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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

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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

<i>Adat</i> -	Custom
<i>Bodhisattva</i> -	Buddha-to-be
<i>Bu athins</i> -	Conspiratorial village-based secret organisations in Burma
<i>Buddha Jayanti</i> -	The 2,500 <sup>th</sup> anniversary of Buddhism and according to orthodox tradition, a period during which Maitreya, the next Buddha, will appear
<i>Bumiputeras</i> -	Sons of the soil
<i>Ghallugra</i> -	Genocide
<i>Harijans</i> -	Untouchables
<i>Khalistan</i> -	Land of the Pure
<i>Minlaung</i> -	Prince
<i>Nirvana</i> -	Enlightenment
<i>Pongyis</i> -	Title of a senior Buddhist monk in Burma
<i>Sangha</i> -	The Buddhist monastic community
<i>Satyagraha</i> -	The concept of non-violence as proposed by Mahatma Gandhi
<i>Setkya-Min-</i>	Legendary ideal ruler of the Four Island continents and a future Buddha
<i>Shariah</i> -	Islamic law
<i>Yang Di-Pertuan Agong</i> -	King

## **GLOSSARY OF POLITICAL AND SOCIAL ORGANISATIONS**

<i>AFPFL -</i>	Anti-Facist Peoples Freedom League
<i>AISSF -</i>	All-India Sikh Students Federation
<i>BJP -</i>	Bharatiya Jana Party
<i>CDAC-</i>	Chinese Development Assistance Council
<i>Dobama Asiayone -</i>	We Burmans Society
<i>Dobama Synyetha Asiayone -</i>	Burmese People's Monks Association
<i>Khalsa-</i>	Singapore Bengali Association
<i>MENDAKI-</i>	Council for the Development of Singapore Muslims
<i>PAP -</i>	People's Action Party
<i>RSS -</i>	Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh
<i>SGPC -</i>	Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee
<i>SINDA-</i>	Singapore Indian Development Association
<i>UMNO -</i>	United Malayan National Flag
<i>VHP -</i>	Vishva Hindu Parishad/World Hindu Forum
<i>YMBA -</i>	Young Men's Buddhist Association

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## INTRODUCTION

Examples of inter-religious conflicts in the world are rife as evidenced by the almost daily reports in the media. Atrocities such as the conflict between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland; the civil war raging in Lebanon between Christians and Shiite Muslims; Buddhists and Hindus fighting one another in Sri Lanka, and the clashes between the Hindus and Sikhs in India, all serve to demonstrate the highly volatile nature of religion in society.

These events would also seem to indicate that religious toleration is a concept that is difficult to achieve in a multi-religious country. To all intents and purposes, Singapore has managed to achieve an enviable level of religious harmony among the various religious communities represented in the country. Except for a few occasions when communal passions were inflamed, Singapore's history has not been marred by wide-scale inter-religious wars which characterize many other plural societies today. As will be demonstrated, the occasions of religious tension in the country have been comparatively tame when viewed against the conflicts currently tearing at the very heart of other multi-religious societies. This thesis is an attempt to analyze the factors which contribute to maintaining the level of religious harmony that is existent in Singapore today.

This introductory Chapter will provide a short description of the religious demography of the Singapore population and examine the Constitutional provisions in the area of religion in the country.

An attempt will be made in Chapter 1 to analyze various incidents of inter-religious conflict in three Asian countries, namely India, Burma and Malaysia. The aim of this Chapter is two-fold: to highlight the fragility of peaceful religious co-existence in a plural society and to show the dangers of politicizing religious groups.

The succeeding chapters will provide a chronological description of significant events and the occasions of religious strife in Singapore from 1950 to 1987.<sup>1</sup> Chapter 2 will recount the Maria Hertogh case where a simple civil dispute resulted in one of the worst religious controversies in the history of Singapore. Chapter 3 provides an in-depth examination of the relationship between Islam and the Malay identity and culture, which forms a key political parameter in Singapore. This theme will be expounded in the next Chapter dealing with the Malay reaction to the Israeli Prime Minister's visit to Singapore. The Marxist Conspiracy of 1987 will be the focus of Chapter 4.

The first part of Chapter 5 will be an examination of the current religious trends in Singapore which will be followed by an in-depth examination of the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act of 1990.

The government's aspirations of inculcating the 'right values' in its citizens will be the theme in the next two Chapters. Chapter 6 will focus primarily on the Religious Education Programme which was introduced in the school curriculum in the 1980s. Chapter 7 will trace the government's initiative to develop a national identity based on core values encapsulated in the 1991 *White Paper on Shared Values*. The Singapore government's concept of a national ideology will be examined against the backdrop of the national ideologies of Indonesia and Malaysia.

Chapter 9 will trace the development of The Inter-Religious Organisation of Singapore and analyze its contribution to religious harmony in the country.

The conclusion will be a summary of the arguments which have been presented in the preceding Chapters. This thesis also aims to examine the position of the Singapore government *vis-à-vis* religion and to determine whether religious harmony in Singapore is a result of effective government policies, a conscious effort to promote harmony on the part of the people themselves or the interplay, intentional or otherwise, between the two.

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<sup>1</sup> Many of the interviewees requested that their opinions not be incorporated into the thesis, so for the most part I have utilised secondary sources for information about the events described. Also, in the interest of maintaining the religious status quo in the country, I have been extremely circumspect when presenting my analysis of the topic.

## THE RELIGIOUS DEMOGRAPHY OF SINGAPORE

Religious pluralism is a feature of Singapore society; its population is heterogeneous in its ethnic and religious make-up. According to the 1990 census, the country's religious composition was as follows: Buddhists made up 28.3% of the population; Christians 18.7%, Muslims 16%; Taoists 13.4%, and Hindus 4.9%. People professing other religions not listed as a Census category constituted 1.1% of the population. There is a strong correlation between ethnicity and religion in Singapore. The Chinese are usually Taoists, Buddhists or Confucianists, while the majority of Muslims are Malays or members of the Indian Muslim or Arab ethnic minorities. Hindus are almost always Indians, while all Sikhs are adherents of Sikhism. In contrast, Christianity is not an ethnically-based religion in Singapore, drawing its followers from all racial groups represented there. The following statistics were obtained from a study<sup>2</sup> commissioned by the Ministry of Community Development into the area of religion in Singapore. The findings of the study will be examined in greater detail in a later Chapter.

Table 1: Correlation of Religion and Ethnicity, 1990

RELIGION	NUMBER OF PERSONS*	ETHNIC GROUP			
		CHINESE (%)	MALAYS (%)	INDIANS (%)	OTHERS (%)
Total	2 276 734	78.9	13.2	6.9	1.0
Buddhism	707 885	99.6	---	0.2	0.2
Taoism	510 382	100.0	---	---	---
Christianity	285 282	88.3	0.2	6.7	4.8
-Catholic	107 422	78.1	0.2	11.2	10.5
-Protestant	177 860	94.4	0.2	4.0	1.4
Islam	350 520	1.0	85.2	12.2	1.6
Hinduism	83 704	0.2	0.1	99.5	0.2
Others	12 525	17.2	0.1	79.4	3.3
No Religion	326 436	98.9	0.2	0.6	0.3

\*Figures were based on the Singapore resident population aged 10 years and above.

<sup>2</sup> Kuo Eddie C.Y. and Tong, Chee Kiong, *Monograph on Religion*, Singapore (Ministry of Community Development, 1995).

Table 2: Percentage change in adherent numbers for each religion over a 10-year period

RELIGION	1980	1990
Buddhism	26.7	31.1
Taoism	30.0	22.4
Christianity	9.9	12.5
Islam	16.2	15.4
Hinduism	3.6	3.7
Other Religions	0.5	0.6
No Religion	13.1	14.3

### CONSTITUTIONAL BACKGROUND

Freedom of religion is guaranteed under the Singapore Constitution. This freedom to practise one’s religion however is subject to certain conditions. Article 15 states clearly that all religious acts, practices and organisations are governed by “general law relating to public order, public health and morality”.

Most of the Federal Constitutional provisions safeguarding religious freedom were incorporated into the Singapore Constitution as Articles 15 and 16. The former states that it is the right of every person in Singapore to practise and propagate his religion, while every religious group is constitutionally allowed to:

- (a) manage its own religious affairs;
- (b) establish and maintain institutions for religious or charitable purposes; and
- (c) acquire and own property and hold and administer it in accordance with the law.<sup>3</sup>

Article 16 rules against discrimination based solely on “religion, race, descent or place of birth” in the administration of educational institutions and/or providing financial assistance to students in these institutions.

While there is no compulsion in Singapore for anyone to profess a belief in any religion other than one’s own or in any religion at all for that matter, Article 16(4) deems that

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<sup>3</sup> *The Singapore Constitution*, Article 15(3)

the religion of a person under the age of eighteen shall be determined by the parent or guardian.

The interests of minority communities are also protected under the Constitution which states that the well-being of racial and religious minorities will be the responsibility of the government. The Presidential Council for Minority Rights was established in 1969 with the aim of safeguarding the interests of the ethnic and religious minorities in the country. The Council's functions in its role of overseer as entrenched in Article 76(2) of the Constitution included reporting on matters affecting "persons of any racial or religious community in Singapore as may be referred to the Council by Parliament or the Government". Its primary role however is to draw attention to any Bill or piece of legislation which may prove discriminatory to any racial or religious groups.

Since self-rule in 1959, Singapore has been governed by the People's Action Party (PAP) which has always professed itself to be "committed to secular politics"<sup>4</sup>, deriving its political authority from the Constitution<sup>5</sup> and remaining neutral in matters pertaining to religion. For the purposes of this discussion, I have chosen the following definition of the term 'secular':

Secularism... refers to the separation of two spheres: the public, which is the business of the state, and the private, where religion correctly belongs. The secular state, while allowing people to freely choose and profess their faith, does not have a religion of its own and does not prefer any religion over others.<sup>6</sup>

As far as possible, the Singapore government tries to distance itself from association with any one particular faith, and in keeping with this secular position, there is no official state religion in Singapore.

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<sup>4</sup> *Business Times*, 14 Dec 1988

<sup>5</sup> *Straits Times*, 1 May 1989

<sup>6</sup> *Business Times*, 28 December 1988

The Singapore government has always been insistent that in pursuing secular policies, it is not against religion, nor is it atheistic. On the contrary, it recognises the important role religion plays in society. George Yeo, Minister of State for Finance and Foreign Affairs, once claimed that no society could progress very far without a “soul”. He noted that not even atheistic communist countries have been able to deny completely the existence of any God. He said that the spiritual vacuum created by this denial had been filled by communist leaders like Lenin, Mao Zedong and Ho Chi Minh, who have been virtually deified in their respective countries.<sup>7</sup>

Religion in Singapore is perceived to be an essentially private institution, to be kept separate from the public sphere. The government has constantly reiterated the need for religion and the practice of one’s faith to be relegated to the private domain. The parameters of religious activity in Singapore were clearly defined by Lee Kuan Yew:

A religion looks after the spiritual, moral and social well-being of its followers. But religious organisations should leave the economic-political needs of people to non-religious groups, like political parties. This is because if any religious group tries to define the socio-economic agenda of Singapore and mobilises the grass-roots by ‘social-action programmes’, other religious groups will do likewise. Once people are mobilised on socio-economic issues on the basis of religious loyalties, the consequences would be bad for all.<sup>8</sup>

There is a very delicate balance between the religious and secular spheres, and there are basically two potential problems which can arise from the relationship between religion and the state.<sup>9</sup> The first problem deals with the issue of the legal status accorded to the various religious organisations in the country. If the government favours one religion, the problem then arises of the other religious organisations feeling alienated and taking

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<sup>7</sup> *Straits Times*, 8 October 1989

<sup>8</sup> Lee Kuan Yew, ‘Politics and Religion Best be Kept Separate’ in *Speeches*, 12(6) 1988, p.13

<sup>9</sup> Wald, Kenneth D., *Religion and Politics in the United States*, New York (St Martin’s Press, 1987), p.263

offence. On the other hand, if the government ignores religion completely, it then runs the risk of marginalising citizens who derive their personal identity from religion.

