protested that they had been deprived of their constitutional right to religious freedom. References were made to Article 15(1) of the Singapore constitution, which provides that ‘every person has the right to profess and practise his religion and to propagate it’ (Rahim 2003: 12). Instructively, the constitutionality of the no-tudung policy was prevented from being tested in the Singapore courts when Karpal Singh, the Malaysian legal counsel for the four suspended schoolgirls wearing the tudung, was denied a practising certificate by the Singapore Supreme Court, even though he had been permitted to represent Singaporean clients in the past (Ahmad 2002). If Singh had been allowed to represent the suspended schoolgirls, it would have been the first time in Singapore’s history that civilians had taken the government to court.

Localised Muslim grievances

Rahim’s (2001, 2009) and Barr and Skrbiš’s (2008) analyses of nation-building in Singapore critically interrogate the serious disjuncture between the rhetoric and reality of multiracialism and meritocracy. In particular, Barr and Skrbiš (2008) purport that since the early 1980s, an aggressive program of assimilation has accompanied the emergence of an increasingly racialised and elitist society. Moreover, ‘ethno-racial hierarchies permeate every aspect of Singapore society even though the official discourse of multiracialism … obscures this reality’,
and ‘a Singapore version of Chinese ethno-nationalism’ has dominated Singapore national identity (Barr and Skrbis 2008: 10–3). They characterise this phenomenon as incomplete assimilation—where ethnic minorities are pressured into mimicking the Chinese in order to succeed, yet remain relegated to the margins of society (Barr and Skrbis 2008: 98). Significantly, they draw attention to the failure of the Chinese community to acknowledge their dominance or to consider the possibility that the Muslim community has remained on the socio-economic fringes of society because of the existence of discrimination in the workplace and wider community. In effect, the perpetuation of the rhetoric of meritocracy and multiracialism allows the Chinese to maintain their dominance in public life ‘from the high ground of neutral umpire’ (Barr and Skrbis 2008: 107).

The more than two decades of exclusion and discrimination of Malays in the Singapore Armed Forces is indicative of the contradiction in the practice of meritocracy and multiracialism in Singapore. This policy was finally acknowledged in the late 1980s but rationalised on the grounds of questionable Malay loyalty to the state. Justifying the government’s policy of institutionalised discrimination, Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew claimed that ‘it would be a very tricky business for the PAP to put a Malay officer who was very religious, and who had family ties in Malaysia, in charge of a machine-gun unit’ (Rahim 2009: 92). The perpetual doubting of Muslim loyalty to the Chinese-dominated state has contributed to the common perceptions of the community as untrustworthy and disloyal to the state—perceptions which have undercut religious and ethnic harmony. For example, a 2000 Straits Times survey on ethnic relations indicated that 46 percent of non-Malays believed that they could not trust Malays in the event of a war with a neighbouring Malay Muslim country. Moreover, 60 percent of non-Malays polled believed that it was necessary to check the background of a Malay officer before placing him in a sensitive position in the Singapore Armed Forces (Osman 2000).

The ‘othering’ of Muslims has been reinforced further by the Islamophobic reports in the mainstream local media and the ISA detention of alleged JI militants. There has been considerable pressure on Muslims to prove their loyalty following the urgings of the PAP leadership for Muslims to ‘speak up’ against Muslim militants. In 2004, Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew criticised Muslims for their supposed silence in the face of the Muslim terrorist activity in Singapore and around the world (AFP 2004). Having uncritically supported the US invasion and occupation of Iraq, the PAP government’s approach is reminiscent of the Bush administration’s ‘you are with us or against us’ mentality—allowing little space for grey areas. Placed ‘under the spotlight’, it is unsurprising that many Muslims in Singapore feel judged and arbitrarily slotted into categories of ‘moderate’, ‘extreme’, ‘tudung-wearing’ or ‘non-tudung-wearing’ (Ismail and Shaw 2006: 39). Their sense of alienation has been reinforced further by the realisation that the Chinese community in Singapore was never placed ‘under the spotlight’ or expected to publicly condemn the
supposedly subversive activities of the 1987 ‘Marxist conspirators’, even though most of them were Chinese. Reaffirming the perception of Malays as the ‘unintegrated other’, Lee Kuan Yew has repeatedly asserted in his writings and speeches that Malays constitute a drag on Singapore’s nation-building project.

Calls by the PAP leadership for Muslims to integrate into the larger society are ironic in view of the numerous surveys since the 1990s which consistently indicate that the Chinese community is the least integrated in terms of their interaction with Malays and Indians. These surveys suggest that the Chinese have less non-Chinese friends compared to Malays and Indians (Ooi 2005: 115). Ooi’s 2005 study of national integration found that Malays are the least affected/concerned by being among people of different races, while the Chinese the most affected/concerned (Ooi 2005: 118). Despite the empirical evidence of relatively strong Malay social integration, Malays have been paradoxically subjected to greater pressure to integrate compared to the less racially integrated but numerically dominant Chinese community. This phenomenon is consistent with Barr and Skrbis’s (2008) incomplete assimilation thesis noted above.

