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RELIGIOUS HARMONY IN SINGAPORE

A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Religious Studies at Massey University

Evelyn Teresa Louis
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ABSTRACT

The rise in the number of ethnic and religious conflicts in various parts of the world serve to indicate that religion is a volatile issue, more so if the country’s population is heterogeneous in its make-up. Although Singapore is a plural society comprising diverse ethnic and religious communities, there have been no major ethnic or religious conflicts in the country since independence, save for the brief spill-over of the 1969 riots from Malaysia. However, events which have unfolded in the country in recent decades provide compelling evidence to suggest that there are strong religious undercurrents within the country which can be easily aroused. Religious harmony is not a natural phenomenon but an achieved state of affairs and this study attempts to examine the factors contributing to religious harmony in Singapore. The government encourages inter-religious toleration in society through its various public policies concerning housing and education for example. The exposure of the population to the diverse religious traditions which abound in the country contributes in part to the relatively smooth coexistence among the various religious groups. Although freedom of religion is constitutionally guaranteed, the government insists that the practice of religion must be tempered with national concerns, such as economic development and success. To this end, there are laws in place such as the recently adopted Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act to regulate the boundaries of religion in the country. In the interest of preserving religious harmony, this Act legislates against aggressive proselytisation practices and the politicizing of religious groups. It is the government’s active management of religion in the country which plays a major role in maintaining religious harmony in Singapore.
GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Adat - Custom
Bodhisattva- Buddha-to-be
Bu athins - Conspiratorial village-based secret organisations in Burma
Buddha Jayanti - The 2,500th anniversary of Buddhism and according to orthodox tradition, a period during which Maitreya, the next Buddha, will appear
Bumiputeras - Sons of the soil
Ghallugra - Genocide
Harijans - Untouchables
Khalistan - Land of the Pure
Minlaung - Prince
Nirvana - Enlightenment
Pongyis - Title of a senior Buddhist monk in Burma
Sangha - The Buddhist monastic community
Satyagraha - The concept of non-violence as proposed by Mahatma Gandhi
Setkya-Min- Legendary ideal ruler of the Four Island continents and a future Buddha
Shariah - Islamic law
Yang Di-Pertuan Agong - King
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AFPFL -</td>
<td>Anti-Facist Peoples Freedom League</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AISSF -</td>
<td>All-India Sikh Students Federation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BJP -</td>
<td>Bharatiya Jana Party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CDAC -</td>
<td>Chinese Development Assistance Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dobama Asayone -</td>
<td>We Burmans Society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dobama Synyetha Asayone -</td>
<td>Burmese People’s Monks Association</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khalsa -</td>
<td>Singapore Bengali Association</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MENDAKI -</td>
<td>Council for the Development of Singapore Muslims</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PAP -</td>
<td>People’s Action Party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RSS -</td>
<td>Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SGPC -</td>
<td>Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SINDA -</td>
<td>Singapore Indian Development Association</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UMNO -</td>
<td>United Malayan National Flag</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VHP -</td>
<td>Vishva Hindu Parishad/World Hindu Forum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YMBA -</td>
<td>Young Men’s Buddhist Association</td>
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