The second problem deals with the encroachment of religion into the secular sphere or vice versa. This may result in a situation where the individual has to choose between according loyalty to the state or to his/her religious beliefs. When religion begins to exert its influence in politics, there is a potential danger of religious activism.<sup>10</sup> In addition, there is also the further possibility of religious issues being employed as a political tool to undermine democracy and to incite violence in a country. These issues will be expounded further in succeeding Chapters.

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<sup>10</sup> Wald, p.267

## CHAPTER 1

### THE UNHOLY UNION OF RELIGION AND POLITICS: AN ANALYSIS OF INDIA, BURMA AND MALAYSIA

The aim of this Chapter is to demonstrate how fragile the threads of unity and tolerance can be in a plural society. In addition to the common economic and social problems faced by all countries, an ethnically and religiously diverse population is constantly threatened by possible communal conflicts which often result in wide-scale riots and bloodshed. Tension between different religious groups can be precipitated by various factors, including the feeling that the interests of one community are elevated above the others'; the emergence of ethno-nationalism with its underlying tones of ethnic cleansing, and the politicization of ethnic and social groups. Most of these factors involve one common denominator, the use of religious sanction for political and/or social ideals.

The first part of this Chapter will provide a brief outline of instances of communal strife in three plural societies in Asia, namely India, Burma<sup>1</sup> and Malaysia. Each of these is ethnically and religiously heterogeneous, with a population comprising one major ethnic group and a number of other ethno-religious minorities. Furthermore, each nation has come under British rule during some point in its history which had a major impact on post-Independence development, one of which was the emergence of nationalism. In all of the three countries, the nationalist movement gradually assumed shades of religiosity, primarily Hinduism in India, Buddhism in Burma, and Islam in Malaysia. In addition to religious nationalism, other factors have also contributed to undermining the nations' racial and religious stability. By isolating and examining the events which have led to communal strife in these Asian societies, it will be demonstrated how the use of religion for political ends poses a serious threat to Singapore's ethnic and religious harmony.

#### INDIA

For centuries India has prided herself on her syncretism, absorbing and assimilating a multiplicity of cultures and traditions. According to 1995 population figures, 83% of India's population were Hindus, 11% Muslims, 2% each of Sikhs and Christians, while the remaining 2% were composed of other religious minorities. Despite being described

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<sup>1</sup> Although its name was changed to the 'Union of Myanmar' in 1989, I will continue to refer to the country as 'Burma' throughout this Chapter.

as a “sovereign socialist secular democratic republic”<sup>2</sup>, in reality India’s political workings are often coloured by various religious incitements. The resulting incidents of sectarian strife since Independence have undermined the ethos of Indian unity and secularism.

Since Independence, India has been labelled a ‘secular’ state but the contradictory interpretations accorded to the term have been the cause of many problems within her political system. Douglas Allen<sup>3</sup> identifies the three distinct interpretations of ‘secularism’ evident in the country today. First, India is a secular state because it advocates a separation of religion and the state. This means that the state does not concern itself with the faith of its citizens because it guarantees freedom of religion and encourages tolerance for the country’s diverse religious groups. This is the interpretation contained in the Indian Constitution and advocated by political leaders such as Jawaharlal Nehru.

The second interpretation of secularity actively promotes religious tolerance and religious diversity based on a conviction that all faiths lead to the same universal truth. This view, championed by Mohandas K. Gandhi, presupposes that all religious paths lead towards one Absolute Reality, and is not dependent on the state’s neutrality on matters pertaining to religion.

The final interpretation holds that religion and politics are inseparable and all forms of a secular state are rejected. Groups holding this view are usually revivalist, nationalist, and fundamentalist in nature. There are also groups which, in spite of subscribing to this view, reject the setting up of an exclusivistic religious nation. Instead they advocate a return to pre-Colonial, traditional religious orientations which emphasise tolerance and inclusivism.

The emergence of Indian nationalism in British India, which was precipitated by a wave of anti-British fervour in the early 1900s, was the major contributor to communal

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<sup>2</sup> A Constitutional amendment which came into effect on 3 January 1977.

<sup>3</sup> Allen, Douglas, ‘Introduction’ in *Religion and Political Conflict in South Asia*, Douglas Allen (ed.), Connecticut (Greenwood Press, 1992), p7-8

tension in the country. In reaction to colonialism and its implied Westernisation, many movements sprung up in India with the aim of re-establishing Indian nationalism. The movement soon assumed religious connotations when its members fused together national and religious symbolism in their concept of cultural nationalism.<sup>4</sup> Indian nationalism gradually became synonymous with Hindu nationalism.<sup>5</sup> For example, the Ramakrishna Mission, founded by Swami Vivekananda in 1882, championed the cause of establishing an Indian nation with Hinduism as its basis. In his pursuit of Indian nationalism, even Mahatma Gandhi, who was by no means an extremist, couched his speeches to the masses in traditional, religious terms.<sup>6</sup> Gandhi even went so far as to admit that he prized Hinduism above all other religions and not surprisingly, his doctrine of *satyagraha*, or non-violence, had its basis primarily in the Hindu tradition.

The emergence of religious nationalism during the Indian independence movement meant that all other religious minorities in India felt marginalised, and by the time the secular faction of the nationalist movement asserted itself in 1948, it was too late, for by then, the seeds of religious intolerance had already been sown<sup>7</sup> as will be illustrated presently.

The union of religion and politics, which was crucial in the formation of Indian nationalism, gave rise to serious problems in India which are still evident today. It had a negative impact on relations between the Hindu majority and the other religious minorities in India.

Religiously inspired nationalist tendencies also provided the basis of many of India's communal social and political parties. Communal parties in India hold great attraction for the masses because they appeal to:

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<sup>4</sup> M. Lewy, in his book *Religion and Revolution*, alleges that most of the members in the newly established Indian National Congress equated Indian nationalism with Hindu nationalism, despite their claims of being devoted to secularism.

<sup>5</sup> In a rather contradictory view, R.S. Chavan, *Nationalism in Asia*, New Delhi (Sterling Publications, 1973), p.472, asserts that Indian nationalism is essentially political and distinct from "Hindu, Sikh, Muslim, or Christian race, religion, or culture". While I agree with his view that Asian nationalism arose in an effort to fight for Independence against colonialism, it is my intention to prove that the nationalist movement inevitably evolved into religious nationalism.

<sup>6</sup> He claimed that "...those who say that religion has nothing to do with politics do not know what religion means." Lewy p.299

<sup>7</sup> Arasaratnam, Sinnappah, *History, Nationalism and Nation-Building: The Asian Dilemma*, New England (University of New England, 1983), p.12

...both patriotic and religious sentiments, ...play[ing] up the solidarities, the securities, the privileged access to scarce resources which social structures like caste, religion and ethnolinguistic community have always afforded Indians...<sup>8</sup>

Despite the fact that Indian Congress leaders, from Nehru to Narashima Rao, have opposed communalistic politics at least in theory, there still exists a strong disposition towards communalism today.

Communalism in India originated primarily with the formation of the Indian Muslim League<sup>9</sup> in reaction to the domination of Hindu extremists in the Indian Congress. The idea of Hindu ascendancy in India, advocated by the extremists in Congress and sanctioned by many in the population, made the Indian Muslims feel alienated. Fearing Hindu domination, the Indian Muslim League cited the Two Nations Theory<sup>10</sup> as the justification for the establishment of a separate Muslim state within India.

The intermittent communal conflicts between Hindus and Muslims in India in the wake of the religious nationalist movement during the 1920s and 1930s peaked during the Partition of British India in 1947, which was preceded by wide-spread Hindu-Muslim riots.

The first Hindu communal political organisation to be formed in India was the *Hindu Mahasabha*, followed by the founding of the *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (RSS) in 1925. The *Bharatiya Jana Sangh* (BJP), another political party formed in India in 1951, denies its communalistic leanings, but advocates strongly a “Hindu” India. The *Akali Dal* is one of the largest Sikh communal political parties and it continues to feature prominently in the strained relations between Hindus and Sikhs in the country.

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<sup>8</sup> Lewy, p.296

<sup>9</sup> This communal political party was formed in 1906 with membership being made available only to Muslims.

<sup>10</sup> First proposed in 1936 by Sir Wazir Hussain, this theory states that the incompatibility of Hindus and Muslims in terms of dress, philosophy, religion and custom meant that both communities should be given the right of self-determination.

The on-going Hindu-Sikh sectarian conflict tearing at the fabric of Indian solidarity was activated by a series of events in the 1980s. In 1982 Sant Longowal, then leader of the Akali Dal, triggered the chain of events when he objected to the Sikhs being classified as Hindus in the Indian Constitution. He began pressing for greater autonomy in Punjab and for the demands contained in the *Anandpur Sahib* Resolution<sup>11</sup> to be implemented in the state. These demands soon escalated when a small group of Sikh extremists, led by Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale<sup>12</sup>, began agitating for the creation of a separate Sikh state, *Khalistan*, or Land of the Pure.

After almost twenty months of continuing hostilities between Hindus and Sikhs, events finally peaked in 1984. On 19 March, a ban was issued to the All-India Sikh Students Federation (AISSF) for speeches “which were prejudicial to the maintenance of harmony between Hindus and Sikhs and which tended to incite Sikhs to equip themselves with arms and resort to violence.”<sup>13</sup> This ban and the subsequent arrests of AISSF activists led to Longowal and Bhindranwale, politically and religiously motivated respectively, issuing a joint statement appealing to all Sikhs to be prepared to “sacrifice their lives to protect the Sikh religion in the face of extermination threats by the Hindu government.”<sup>14</sup>

On 6 June 1984 the Indian army stormed the Golden Temple<sup>15</sup> in Amritsar and raided twelve other Sikh temples; seven hundred Sikhs were arrested and huge caches of arms and ammunition were seized.

The central government’s decision to storm the Golden Temple angered Sikhs all over the world who perceived the act as a desecration of their holiest shrine.<sup>16</sup> What began as

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<sup>11</sup> This Resolution was adopted by Shiromani Akali Dal in 17 October 1973. Some of the party’s political demands included a return to the Punjab state all areas “which have been taken away from it or have been intentionally kept apart” and for intervention from the central government in the affairs of “this new Punjab” be limited to certain areas.

<sup>12</sup> Bhindranwale, a militant separatist preacher, has been aptly described as one who “swore by the Sikh scriptures and lived by the gun”. *Asiaweek*, 22 June 1984, p.16

<sup>13</sup> *Asiaweek* 13 April 1984, p. 13

<sup>14</sup> *Asiaweek* 13 April 1984, p.13

<sup>15</sup> The holiest shrine of the Sikh religion which had also become the base for Bhindranwale’s terrorist activities and a hideout for him and other Sikh militants.

a nationalistic struggle was immediately classed as a religious conflict with the Golden Temple becoming the symbolic centre of the Sikh cause despite Indira Gandhi's claim in the aftermath of the event that:

...the [Indian] army was not used against the Sikhs. It was not used against the Golden Temple. It was not used against the Sikh religion. It was used to take out terrorists who had been indulging in murder, arson and looting.<sup>17</sup>

Such assurances however did nothing to appease the Sikhs. In retaliation for the assault on the Golden Temple, Indira Gandhi was assassinated by her two Sikh bodyguards on 31 October that year, which in turn sparked further anti-Sikh riots all over India.