The PAP government has consistently denied the significance of localised socio-economic and political grievances in motivating the alleged JI militants detained under the ISA. This denial was reaffirmed in the 2003 White Paper on the JI detainees in the following way: ‘These men were not ignorant, destitute or disenfranchised outcasts. All 31 had received secular education ... they held normal, respectable jobs’ (MHA 2003: 15). Yet, the empirical data suggests otherwise. Nine of the 31 JI detainees in 2002 had lower than Cambridge ‘ordinary level’ education (equivalent to Year 10 in Australia) and six were ‘exempted’ from ‘compulsory’ military service (MHA 2003). Similarly, 13 of the 15 JI detainees arrested in December 2001 had incomes below S$2000 per month (Rodan and Hewison 2006: 112), and four of the 15 were ‘exempted’ from ‘compulsory’ military service (MHA 2003). Workers’ Party MP Low Thia Khiang has drawn attention to the political and social alienation and economic grievances that may have contributed to the radicalisation of JI detainees (How 2003).

Conclusion

Like most industrialised societies, Singapore has been affected by renewed religiosity and post-traditional spirituality. The political manifestations of this renewed religiosity are of concern to the PAP government. Intent on maintaining its political hegemony after more than 50 years of uninterrupted rule, the PAP government is acutely conscious of the potential of religion as a powerful tool of protest against perceived injustices. As such, religion and religious institutions and organisations have been tightly regulated, via legislation such as the MRHA, in order to curtail the potential of religious institutions and groups to mobilise against the authoritarian state. Legislation such as the MRHA,
which proscribes the mixing of religion and politics, remains deliberately ambiguous in terms of where the line between religion and politics is drawn. This lack of clarity serves to reinforce the climate of uncertainty, self-censorship and fear. While the political dimensions of religious doctrine that seeks to promote social justice have been restricted, the government has encouraged a religious orientation that downplays the linkages between the spiritual, economic and political realms.

The harassment of no-
tudung policy campaigners, who believed it was their constitutional right and religious duty to challenge the no-
tudung policy, illustrates the way by which the ambiguous distinction between religion and politics has served the authoritarian state. A genuine public debate on the merits of the no-
tudung policy and the MRHA was not allowed to take place, as it would have exposed the myriad contradictions associated with Singapore’s supposedly multiracial society. This response is characteristic of Singapore’s authoritarian top-down assertive secularism. The maintenance of draconian legislation, the stringent policing of the Muslim community and the dismissal of genuine Muslim grievances do not bode well for the nurturing of religious harmony and the promotion of a genuinely multiracial and democratic society.

Notes
1. A version of this article was presented at the joint conference with the Innovative Universities European Union Centre on New Modes of Governance and Security Challenges in the Asia-Pacific, at the Asia Research Centre, Murdoch University, Perth, Australia, 12–13 February 2009.
2. For a comprehensive conceptual discussion of multiple secularisms and the ‘twin tolerations’ principle, see Stepan (2010).
3. For a comprehensive analysis of the socio-economic and political marginality of the Malay community, see Rahim (2001).
4. The IRCCs and DRH were initiated from 2002 to promote interfaith dialogue and interaction. IRCCs are consisted largely of government and senior religious and community leaders. They organise activities in places of worship and inter-faith celebrations. The DRH is a non-legislative, non-enforceable code of conduct that is a government-led effort to exert moral suasion on religious leaders and believers. The rules of religious conduct are clearly laid out (see Tan 2008).
5. Multiculturalism commonly refers to polities that promote the equality and dignity of all communities and cultures, and where the various communities build a common national identity while preserving their ethnic and cultural identity. There are various types of multicultural societies and no single doctrine of multiculturalism. In this article, ‘multiculturalism’ and ‘multiracialism’ are used interchangeably.

References
AFP (Agence France Presse), 2004. ‘Moderate Muslims must take stand against extremism: Senior Lee’, 28 March.
Ahmad, Reme, 2002. ‘Karpal asked to fight Singapore tudung case’, Straits Times, 2 February.


Osman, Ahmad, 2000. ‘MPs son shocked by survey’s trust response’, Straits Times, 10 March.


Straits Times, 2002a. ‘4 still wearing tudung as deadline approaches’, Straits Times, 30 January.

Straits Times, 2002b. ‘Muslim leaders must be seen to speak their minds’, 6 February.