Keen to capitalise on strong Sikh nationalistic and religious fervour and maintain his political hold on an increasingly militant Sikh population, Longowal exploited the issue at hand. He described Gandhi's assassins as "martyrs" and hailed Bhindranwale, who was killed during the Temple assault, as a valiant benefactor of the Sikh cause. Support for Longowal did not last long however. In protest of the peace accord he signed with Rajiv Gandhi which was perceived as being against the Sikh nationalist struggle, Longowal was shot dead by Sikh militants on 20 August 1985.

The following year saw another round of Sikh terrorist activities in India, this time aimed against more moderate Sikhs as well as at the wider Hindu population. In June, Sikh extremists held a *ghallughara* (genocide) week in remembrance of the 1984 assault on the Golden Temple, during which militants staged attacks on Sikh moderates who were guarding the Temple<sup>18</sup>. In another act of terrorism during the conflict, a public bus was hijacked by Sikh militants in a Punjab town. Of the passengers, only women, children, and Sikh men sporting turbans and beards were released. The

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<sup>16</sup> During the assault, government troops were under strict orders not to touch the *Harmandir Sahib*, the holiest part of the Golden Temple, despite clear evidence that Sikh militants were firing at the troops from within its sacred walls. The question that begs to be asked here is whether the Temple was in fact desecrated by the army who refrained from encroaching the Temple's holiest sanctuary even at the height of hostilities or the Sikh militants, who had turned their holiest shrine into a terrorist fortress.

<sup>17</sup> *Asiaweek* 29 June 1984, p.8

<sup>18</sup> The Golden Temple had become a point of conflict when Sikh moderates expressed their dissatisfaction at the use of the holy ground as a terrorist hide-out.

remaining twenty-two passengers, some of whom were Sikhs but were treated as Hindus because of their clean shaven looks, were shot dead. There were other instances of indiscriminate killings by Sikh militants of their co-religionists because of either the latter's moderate stance on political issues or because they were judged as failing to live up to the standards expected of Sikhs.

Engaging in terrorist activities was not only restricted to the Sikh laity. On his election as the President of the *Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak* Committee (SGPC), the militant Gucharan Singh Tohra announced his intention of banning the Golden Temple Task Force, a Sikh voluntary organisation formed to prevent terrorist use of the complex. Sikh militancy is a dangerous issue because as one observer pointed out, "In Sikh politics, he who controls the Golden Temple controls the people."<sup>19</sup> Tohra and Prakash Singh Badal, leader of a breakaway faction of the Akali Dal, were subsequently arrested under the National Security Act for their "cynical opportunism" in attaining power by mixing terrorism with politics.

The arrests did not prevent other pro-militant high priests of the Golden Temple from issuing an edict calling for the resignation of all factions of the Akali Dal political party. Punjab's Chief Minister, Surjit Singh Barnala's refusal to resign saw him declared guilty of religious misconduct and excommunicated. The Temple's Council however declared that the edict went against the tenets of Sikhism and insisted that the Temple's high priests refrain from any form of further involvement in political matters. In fact, when Barnala held a rally during which he highlighted the need to keep the Sikh religion separate from politics, he received unmitigated support from hundreds of Sikhs and social organisations throughout the nation. This Sikh-Hindu stalemate in India has yet to be resolved, claiming numerous lives daily as the Sikh religiously inspired nationalistic struggle continues unabated.

The unity of India has also been seriously undermined by another Hindu-Muslim conflict which has reached alarming proportions in recent years. This time the conflict between these two communities centres around the century-old dispute over a site in

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<sup>19</sup> *Asiaweek* 2 March 1984, p.23

Ayodhya<sup>20</sup> where in 1528, the first Mughal Emperor Babar built the Babri masjid. The Hindus believe that the site is the birthplace of Lord Rama and that a temple to Rama had stood there even before the Mughal invasion. In December 1949 when idols of *Rama*, *Krishna* and *Hanuman*<sup>21</sup> mysteriously appeared inside the mosque, the court ordered the complex be locked to prevent communal conflict. In 1984, the *Vishva Hindu Parishad* (VHP or World Hindu Forum), a Hindu nationalist organisation, launched a campaign to “liberate the birthplace of Lord Rama” which attracted considerable Hindu support. The issue however was overshadowed by the assassination of Indira Gandhi but gained national attention again when on 1 February 1986 a court appeal overturned the 1949 locking order and ruled that only Hindus were allowed to use the complex. This triggered communal rioting between Hindus and Muslims in India.

At a Muslim rally on 30 March 1986 attended by about one hundred thousand Muslims, Syed Abdullah Bukhari, the Shahi Imam of the Jama Masjid in New Delhi, called for Muslims to ignore “the judicial system [and] the government, which have not been able to protect the religious places of the Muslims”<sup>22</sup>. 5 April saw a gathering of militants from the *Vishva Hindu Parishad* and the *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (RSS)<sup>23</sup> at Ayodhya, during which suggestions that the Ayodhya shrine be either partitioned or declared a national monument open to people of both religions, were rejected by the Hindu militants. The situation between the two religious communities over the Ayodhya site still remains at an impasse.

A country in which secularism provides the foundation on which civil law is based and whose population is strongly religious is bound to encounter a clash between secularism and religiosity. The Shah Bano Begum case of April 1984 is significant because it was the first time India witnessed such a strong clash between Muslim religious law and civil law. The 1932 marriage of Shah Bano Begum to Mohamamed Ahmed Khan ended when the latter filed for divorce in 1978. When Bano took the case to court to have the maintenance payment extended beyond the *iddat* period stipulated by Muslim Personal

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<sup>20</sup> Regarded by Hindus as one of the seven holiest places in India. Once an important Buddhist centre, Ayodhya also has mosques, Jain and Sikh temples.

<sup>21</sup> Gods in the Hindu pantheon.

<sup>22</sup> *Asiaweek*, 13 April 1984, p.53

<sup>23</sup> This organization was formed in the 1920s to revive the primacy of Hinduism in India.

Law, the High Court ruled in her favour. Khan managed to procure the All India Muslim Personal Law Board to take the matter to the Supreme Court and argue his case using the tenets of the *Shari'ah*. The Supreme Court however upheld the High Court ruling, citing Indian civil law which grants all divorced women entitlement to alimony until they re-marry. Stating that there was no conflict between Islamic Personal Law<sup>24</sup> and the Indian Civil Code, the bench ruled that the maintenance provision came under criminal law which is applicable to all Indian citizens, regardless of religious affiliation:

The liability of Section 125 of the Criminal Procedures Code to maintain close relatives who are indigent is founded upon the individual's obligation to society to prevent vagrancy and destitution. That is the moral edict of the law. And morality cannot be clubbed with religion.<sup>25</sup>

The Supreme Court ruling was perceived as being in direct opposition to Islamic Personal Law and received strong condemnation from many in India's Muslim community. The ruling was labelled a violation of Muslim Law and an "unwanted manipulation of divine texts"<sup>26</sup>.

Negative reactions from the Muslim community peaked when Arif Khan, Minister of State for Home, himself a Muslim, defended the Supreme Court's ruling in Parliament. Rallies were held in protest and about fifty thousand Muslims staged a demonstration outside Bano's home. In November 1985 Bano, while disclaiming any social and/or religious pressure, declared that she wanted to withdraw her plea on which the Supreme Court ruling was based. She also demanded that the ruling be reviewed as it amounted to secular interference in Islamic Law. The Chief Justice who headed the Supreme Court bench stated that "... in this case, a review is particularly inappropriate since the verdict is a significant landmark in the march of law towards social reformation."<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> The Supreme Court bench claimed that according to the Prophet Mohammad, in the event of a divorce, Muslim husbands were under an obligation to provide for their wives.

<sup>25</sup> *Asiaweek*, 13 December 1986, p.26

<sup>26</sup> *Asiaweek*, 13 December 1986, p.26

<sup>27</sup> *Asiaweek*, 13 December 1986, p.26

In response to increasingly stringent calls to Muslims to fight for the preservation of Muslim identity by upholding Muslim Personal Law over a common civil code, Rajiv Gandhi issued a statement claiming that his government was willing to review any legislation which was perceived to be in variance with religious personal law.

Finally, the shift in India towards Hindu nationalism in the late 1980s was also apparent during Pope John Paul II's "pilgrimage of peace" to the country in February 1986. The day before the Pope's arrival, about six thousand Hindu extremists staged a protest, waving saffron flags and chanting anti-Christian slogans. The next day, one hundred and fifty seven Hindu fundamentalists, members of the *Hindu Mahasabha*, were arrested while trying to demonstrate outside the Cathedral where the Pope and local religious leaders were scheduled to meet. The *Mahasabha* accused Christians of attempting to convert low-class *Harijans* (untouchables) and thus upsetting the Hindu social order. Ironically the Pontiff's visit was welcomed by the Sikhs in India. Bhai Gurdev Singh, the acting caretaker of the *Akal Takht*, invited the Pope to visit Amritsar "to see the persecution and enslavement of Sikhs"<sup>28</sup>, effectively highlighting the way in which a religious group will align itself with another if the end result will prove beneficial to its political agenda.

## BURMA

Burma, another Asian country comprising a variety of religious groups, faced numerous communal and religious conflicts not unlike that experienced in India. Since the 1900s in a bid to regain their independence, lost to Great Britain in the Anglo-Burman War of 1824-25, the Burmese people sought to cultivate their sense of national identity, a crusade which can be viewed as the source of many confrontations in the country.

Of Burma's population, 68% are Burmese, while the remaining 32% are made up of various ethnic groups, Shans, Karen, Rakhine, Indians, and Chinese.<sup>29</sup> It is commonly accepted that adherence to Buddhism is the primary criterion of national identity in Burma<sup>30</sup> and therefore, awakening Burmese national consciousness meant a revival of

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<sup>28</sup> *Asiaweek*, 16 February 1986, p.13

<sup>29</sup> *The World Almanac and Book of Facts 1995*, p.803

<sup>30</sup> It is a Burmese adage that 'To be Burman is to be Buddhist'.

the Buddhist religion. The view that Burmese nationalism was synonymous with Buddhist nationalism served only to alienate the other religious minorities and constituted an important element in the racial and religious conflicts in Burma over the years.

In pre-colonial days, there existed a symbiotic relationship between Buddhism and the monarchy where Buddhism supported the Burmese kingship and was in turn supported by the state. Since Buddhism<sup>31</sup> served as the common bond between the various ethnic groups in the country, the Burmese king's active promotion<sup>32</sup> and defence of the Buddhist religion served to legitimise his position and ensured the allegiance of his subjects. The *Sangha*<sup>33</sup> meanwhile, stabilised the political structure by exercising social and religious control over the people, running monastic schools where *pongyis*<sup>34</sup> taught reading, writing and the traditional Buddhist religion.

When the British abolished the Burmese monarchy, a national and religious symbol, the Burmese perceived this as a blatant disregard for their eight hundred year old cultural identity:

The Burman cannot conceive of a religion without a Defender of the Faith - a king who appoints and rules the Buddhist hierarchy. The extinction of the monarchy left the nation, according to the people's notions, without a religion. ...Naturally they look upon this as a destruction of their nationality.<sup>35</sup>

The Buddhist *Sangha* also resented the Colonial Government's indulgence of religious minorities which it saw as foreign encroachment on the elevated status it previously enjoyed and erosion of traditional Buddhist values. According to John Cady<sup>36</sup>, the

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<sup>31</sup> Theravada Buddhism became the principal religion of Burma during the reign of King Anawrahta, and the state religion in 1961.

<sup>32</sup> For example, building Buddhist shrines and temples, and supporting the *Sangha*.

<sup>33</sup> The order of Buddhist monks.

<sup>34</sup> A commission of eight Buddhist monks which assisted the Burmese primate.

<sup>35</sup> Lewy, p.328

<sup>36</sup> Cady, John F., *A History of Modern Burma*, New York (Cornell, 1958), p.78

Buddhist clergy's role in education began to diminish after 1900 when Burmese children were no longer sent to monastic schools but to government sponsored educational institutions. This shift in the educational sphere from monastic schools to lay schools was perceived by the Buddhist clergy as "...reduc[ing] the amount of religious and moral destruction imparted to the youth [and] also discredited in the eyes of the educated elite the prescientific lore of the *pongyis*"<sup>37</sup>

All these factors combined to bring about a flood of Buddhist fervour among the Burmese, which subsequently witnessed the establishment in Burma of the Young Men's Buddhist Association (YMBA) in 1902.

The YMBA<sup>38</sup> began as an organisation aimed at revitalising the country's traditional social and religious values. Gradually assuming a more political orientation, in 1916 the YMBA became formally embroiled in a confrontation with the government over the British refusal to remove their footwear on pagoda premises<sup>39</sup>, which was considered a flagrant insult to the Buddhist custom and religion. The dissatisfaction over the issue was succinctly relayed to the Colonial Government in a letter sent by the All-Burma Sangha Council:

Since the advent of the British into Burma, proclamations have been issued declaring that the Government would not interfere in any way whatever with the religion of any nationality. In the face of all these proclamations, the Buddhists have been compelled to put up with the use of footwear within the precincts of religious edifices in Burma, amounting to a direct interference of their religion and rendering the said proclamation unworthy of credence and trust. In view of the proclamations it is the bounden duty of the Government to govern the country in a way calculated to bring about peace and prosperity

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<sup>37</sup> Ling, Trevor, *A History of Religion East and West: An Introduction and Interpretation*, London (Macmillan Press, 1968), p.80

<sup>38</sup> In an effort to enlist non-Buddhist support, the YMBA changed its name to the "General Council of Burmese Associations" (GCBA) in the early 1920s.

<sup>39</sup> This issue had previously been taken up with the government by barrister U Theing Maung, but nothing was achieved. Signs reading "Footwearing prohibited except to the British and Europeans" were still found in pagodas around the country.

in the land but the exceptions to the prohibitions of footwear would be quite detrimental to the peace and happiness of a nation.<sup>40</sup>

The demand by Buddhists for the government to issue a general decree regarding footwear was not met but in 1918, the latter did grant each *pongyi* the right to regulate the issue of footwear for his pagoda. This essentially religious matter signalled the start of nationalist anti-Western agitation in Burma and the increasing politicisation of the Buddhist clergy.

In 1921, the *pongyi* U Ottama travelled around Burma, preaching the need for the country to rid herself of Colonial rule and urged Buddhist monks to defend their faith by joining the nationalist struggle. U Ottama subsequently became the recognised leader of the politically active monks who now immersed themselves in the nationalist movement. In an effort to gain support from the traditionalist rural population, these nationalists employed Buddhist religious symbolisms to characterise the Burmese independence struggle. For example, the nationalistic interpretation of Buddhism redefined *nirvana*<sup>41</sup> to mean freedom from the British political yoke. So successful was U Ottama's influence in politicising the *pongyis* that Cady comments, "U Ottama did for nationalism in Burma part of what Gandhi did for it in India by transforming an essentially political problem into a religious one"<sup>42</sup>.

The politicised faction of the *Sangha*, the General Council of Sangha Sametggi (GCSS), was formed in 1922, and it co-ordinated the monks' political activities. Because of their increasing popularity among the Burmese laity the *pongyis*, for the most part, were secure in the knowledge that any attempt made by the Colonial Government to arrest or prosecute them for political agitation would result in the government being accused of violating the sacredness of the *Sangha*. *Bu athins*, conspiratorial village-based secret organisation set up by the GCBA, encouraged the use of violence in the fight for

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<sup>40</sup> von der Mehden, Fred R., *Religion and Nationalism in Southeast Asia: Burma, India and the Philippines*, Madison (University of Wisconsin Press, 1963), p. 167

<sup>41</sup> Enlightenment

<sup>42</sup> John F. Cady, cited in Ling, p.84

independence, and although declared illegal in 1923, still enjoyed a huge following and were supported by *pongyi* radicals.

The Saya San<sup>43</sup> rebellion, 1930-1932, in which some two thousand people were killed, was “...more than a peasant uprising motivated by economic grievances...[It assumed] the character of a quasi-millenarian rebellion propelled by militant religious ideas.”<sup>44</sup> Saya San, a Buddhist monk and a prominent member of the GCBA, nurtured a strong desire to promote the Buddhist religion and free the nation. Supported in his quest by other politically inspired monks and local *athins*, Saya San capitalised on growing Burmese nationalist sentiments. He appealed to the strong traditionalist and religious feelings of the peasants by reminding them of an old Burmese prophecy claiming that the British would be ousted from Burma by a *minlaung*, or a prince. Many of his followers identified Saya San with *Setkya-Min*, the legendary ideal ruler of the Four Island continents and a future Buddha. Saya San was consequently proclaimed ‘King of Burma’ by his followers on 28 October 1930<sup>45</sup>.

On 22 December he launched the rebellion against “the heathen English” who had enslaved the Burmese people. By labelling the British “heathens”, Saya San intimated that his movement was against unbelievers and that in fighting them, the Burmese were acting to restore pre-colonial Burmese Buddhist values.

The uprising against the British by the rebel army was fortified by religious fervour, both animism and Buddhism. The soldiers, equipped only with swords and thirty crudely made guns, believed themselves to be invincible because of astrologers’ prediction of the end of British rule. Besides being tattooed with the galon<sup>46</sup> emblem vaunted to ensure invulnerability, the rebels also carried on their person magical elixir

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<sup>43</sup> Saya San, a Burmese Buddhist monk, was a member of a radical faction of the GCBA. In 1928, he withdrew and formed his own secret association that sanctioned the use of force in the nationalist movement.

<sup>44</sup> Lewy, p.339

<sup>45</sup> The date and time were deemed auspicious by the astrologers. The ‘coronation’ itself was carried out according to traditional Burmese religious custom. To further authenticate his ‘spiritually sanctioned’ position, Saya San adopted the five symbols of royal regalia - the white umbrella (an ancient Brahman emblem of divine kingship); a crown; a sword, a pair of sacred gem-studded slippers, and a fan.

<sup>46</sup> A legendary bird of Hindu mythology that was believed to have destroyed the *Naga*, the snake, now identified with the British.

and other religious paraphernalia which they believed would protect them from their enemies. An excerpt from one of the many secret oaths taken by the rebels clearly reflects the extent to which religious beliefs featured in the Saya San uprising:

Do away with the heathen, Oh Nats, so that our glorious Buddhist religion may prosper. ...Hark! Ye Brahmans and Nats, King of Brahmans, Defender of Buddhism, and others. We swear we will not ill treat, nor destroy either the life or the property of the people who are members of the associations affiliated to the G.C.B.A. and the Galon Army ... May we overcome the heathens speedily and may the arms and ammunition used by our heathen opponents and their servants turn into water or air or mis-fire and never attain their object.<sup>47</sup>

During the height of the rebellion, there were reports of rebels killing Burmese villagers suspected of co-operating with the police, or who refused to give the soldiers food and/or money. The rebellion was finally suppressed in 1933, and Saya San, convicted of serious treason, was executed on 28 November 1937. Reports on the rebellion indicate clearly that the Burmese people, both the clergy and laity, were divided in their support of the violent way in which the rebellion was carried out.<sup>48</sup>

Despite the basis of the rebellion being essentially economic and political, Saya San managed to successfully utilise the traditional religious beliefs of the villagers to his advantage, and the rebellion has since been appropriately labelled “a strange blend of faith and superstition, nationalism and madness, of courage and folly”<sup>49</sup>.

As was the case in India, the secular faction of the nationalist movement in Burma gained popular support only after much bloodshed and killing advocated by their militant religious counterparts. Two student nationalist groups amalgamated in 1935 to form *Dobama Asiayone*, the ‘We Burmans Society’. Because members addressed each

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<sup>47</sup> Lewy p.340

<sup>48</sup> Ling, p.86

<sup>49</sup> Lewy, p.341

other as *thakin*, the group became known as the *Thakin* party. The *thakins* steered the nationalist movement away from racial and religious lines and instead emphasised the importance of Burmese national unity in the fight against colonialism. Some *Thakin* members however failed to live up to the secularism propounded by their party as will be illustrated later.

The political participation of Buddhist clergy did not cease with the Saya San rebellion. In July 1938 the *pongyis* were involved in a series of anti-Indian riots in Burma which was described by Dr U Ba Maw, the then Burmese Prime Minister, as being “between the Buddhists, who were Burmese, and the Muslims, who were mainly Indians”<sup>50</sup>. The conflict was ostensibly triggered by the 1937 publication of a book in which the author, Shwe Hpi, a Muslim, made critical comments about Buddhism. Although the book was first published six years previously and had provoked no adverse reactions, this new edition was exploited by various groups - the *Sangha*, the vernacular press, and other politically motivated parties to incite anti-Indian sentiments in Burma. The vernacular press carried inflammatory anti-Muslim articles in their newspapers in an attempt to fuel public unrest. Dr Ba Maw was also implicated in the communal conflict because he made no effort to prevent his *pongyis* from taking part in the riots. In fact, a demonstration instigated by the president of the Thanthana Mamaka Young Sanghas’ Association resulted in a spate of Indian Muslim killings. Even some members of the *Thakin* party were found to have been involved in inciting the riots.

Although the agitation was contrived to look like a religious conflict, the book was simply an instrument conveniently manipulated by various factions of the population to vent anti-Indian Muslim sentiments, caused by the favourable economic position enjoyed by the Indians in the country. These anti-Indian sentiments saw a rise in consciousness of national identities; the Burmese deliberately played up Burmese Buddhist characteristics in an effort to highlight the ‘foreignness’ of the Indians. The official report on the Indo-Burmese rioting alleged:

An attempt has been made to represent the riots to us as religious riots. But, just as the book was not, in our opinion, the real cause, so

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<sup>50</sup> Ling, p.88

the riots were not, we think, religious riots. At the highest, the book gave to them in the beginning a religious odour and an anti-Muslim bias...the real origin of the disturbances and the real cause of the protraction was, and is, political.<sup>51</sup>

The *pongyis*' considerable influence over the Burmese majority was often exploited by various political factions. The Japanese for example, were not above exploiting religion in the hopes of securing support from the *pongyis* by associating their faith with that of the Burmese people. In fact, it was publicly acknowledged by the Japanese that their occupation of Burma would be made easier with the support of the *Sangha*: "The Burmese priests have not been utilised enough as suitable co-operators with Japan. In the future to make a firm coalition with Burma, it is necessary for Japan first of all to secure their co-operation."<sup>52</sup>

Dr Ba Maw<sup>53</sup> too manipulated the *pongyis* to further his political ambitions by encouraging the Burmans to accept Japanese rule in the country. He courted the support of the *Sangha* by setting up the *Dobama Synyetha Asiayone*<sup>54</sup> on the condition that all monks must collaborate in the formation of the New Burma; rid the country of all enemies of Burma and Nippon; foster positive Burma-Nippon relations, and promote positive religious programmes for the advancement of the Burmese people. Ba Maw also appointed Bandoola U Sein as the Minister of Religious Development and Propaganda and used him to promote the 'Trust Japan' programme, effectively linking the Japanese Occupation with religious promotion.

Even the *thakins* formed a loose alliance with the *pongyis* in the 1930s with the calculated aim of furthering their political aspirations. This alliance became strained when the monks gave their full support to the Japanese during World War II, in the

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<sup>51</sup> van der Mehden, p.168

<sup>52</sup> van der Mehden. p.150

<sup>53</sup> Born in a Christian family, Ba Maw was not a Buddhist but he exploited the religion for his political gain. For example, he publicly professed his faith in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the *Sangha*, and promised to defend the faith in the fashion of the Burmese kingship, thus ensuring the support of the large Buddhist population.

<sup>54</sup> Burmese People's Monk's Association

hope that being fellow Buddhists, the latter would restore Buddhism to its rightful place in Burma.

The *pongyis* however soon became disillusioned with their Japanese co-religionists when Buddhist shrines were desecrated and pagodas were stripped bare of valuables by the soldiers who also used monasteries for stabling their horses. Such offensive behaviour only served to have the monks withdraw their support of Ba Maw and the Japanese so that by the end of the Occupation, the *pongyis* ceased their active involvement in the political realm in Burma.

The resulting anti-Japanese feelings saw the Anti-Fascist Peoples Freedom League (AFPFL) assume power in Burma. The party reaffirmed its strong commitment to a modern secular republic so that when Burma achieved its independence in 1948, secular nationalism was at the forefront and “...there was little awareness of other Buddhist-oriented nationalism.”<sup>55</sup>.

Secularism did not last long in Burma; during the premiership of U Nu<sup>56</sup>, the Buddhist religion was again promoted with renewed fervour in the country. The 1950s proved to be a time of great expectancy among the Buddhists; the approach of the *Buddha Jayanti*<sup>57</sup> gave rise to messianic expectations among the faithful in Burma. A majority of the Burmese people started to treat U Nu like a Buddhist king of pre-Colonial days, as the defender and promoter of the faith. They attributed U Nu the role of a *bodhisattva*<sup>58</sup>, an image he himself was prepared to actively promote, given that he was not above exploiting religion to further his political ambitions, as succinctly captured in the following comment, “U Nu will sit in a pagoda for ten hours, if necessary, if he thinks it will help him politically.”<sup>59</sup>.

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<sup>55</sup> Lewy, p.344

<sup>56</sup> U Nu became the Prime Minister of Burma in 1947.

<sup>57</sup> The 2,500th anniversary of Buddhism, and orthodox tradition has it that Maitreya, the next Buddha, will appear during this time. Ling, p.104

<sup>58</sup> A Buddha-to-be in the Thavada School of Buddhism.

<sup>59</sup> Ling, p.123

The advent of *Buddha Jayanti*, believed to signal the expansion of Buddhism, also influenced the faithful in Burma to nurture the hope that their country would once again become a Buddhist state. To this end, they gave their full support to U Nu's ambitions of embarking on a programme to revive Buddhism in the country.

In 1958, the AFPFL split into two factions, the Clean AFPFL led by U Nu, and the Stable AFPFL, headed by two of U Nu's former lieutenants. In a calculated bid to win the support of the Burmese majority in the coming elections, U Nu began to promulgate the issue of religion in his political campaign when before this, the united secular AFPFL had refrained from exploiting religion in its political campaigning. In fact Article 21, Section 4 of the Constitution was specifically designed to avoid the mixing of religion and politics, which had in the past, caused strife between the different religious groups in the country.

The abuse of religion for political purposes is forbidden; and any act which is intended or is likely to promote feelings of hatred, enmity, or discord between racial or religious communities or sects is contrary to this Constitution and may be made punishable by law.<sup>60</sup>

On 26 September 1959, U Nu promised to establish Buddhism as the state religion if he was elected into government. Despite levelling various charges against U Nu<sup>61</sup>, the Stable AFPFL had to acknowledge that his tactics of religious politics was hugely popular among the rural masses. Keen to capitalise on the nation's religious fervour, the Stable AFPFL redefined its secular image by making public offerings to the *Sangha* and proposing a programme designed to propagate Buddhism in the country. This political ploy however failed to win the Stable party much support in the election which returned U Nu with a 60% majority.

In keeping with his election promise, U Nu instituted Buddhism as the state religion, much to the dissatisfaction of the other religious minorities in Burma. The National

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<sup>60</sup> van der Mehden, p.98

<sup>61</sup> Among the charges were violating the constitution, using religion to further his political ambitions, and disregarding the AFPFL's previous stand that elevating Buddhism as the state religion would divide the country.

Religious Minorities organisation, representing all the non-Buddhists in the country, staged a protest on 26 August 1961, the day the government passed the Act adopting Buddhism as the state religion. Although there were no reported instances of violence during the protest, there was a high degree of tension in the capital, leading to U Nu warning the Buddhists to act considerately in all matters relating to religious minorities in the country. Reaffirming his intention of safeguarding the constitutional guarantee of freedom of worship<sup>62</sup> in the country, U Nu made it clear that it was not the government's intention to "...disparage in any way other religions like Mohammedanism, Hinduism, Christianity or spirit worship...[but] to combat effectively anti-religious forces...that might be attributed to Karl Marx"<sup>63</sup>

A further amendment added to the Constitution granting minority groups the "right freely to profess, practice and teach" their religion was viewed with resentment by the Buddhists. The *pongyis* strongly opposed the teaching of Christianity and Islam in state schools and even the Buddhist laity believed that Christian missionaries might exploit the amendment to promote Christian propaganda among pupils in Christian schools. To counter such fears, a proviso was added to the amendment stating that no pupil will be taught a religion other than that of his parents without their written permission. Even this failed to satisfy the fanatical *pongyis* who believed that such Constitutional amendments completely overshadowed the value of establishing Buddhism as the State religion.

Religious minorities in Burma resented what they perceived as the advocacy of Buddhist dominance over them and the increasing resentment between the various religious groups put a strain on the country's national unity, a contributing factor in the success of the military coup staged by General Ne Win on 2 March 1962.

Despite being a Buddhist himself, Ne Win reversed U Nu's Constitutional amendment promulgating Buddhism as the State religion, although in an effort to ensure the support

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<sup>62</sup> Article 21(3) of the Constitution reads "The State shall not impose any disabilities or make any discrimination on the ground of religious faith or belief". Ling, p.131

<sup>63</sup> Ling, p.125

of the Burmese Buddhist majority, Ne Win reiterated the importance of employing Buddhist values in establishing the new socialist State of Burma.

Preserving national unity has been the *leitmotif* of Ne Win's rule and to this end, he initially down played ethnic and religious differences in Burma, emphasising instead a Marxist national ideology. Later into his rule however, Ne Win regarded Buddhism as a hindrance to attaining his desired Marxist socialist republic and began to repress the religion.

In recent years, the Burmese government has attempted to bolster the religion in a bid to win support for the increasingly unpopular military regime. In 1980, Ne Win established a national organisational structure which granted state support for Buddhism, while at the same time, allowing the government a greater control over the *Sangha*. In an attempt to curtail religious opposition, recalcitrant *pongyis* who had opposed the military regime in 1989 and 1990 were arrested and imprisoned. Other religious groups have also been targeted by the government's clamp down on religious dissent in Burma; thousands of Burmese Muslims have also been forced to flee the country into Pakistan.

#### MALAYSIA

Formed in 1963, the Federation of Malaysia was initially made up of fourteen States, eleven in peninsular Malaysia; the East Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak, and the island of Singapore. Since Singapore's exit from the Federation in 1965, Malaysia currently comprises thirteen states, each with its own legislative assembly dealing autonomously with issues of local government, land and religion. National concerns such as foreign policy, education and defence are dealt with by the Malaysian Federal Government.

At the time of attaining independence in 1957, Malaya's population consisted almost equally of indigenous communities and immigrants. Of these, *bumiputeras* (sons of the soil) made up slightly less than 50%; 37% of the remaining population were Chinese and 12% Indians. When Singapore joined the Federation in 1963, its Chinese majority led to a substantial increase in the Chinese population in Malaysia which was counter-balanced by the inclusion of the indigenous populations of Sabah and Sarawak. The

expulsion of Singapore from the Federation two years later meant that the Malaysian population was back to being dominated by the Malay and *bumiputera* communities. The population make-up of Malaysia at present is as follows: Malays 46.8%; indigenous communities 8.6%; Chinese 34.1%; Indians 9% and other minorities 1.4%.<sup>64</sup>

The Malaysian Constitution defines a 'Malay' as one who habitually speaks the Malay language, practices Malay *adat* (custom), and is a Muslim, therefore establishing Islam as a crucial marker of Malay ethnicity in the country. The Muslim community in Malaysia is relatively homogenous where the majority of Muslims are Malays.

When the Malayan Constitution was implemented in 1957 it guaranteed Malay predominance in the peninsula which was reflected in numerous provisions. Islam was established as the State religion, making Malaysia officially an Islamic state although freedom of religion is guaranteed to all other religious groups in the country. Malay was deemed the national language with the proviso that English was to be employed as the official language in administration, the courts and a large part of the educational system until 1967.<sup>65</sup>

In Malaysia, there is no separation between politics and religion. Most, if not all, the political groups in the country are organized along communal lines. Despite usual claims of ethnic impartiality, all political groups in Malaysia inevitably attempt to gain mass-support by appealing to communal interest. Here follows a brief look at the political scene in Malaysia and the way religious and ethnic issues are exploited as political tools by various organizations in the country.

## POLITICAL PARTIES IN MALAYSIA

### (1) United Malayan National Organisation

The United Malayan National Organisation (UMNO) is purported to be the largest Muslim political group in the world with its voluntary paid membership exceeding one

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<sup>64</sup> Data from the 1970 census in 4MP:74 cited in Crouch, Harold A., *Government and Society in Malaysia*, New York (Cornell University Press, 1996), p.14

<sup>65</sup> The subject of Malay as the country's national language will be dealt with in greater detail later on in the Chapter.

million Muslims.<sup>66</sup> The party was formed in 1946 as a reaction against the proposed Malayan Union scheme<sup>67</sup> put forward by the British. Concerned with the protection of Malay interests in the country, this new party played a crucial role in the 1957 Constitutional negotiations with the British by insisting on provisions which characterized Malaya as a Malay State. These provisions included Malay as the national language, Islam as the religion of the Federation, and the recognition of the office of *Yang di-Pertuan Agong* (king). UMNO basically proposed and backed policies which were beneficial to the Malay community.

## (2) Malayan Chinese Association

Encouraged by the British as an alternative to the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) which was at that time agitating for the immediate withdrawal of the British from Malaya, the Malayan Chinese Association (MCA) was formed in February 1949. The establishment of the MCA provided an alternative to attract the Chinese politically.

The MCA usually avoids clashing with its major coalition partners by going along with the government's general policies while at the same time, attempting to ensure that Chinese interests were protected. For example, although supporting the National Economic Policy (NEP)<sup>68</sup> in general, the party still pushed to ensure greater opportunities for Chinese businesses. The MCA also insisted that Chinese medium primary schools be maintained even under the government's new education policies.

## (3) Malayan Indian Congress

The Malayan Indian Congress (MIC) was formed in 1946 as a political representative of the Indian community in Malaya. Although Indians do not form a majority in the country, the MIC has always been represented in the national cabinet as a constituent

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<sup>66</sup> *Asiaweek* 24 August 1984, p.23

<sup>67</sup> In 1946, the British issued a White Paper detailing the formation of a Malayan Union which would comprise the four former Federated Malay states (Perak, Selangor, Pahang and Negeri Sembilan); the five Unfederated Malay states (Johore, Trengganu, Kelantan, Kedah and Perlis) and the two Straits Settlements of Penang and Malacca. The island of Singapore was designated a separate Crown Colony and was not included in the Union for two main reasons. The island was still seen as an important military base for the British and secondly, the country's majority would upset the racial balance in the Union.

<sup>68</sup> To be discussed in greater detail in a later section.

party of the ruling coalition. It is usually able to garner close to 70% to 80 % of Indian votes in all Federal elections held to date.

#### (4) Gerakan

Originally formed as a multiracial political party in 1968, Gerakan has been increasingly identified with the Chinese community in Malaysia. Although its original multiethnic ideology has never been officially abandoned, the party realized that it needed the support of the Chinese to help maintain its political position, hence its gradual swing towards promoting the interests of the Chinese community within the country.

#### (5) Parti Islam Se-Malaysia

PAS or the Pan-Malaya Islamic Party presents itself as an Islamic alternative to UMNO. The party was founded in 1951 in Butterworth, Penang. Many of its founding members were defectors from UMNO's religious bureau who left because of differences in opinion about the nature of the Malayan State to be established after the withdrawal of the British. While UMNO wanted to establish a secular state, PAS was agitating for the new state to be Islamic, with the religion permeating all aspects of the state including the economy, politics and law. The party's manifesto was based on an Islamic system of government and a Constitution founded on Quaranic law.

PAS was part of the Malaysian national coalition front from 1973 to 1977 when it left to become the country's main Islamic opposition party.

#### ALLIANCE/BARISAN NASIONAL

Since Independence, Malaysia's government has been formed by a ruling coalition of the major political parties in the country - the dominant Malay party, UMNO, and the non-Malay parties representing the Chinese, Indian and East Malaysian communities. In 1952, UNMO and MCA formed an alliance that was expanded three years later to include the Indian party, MIC. In theory, the Alliance purported to represent the interests of the three major ethnic communities in the country, the Malays, Chinese and Indians but the reality proved a different matter. It was definitely a period of open

political competition in Malaya because the various parties sought to gain support by appealing to the sensitivities of their respective ethnic communities.

In an effort to eliminate such political practices which could contribute to communal tension, Tun Abdul Razak bin Datuk Hussein<sup>69</sup> decided to expand the ruling Alliance coalition to include opposition parties such as the Chinese-based Gerakan and the People's Progressive Party (PPP), and PAS, the main Malay opposition party. This new coalition, the Barisan Nasional (BN), was officially registered as a confederation of political parties in June 1974.

When elected into the BN, members were expected to give their full support to common policies which often led to a conflict of interests given that each constituent party still retained its distinct identity. The threat of open political rivalry was therefore not fully eradicated even with the establishment of this multi-ethnic coalition. Furthermore, when the Alliance was replaced by the larger Barisan Nasional, UMNO strengthened its political position within the coalition. This led to the fear among the non-Malay communities of increasing Malay political power within the country.

The mid-1970s saw the emergence of Islamic revivalist movements or *dakwah*<sup>70</sup> in Malaysia, the most influential organization of which is *Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia* (ABIM) or Islamic Youth Movement of Malaysia which was launched as a means of generating "an Islamic movement as the path to Islamic revival in Malaysia". The organization was founded in 1971 by a group of Malay university graduates headed by Anwar Ibrahim. It has close ties with World Assembly of Muslim Youths (WAMY) and International Islamic Federation of Student Organisation (IIFSO). Being registered as a missionary organization and therefore not permitted to engage in political activities, ABIM employs PAS as its political vehicle to promote its ideas.

ABIM is constantly agitating for the active reform of the political system in Malaysia, and aims for an Islamic alternative to the social, cultural and political structures

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<sup>69</sup> He became Prime Minister in 1970.

<sup>70</sup> *Dakwah* is not a unified religious movement in Malaysia, comprising instead of a number of Islamic organizations and cults, whose religious tenets and practices are sometimes in variance with each other.

currently in place in Malaysia. Ibrahim has been very vocal in his criticism of what he terms as the “unIslamic” governing style of the Barisan Nasional coalition government. He believes that if run like a truly Islamic state, Malaysian politics will not exist along communal lines.<sup>71</sup>

For its 8<sup>th</sup> annual convention held in July 1979, ABIM adopted the theme “Islam and the solutions to the Problems of a Multi-Racial Society” which was another attempt on its part to convince non-Muslim communities in Malaysia to accept an Islamic approach in solving the problems inherent in a multi-ethnic society. The convention saw three resolutions passed, one which emphasized that the Islamic approach be adopted in tackling the problems of achieving unity and national identity which are inherent in a multi-racial society. It was alleged that while all other efforts had failed to solve these problems, history has “proved beyond doubt” the ability and practicability of Islam in developing nations “because of its relevance to the nature of man and its true respect of his dignity.” It was also claimed that attempting to build a strong, just nation based on anything other than Islam “will be ineffective and a failure”<sup>72</sup>.

#### THE EFFECTS OF GOVERNMENT POLICIES ON INTER-COMMUNAL RELATIONS

Ibrahim claimed that narrow communal and chauvinistic trends “evident in the country are actually preventing the emergence of a multi-racial society”. He is against any government policies which are designed to alleviate the lot of one ethnic community.

The National Language Bill, introduced in Parliament on 24 February 1967, provided for Malay to be the sole national language in the country. The Bill also made provisions for the use of the languages of the other communities in the Federation as “deemed necessary in the public interest” and the continued use of the English language for official purposes as considered necessary by the *Yang di-Pertuan Agong*. These concessions were made to appease the other communities which viewed the National Language Act as the state’s attempt to exert Malay cultural hegemony in Malaysia. There was a serious danger of communal clashes erupting over the national language

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<sup>71</sup> *Asiaweek* 24 August 1979, p.21

<sup>72</sup> *Asiaweek* 27 July 1979 p.20

issue and the Bill was seen as a compromise to protect secondary languages in the country.

There were many Malay organizations which were also opposed to the Bill because of these provisions, especially the official status accorded to the English language for 10 years after independence. The Malay community perceived this as a threat to Malay nationalism in the country. The Alliance faced a challenge because its constituents, the MCA and MIC, had to be seen by their respective communities as pushing for the use of their own languages while at the same time, maintaining their public support for the 1957 Constitutional Agreement of Malay being the national language. In giving its support to the Bill, the Alliance emphasized the national goal of communal peace in the country.

Under British Colonial rule, there was a pronounced preferential treatment accorded to the Malay community. Firstly, the British maintained Malaya as essentially a Malay country, and as such the Malay community was accorded a special position under the law. Large areas of land were designated as Malay Reservations, and this banned them being leased or owned by non-Malays. There was also free education in place for the Malays, including Islamic instruction.

Under the Japanese Occupation from 1942 to 1945, the Chinese were treated badly, with heavy loss of life and property. The Malayan Police Force, comprising mainly Malays, was used to suppress any form of resistance among the Chinese community. This led to a heightened sense of anti-Malay feelings among the Chinese community which provided the basis for later inter-communal conflicts in the country, especially the May 13<sup>th</sup> riots in Kuala Lumpur<sup>73</sup>.

This incident led to the amendment of the 1948 Sedition Act to ensure against communal tension in the country. On 30 July 1970 the government issued an Ordinance which made it an offence to raise sensitive issues which could provoke racial feelings in society. The 'Emergency' (Essential Powers) Ordinance No.45 legislates against raising issues which have "a tendency to question" any matter, right, status, position, privilege, sovereignty or prerogative established or protected by the Constitution pertaining to

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<sup>73</sup> The 1969 race riots will be discussed in Chapter 4.

citizenship, National Language, the special position of the Malays and the Malay Rulers. The penalty is a fine not exceeding M\$5000, or a jail term of not more than 3 years, or both. A person convicted for offence against this Ordinance is automatically disqualified from standing for election for 5 years. Any political party or society which habitually contravenes the Ordinance can be deregistered. This is aimed at preventing political parties from exploiting issues which may instigate racial and/or religious tension in the country.<sup>74</sup>

On 23 February 1971, the Constitutional (Amendment) Bill was presented to Parliament. This Amendment made it an offence for Malays to question the languages of the other communities in Malaysia. Another amendment made to the 1957 Constitution was to empower the paramount Ruler to reserve for Malays a “reasonable proportion of places in selected courses in higher learning where the number of Malays are proportionally small”.

Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak claimed that the purpose of these Constitutional amendments was to prohibit sensitive issues from the arena of public discussion and to redress racial imbalance in an attempt to promote national unity in the country:

A new generation has grown to adulthood since independence that is unmindful of the delicate and careful compromises agreed upon by the various races before we attained independence in 1957.

There are also unscrupulous individuals who seek to ride to power by inciting and exploiting racial emotions, fears and mistrust.<sup>75</sup>

Formulated in the aftermath of the 1969 race riots and initiated in 1970/1, the National Economic Policy (NEP) was proposed as a formula to prevent Malays from losing control of their country and it formed the underlying ideology of national development in Malaysia. There were two goals contained within the proposal, the first is the elimination of poverty among all Malaysians, with a specific focus on redistributing

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<sup>74</sup> *Asian Recorder*, 15-21 October 1970, 9810

<sup>75</sup> *Asian Almanac*, 9(15) April 1971, p4519.

wealth in favour of the Malays.<sup>76</sup> The second goal was to eradicate the identification of ethnicity and economic function.

The NEP, criticized by many organizations as being discriminatory, was felt to have contributed to increasing the existing polarization between the various communities in the country. The political, educational and economic agendas set by the implementation of the NEP did little to ease communal feelings in Malaysia. Given the Malaysian Constitutional definition of a 'Malay', the NEP by implication favours the Muslims over the other religious communities in Malaysia, thereby creating a potential situation ripe for religious dissatisfaction.

In 1990, the NEP was replaced by the National Development Policy (NDP) which sought to moderate affirmative action for the Malay community and to place greater emphasis on education and training. At the launch of the NDP, Mahathir claimed that the policy was not to impede the progress of other races but to accelerate the progress of the Malays.<sup>77</sup>

Also introduced in 1971 as a result of the 1969 race riots in the country, the National Cultural Policy was aimed at promoting nation-building in Malaysia. This policy has been the subject of intense debate because of the proposal that the national culture and national language to be adopted in the country be based on the 'traditional' culture and language of the Malays. Although the national culture was to have incorporated suitable elements from the other cultures in the country, the underlying ideology was to be essentially Malay with Islam to feature prominently.<sup>78</sup>

This attempt by the government to impose a policy on a national culture which advocates a unitary approach based on one language, one culture and one university system, further exacerbated the fear of the non-Malays of increasing Malay cultural dominance in the country:

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<sup>76</sup> Under the NEP, Malaya ownership of share capital increased from 4% in 1971 to 20% in 1990.

<sup>77</sup> *Straits Times*, 6 October 1998

<sup>78</sup> Kahn, Marvin, *The Militant Communist Threat to West Malaysia*, Kuala Lumpur (Penchetek Kerajaan, 1966), p.283

To say that minority communities must succumb to the political strength of the dominant community is to subscribe to an extremist racist ideology that goes against the principles of democracy and human rights.<sup>79</sup>

Many have been critical of the government's attempt to promote nation-building through the implementation of the New Cultural Policy which has been dismissed as hegemonic and unsuitable in a plural society. Critics of the policy advocate that the government adopt a pluralistic approach in all policies pertaining to culture which will be more appropriate given the ethnic make-up of Malaysian society.

Certain education policies in Malaysia have also been dismissed as being racially and religiously discriminatory. On 24 June 1997, the Islamic Affairs Development committee and the Consultative Body, in a joint meeting chaired by Acting Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, proposed that Islamic Civilisation Studies be made a core subject in all public and private universities in the country. Islamic Civilisation, as an optional subject, was originally introduced by Mahathir in 1983 "so that undergraduates, regardless of race or religion, can appreciate Islam as an excellent civilisation".<sup>80</sup> The Education Ministry, in the process of restructuring the course, announced that the subject would be made compulsory in 1997.

This move was greeted with opposition by non-Muslims and political groups who insisted that the subject be made optional. The main opposition Democratic Action Party (DAP) claimed that the decision was discriminatory if non-Muslims were required to pass the proposed Islamic course without being allowed the opportunity to learn about their own respective civilisations: "While it is important for non-Muslims to study Islamic history, it is equally important for Muslims to study the history of other religions to promote mutual understanding."<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Kahn, p.195

<sup>80</sup> *Straits Times* 10 July 1997

<sup>81</sup> *Straits Times* 26 June 1997

In response, Datuk Dr Abdul Hamid Othman, the Minister in the Prime Minister's Department, gave the assurance that the subject will be taught in a purely academic fashion and not as a religious subject. It was deemed by government officials that the purpose of the subject was to promote tolerance among Muslims and non-Muslims in an effort to produce healthy citizens who understood the role and contribution of Islam in society.

Under the proposed scheme, each tertiary institution will be accorded the flexibility to decide on the method of implementing the subject while under the umbrella supervision of a committee to be headed by the Education Minister, Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak. In addressing the concerns of the Indian and Chinese communities, the Education Minister claimed that it was not the government's intention to convert anyone to Islam but that the subject was aimed at improving better religious understanding between Muslims and non-Muslims in the country.

The Malaysian media downplayed the entire issue in the interest of maintaining communal peace as noted by the editor of a local newspaper, "Many non-Muslims are unhappy about this decision, but we have to be careful in the treatment of news so that the whole issue will not be turned into a religious issue."<sup>82</sup>

Ironically, the component parties of the ruling coalition and other religious bodies in the country were not made privy to the proposed scheme. The Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism and Sikhism<sup>83</sup> for example, regretted that it was not consulted on "such a fundamental issue that affects the religious sensitivities of non-Muslims"<sup>84</sup> and voiced its opposition to the proposed move. Meeting on 27 June 1997 the Council, which represents 47% of the Malaysian population, believed that all students needed to have adequate knowledge and appreciation for one another's religions to promote national unity and integration.

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<sup>82</sup> *Straits Times* 28 June 1997

<sup>83</sup> An inter-religious organization, the Council was formally established in August 1983 by discontented non-Muslim members of the National Unity Board, a government-sponsored organization.

<sup>84</sup> *Straits Times* 9 July 1997

Those opposed to the scheme proposed two alternatives. One was to make Islamic Civilisation an optional subject and two, to introduce Hindu and Chinese civilisations as well into the school curriculum. On 9 July, the Malaysian cabinet finally proposed an amendment where Asian Civilisation Studies will be added onto the Islamic Civilisation course. This new course will include subjects on Malay, Chinese, Indian and Japanese civilisations. This was effectively an attempt to avert a controversy which could have proven costly in the multi-religious make-up of Malaysian society.

#### INSTANCES OF ETHNIC AND RELIGIOUS DISSENSION

This renewed Islamic fervour in Malaysia has also resulted in tension between the Muslims and non-Muslims which is further exacerbated by political groups in the country which are not averse to manipulating religious and ethnic issues as political tools. Communal politics is constantly being engaged in Malaysia because it stands to reason that in order to get votes in a plural society, the various political parties in Malaysia have to emphasize communal issues and this has been the root of many clashes in the country.

In August 1978, a group of Muslim religious fanatics entered a Hindu temple in Kerling and smashed statues of Hindu deities. The incident resulted in the deaths of three Malay youths. One of the dead was a teacher from a leading secondary school in Kuala Lumpur and the other two were undergraduates from a Malaysian university.<sup>85</sup> The sole survivor of the incident, a medical student on holiday from the University of Adelaide, was jailed for six months on the charge of damaging nine idols.

The authorities subsequently revealed that such attacks had been occurring at various Hindu temples in the country since December 1977. After a short period of relative calm, the attacks resumed again in mid-1979.

The following incident demonstrates the ease with which political parties can manipulate a religious issue to further their political agendas. The New York Philharmonic Orchestra was scheduled to give a concert in Kuala Lumpur in 1984, the proceeds from which were to be donated to an independent drug rehabilitation agency

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<sup>85</sup> *Asiaweek* 1 September 1978 p.15

Pemadam in Malaysia. When it was disclosed that a Hebrew rhapsody, the Ernest Bloch's *Schelomo*, was to be included in the concert programme, the Malaysian Information Ministry requested that the number be removed from the orchestra's concert selection claiming that it was an inappropriate musical piece to feature in an Islamic country. In response, Jewish organizations in New York tried to persuade to US Embassy in Kuala Lumpur to have the musical piece reinstated.

A major motivating factor behind the controversy was the political fracas between the moderates in UMNO and PAS extremists with both parties wanting to be seen as pursuing the Islamic cause. Each was concerned with exploiting the issue to win political favour among its supporters. Despite being caught in a dilemma with the possibility of PAS using the incident to its own advantage and accusing UMNO of yielding to pressure from American Jews, the government finally agreed to welcome the orchestra. The New York Philharmonic Orchestra however announced its decision to call off its Malaysian tour claiming that the decision was made "in the absence of a positive response to an urgent heartfelt request to reinstate Bloch's work."<sup>86</sup>

On 19 November 1985, police raided a village at Kampong Memali in the Baling area of Kedah, with the aim of arresting Ibrahim Mahmood<sup>87</sup> for deviant preaching and thirty six others for various offences. Tipped off about the intended raid, the villagers, including women and children who were armed with a variety of weapons<sup>88</sup>, confronted the police. In the ensuing shootout, eighteen people including Mahmood were killed<sup>89</sup>. Of the one hundred and fifty nine villagers arrested, twenty nine were women and twelve children.<sup>90</sup> The government imposed a curfew on the entire Baling area and fearing that the incident might trigger further clashes in the country, the government placed a temporary ban on *ceramahs* in Kedah, Trengganu, Perlis, Kelantan and

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<sup>86</sup> *Asiaweek* 31 August 1984, p.20

<sup>87</sup> A recalcitrant local religious teacher, Mahmood was a graduate of Egypt's Al Azhar University. A former employee of the Libyan People's Bureau (embassy) in Kuala Lumpur, he was rumoured to have close ties with Muammar Gaddafi's militant North African regime. His strong Libyan association earned him the nickname "Ibrahim Libya".

<sup>88</sup> These included clubs, bamboo spears, poisoned arrows, catapults, swords and *parangs* (long knives) and molotov cocktails.

<sup>89</sup> Defiant sympathisers of the slain religious leader buried their dead according to the burial rites for those who die as *syahid* or martyrs for the Islamic cause.

<sup>90</sup> *New Straits Times*, 21 November 1985

Penang, and all unauthorised publications and documents about the incident were banned under the Internal Security Act.

Given that Kedah is the stronghold of PAS, the incident assumed political overtones. UMNO insisted that PAS make a stand on the issue while the latter tried to distance itself from the incident claiming that although Mahmud had been an active member and former electoral candidate for the party, in this instance, he had acted on his own volition.

The much publicised Nesdale case of August 1986 also serves to illustrate the ease with which religious sensitivities can be aroused in Malaysia.<sup>91</sup> Two Christian missionaries from New Zealand, Terrence Nesdale and Mary Miessen, were accused by a Muslim man of offending his religious sensitivities with their remark that “Islam is not original, Prophet Mohammad and the Quran are not true.” The issue assumed political overtones because the Muslim man had discussed the issue with a mosque committee, a local welfare committee, and a *kadi* before lodging a police complaint against the pair, five days after the alleged incident. Nesdale claimed cultural misunderstanding but was still fined M\$1 000 and jailed for a day; Miessen was acquitted on all charges.

The following year also saw the Muslim community raise objections to a poster which was being distributed with the purchase of a Malay album recorded by a local Eurasian singer. The singer, a non-Muslim, was pictured wearing a gold cross around her neck and this was deemed to be inappropriate given that many of her fans are Muslims.<sup>92</sup> The matter was settled amicably when the album distributors apologised to the Muslim public for being insensitive to their religious beliefs.

On August 20 1987, two mosques in Pahang were the targets of arsonists, followed the next day by another three mosques in a different town. No arrests were made. Government officials were quick to advise against over-reaction from the public. The opposition party PAS however laid the blame for the arson squarely on the government,

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<sup>91</sup> *The Star* 10 July to 1 August 1986

<sup>92</sup> *The Star* 12 June 1987

alleging that the attacks proved that the government had failed in its duty to “protect Muslims and their places of worship”<sup>93</sup>.

There was also a rumour that the arson attacks were the work of illegal Indonesian immigrants. This rumour was based on reports published in the local papers in the weeks leading up to the arson about Christian groups proselytizing and converting Malay Muslims. PAS President Yusof Rawa alleged that “hundreds if not thousands” of Muslims had been converted to Christianity. UMNO however dismissed such allegations as politically motivated, noting that these “misguided groups” wanted “to give the impression that the government has done nothing to instill Islamic awareness among people”. Mahathir also warned that such dangerous speculations could lead to communal clashes between Muslims and Christians in Malaysia, “Several leaders from Parti Islam have not tried to divide Muslim from Muslim but incited Muslims to hate and feel angry towards Christians through unfounded allegations.”<sup>94</sup>

In 1997, an Israeli cricket team visited Malaysia to take part in the International Cricket Council Trophy tournament. The inclusion of the Israeli team in the tournament caused a furore in Malaysia because of Israel’s occupation of Palestine.

PAS members organized a demonstration against the Malaysian government for allowing an Israeli sporting team into the country. They felt that such an action effectively signaled a future diplomatic recognition of the Jewish state. On 4 April, one thousand five hundred demonstrators, mostly PAS members and their supporters, gathered at the University of Malaya grounds where the Israeli team was scheduled to play the Argentinean team. The demonstrators chanted anti-Jewish slogans and carried placards with phrases such as “Crush the Jews”, “Long Live Islam”, and “Get Out Israel”. Anticipating such disruptions, the organizers of the tournament had secretly moved the match to another venue at the last minute.

Police were deployed to break up the demonstration and clashed with the protesters who took refuge in a nearby mosque. Police finally rounded up the protesters after a six-hour siege and two hundred and fifty people were arrested.

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<sup>93</sup> *Asiaweek* 20 September 1987, p.15

<sup>94</sup> *Far East Economic Review* 12 November 1987, p.12

The day following the incident, the Association of Students of Higher Institutions of Learning issued a memorandum listing their objections to the presence of the Israeli cricket team in Malaysia<sup>95</sup>. The Association feared that allowing the team into Malaysia might pave the way for diplomatic ties to be established between the two countries. It also felt that since the Jewish race “is cursed by God”, their presence in Malaysia might invite God’s disfavour on the latter. The memorandum called for the Malaysian government to conduct its foreign policy according to Islamic principles. In response to the disquiet over the incident, Mahathir advised the Muslim community against pursuing extremist views to ensure that Malaysia would remain peaceful to enable it to forge ahead, “If Muslims in the country are ever willing to make sacrifices in the interest of the religion, race and nation, Muslims and Islam will be more respected by the world.”<sup>96</sup>

In the wake of this incident, Haji Wan Mohammed Jamil, a PAS assemblyman, proposed two motions in Parliament, the first being that the Malaysian government should stop issuing visas for visitors from Israel. The second motion was to prevent police personnel from entering a mosque and making arrests. Both motions however were defeated.<sup>97</sup>

The issue of religious buildings has always been a bone of contention in Malaysia. With the increased emphasis on Islamisation, non-Muslim groups have faced many obstacles when erecting buildings for religious purposes. For example, it has become increasingly difficult for non-Muslim organisations to acquire land to construct their religious institutions.<sup>98</sup>

The following incident also serves to highlight how the issue of religious buildings can be exploited as a political tool. On 14 July 1993, Selangor’s Menteri Besar, Tan Sri Muhammad Haji Muhamad Taib, called for the immediate termination of construction work on a Catholic cathedral in Shah Alam, claiming that “...he did not want a church

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<sup>95</sup> *Straits Times* 5 April 1997

<sup>96</sup> *Straits Times* 19 April 1997

<sup>97</sup> *Straits Times* 26 April 1997

<sup>98</sup> Lee, Raymond, L.M. “Patterns of Religious Tension in Malaysia” in *Asian Survey* (April, 1988) 28(4): University of California Press, p.410

of “such a mammoth size” in a Muslim-majority area”<sup>99</sup>. His comments obviously drew strong criticisms from non-Muslim organisations which labelled his tactics as being “politically motivated” given his intention of standing for the upcoming UMNO elections, and urged the Federal Government to intervene in the matter before the incident created religious confrontation in the country.

#### ISLAMIC LAWS IN MALAYSIA

Far from being a uniform entity, Islam in Malaysia is highly fragmented. This has created many problems in establishing a standardized set of Islamic religious laws in the country. Current Islamic resurgence in the country sees groups, organizations and/or persons claiming to speak on behalf of Muslims as a whole. There is a tension between the direction of the nation-state and the identification of the Muslim *ummah* which is reflected for example in the controversy pertaining to the role of Muslim law in Malaysia.

In 1993, the Kelantan<sup>100</sup> state government tabled the *Syariah* Criminal Code Bill which advocated the adoption of *hudud* or religious laws which prescribe mandatory Islamic forms of punishment for offences mentioned in the Quran. This was an attempt by PAS to fulfil its 1990 election promise to introduce Islamic laws if elected into power and the announcement was therefore received with trepidation by the non-Muslim communities.

The State Government however assured non-Muslim communities in Kelantan that the provisions in the *Syariah* Criminal Code will not be applicable to them because non-Muslims will be given a choice of whether to be tried under either *hudud* or secular laws. Given this assurance, the Menteri Besar asserted that he foresaw no reason why non-Muslims should object to the Bill:

Any opposition against the enactment will be seen as an attempt to restrict Muslims from practising their religious beliefs. This conflicts with the freedom of worship guaranteed by the federal Constitution.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> *Straits Times* 20 July 1993

<sup>100</sup> The only PAS-controlled state in Malaysia.

<sup>101</sup> *Straits Times* 25 November 1995

On 25 November 1993, the Kelantan State Assembly unanimously adopted the *Syariah* Criminal Code Bill. Given that Article 175 of the Constitution holds that State law cannot be in variance with the provisions of Federal law, the Bill cannot be implemented in Kelantan until the government amends the Federal Constitution.

The Johor State Assembly passed the *Syariah* Criminal Offences Enactment, a new Islamic penal law, in May 1997. Under this Enactment, Muslims found guilty of committing serious religious crimes will, in addition to being fined, face whipping. The serious crimes listed in the Enactment include adultery, homosexual and lesbian activities, prostitution, teaching and spreading deviationist teachings, and illicit sex with relatives. Under the provisions of the 1978 Islamic Religious Administration Enactment, religious crimes were punished with a jail term of between fifteen days to six months, with fines ranging from M\$100 to M\$1 000. The new law raised the maximum fine to M\$5 000 and the jail term increased to not more than three years. It also provides for punishment of no more than six strokes of the cane. Johor will be the first State in Malaysia to cane offenders. Its State Religious Affairs Committee chairman, Datuk Abdul Kadir Anuar, hoped that this change would serve as a reminder for Muslims to stay away from immoral activities.<sup>102</sup>

In June 1997, three Muslim women were arrested by Muslim religious officials for taking part in a Miss Malaysia Petite beauty pageant in Selangor. Charged with being indecently dressed, each of the three women received a fine of M\$400 in default of two months jail. The girls were then further charged with breaking the *fatwa*<sup>103</sup> contained in the Selangor *Syariah* Criminal Enactment, gazetted on 11 May 1995. Section 12 (C) of the Enactment states that breaching a *fatwa* by taking part in a beauty pageant carries a maximum fine of M\$3 000 or a two year jail term.

There was a huge public outcry about the charges brought against the three women. One major complaint was that since the provisions listed in the Enactment were not given much publicity in the country, Muslims should not be penalized for being ignorant

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<sup>102</sup> *Straits Times* 24 May 1997

<sup>103</sup> An Islamic religious ruling.

about the existence of such provisions. This sentiment was echoed by Marina Mahathir, a newspaper columnist for the *Star*, who claimed that the women were convicted for a “crime so ill-defined and vague as to be nonsensical.”<sup>104</sup>

The incident also drew strong criticisms from another prominent Muslim columnist, Zainuddin Maidin, the former editor of the Malay daily *Utusan Melayu*, who alleged that the “over-the-top” approach in enforcing Islamic laws in Malaysia could be construed as subversive in a multi-racial society. He felt that allowing militant views to be absorbed and spread was a recipe for disaster, while surrendering power over to the country’s religious officials was ill-advised because the latter were ignorant about national goals.

The other complainant, Akbar Ali, a *Sun* columnist, noted that although Islam preaches tolerance, there was “an obsession [in Malaysia] with catching people and quickly punishing them”<sup>105</sup>

In an article published in Malaysia’s *New Straits Times*, Rose Ismail alleged that Muslim authorities in the country are over-stepping their duties in an attempt to regulate the fundamental liberties of Muslims. She noted in her article that once a *fatwa* was gazetted, it becomes legally binding until the *mufti* who issued it, or his successor, decides to amend, modify or revoke it. The irony of the situation is that even the State Legislative assembly, which delegates powers to the *mufti* to issue a *fatwa*, does not have the authority to annul or amend the religious ruling. She further claimed that the blanket ban questioning any edict issued by the State *mufti* in the name of Islam can be perceived as infringing on the citizen’s constitutional right to free speech.<sup>106</sup>

In wake of the beauty pageant incident, the Selangor State Religious Department warned that it would take stern action against Muslims who dressed indecently in public places.<sup>107</sup> For Muslim men, this meant the lower part of the body between the navel and

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<sup>104</sup> Datin Paduka Marina Mahathir, *The Star* 9 July 1997

<sup>105</sup> *Straits Times* 10 July 1997

<sup>106</sup> Rose Ismail, *New Straits Times* 22 July 1997

<sup>107</sup> *Straits Times* 5 July 1997

the thigh, while Muslim women were prohibited from wearing body-hugging dresses, showing cleavage or exposing large parts of their legs. Muslims convicted on the charge of indecent dressing will face a fine of M\$1 000, six months jail, or both.

Penang was the next Malaysian state to ban Muslims from taking part in beauty contests. The State's Islamic Religious Affairs Department was to issue a *fatwa* prohibiting Muslims from taking part in competitions that require them to wear skimpy outfits:

Action can be taken against those who are found to be behaving or acting indecently in any public place including in their dressing under Section 29 of the Syariah Criminal Enactment (Penang) 1996.<sup>108</sup>

Although Malacca does not have a law against Muslims taking part in pageants, it publicly advised Muslim women against doing so claiming that "... is only after educating and creating awareness among the people of the State's Syariah laws can enforcement action be taken against those who violate them."<sup>109</sup>

The above controversy served to highlight the difficulty in regulating Islamic religious laws across the country because of the different "brands" of Islam being practised in the various Malaysian states. In the wake of this incident, the government proposed the implementation of a uniform set of Islamic laws across the country. Some government officials however believed that preventive measures were more important than the enforcement of laws. Anwar Ibrahim warned that the implementation of a religious law, if not done wisely, would create political tension and jeopardise national security in Malaysia.<sup>110</sup>

There has not been much success with the scheme given that the power to alter religious laws rests with the Malay Rulers who have the final authority on religious matters in the

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<sup>108</sup> *Straits Times* 12 July 1997

<sup>109</sup> *Straits Times* 19 July 1997

<sup>110</sup> *Straits Times* 27 July 1997

country. In a meeting between Federal and State Islamic officials, it was proposed that guidelines be drawn outlining the enforcement of *syariah* criminal laws in Malaysia which will then be enforced in all states.

During this meeting, five States in Malaysia agreed to a standardised *syariah* law which effectively means that all *syariah* court judges and officers in Malacca, Negeri Sembilan, Selangor, Penang, and the Federal Territory, would come under the auspices of the Syarak Judicial Department in the Prime Minister's Department. The other remaining states are still debating the issue and to date, all states bar Kedah have agreed to the proposal. Kedah will refrain from making a commitment until it sees the proposal that is to be presented at the Rulers Conference to be held later in 1997.<sup>111</sup>

The Bill for the Control and Restriction of the Propagation of Non-Islamic Religion was tabled in 1991 during the Johor State Legislative Assembly. This Bill made it an offence to allow or persuade a Muslim under 18 years of age to receive instruction or take part in a ceremony, an act of worship, or a religious activity which is sponsored by a non-Islamic religion. The penalty for such offences is a maximum fine of M\$10 000, four years jail term, or both. The Bill also makes it an offence to arrange or contrive a contract with a Muslim for the express purpose of subjecting them to any form of material belonging to a non-Islamic religion. It is also an offence to mail non-Islamic material to a Muslim within or outside the State.<sup>112</sup>

#### THE USE OF RELIGION AS A POLITICAL TOOL

Religious and political groups in Malaysia have utilized *ceramahs* (lectures) to instigate the public to oppose the government. UMNO accused PAS of holding *ceramahs* as ostensibly religious gatherings for which they did not require police permits but subsequently turned them into political rallies by attacking the government and government policies.<sup>113</sup> The government also placed a ban on *ceramahs* in Kelantan, Trengganu, Kedah and Perlis, States which have large PAS following. In response to the ban, PAS deputy president Haji Fadzil Nor claimed that "...methods other than

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<sup>111</sup> *Straits Times* 1 August 1997

<sup>112</sup> *Straits Times* 19 December 1991

ceramah would have to be used now for the party to reach its supporters and others who have yet to be converted to our cause”<sup>114</sup> while PAS’s commissioner to Kelantan noted that “As an Islamic party, we will continue to find loopholes in this man-made law and continue to spread the message of Allah.”<sup>115</sup>

There were also reports of religious extremists in Kedah distributing leaflets urging Muslims to rebel against the government as well as conducting house to house campaigns. The 1982 circular issued by the secretary of the Islamic Council prohibiting preaching in mosques without official permits was the government’s way of preventing religious opposition and deviant preaching in Malaysia.

There have been other incidents where “politically motivated groups” have intimated that Muslim students who sing the national anthem and take part in extra-curricular activities were engaging in events which were apparently contrary to Islam. To counter such religious extremism, student guidance committees were set up in schools to monitor “unhealthy and negative influences” and to “promote values in line with the aspirations of a multi-racial nation”.<sup>116</sup>

UMNO has denounced PAS for misusing quotes from the Quran to incite Muslims to violence by preaching that Islam allows *jihad* or holy war to be waged against groups which are perceived to be against the Islamic cause. Mahathir also accused PAS of wanting to establish a *mullah* system in the state. He warned of the dangers of such a move which he labeled “an oligarchy or communist...rule which they are trying to promote as an Islamic system”.<sup>117</sup>

PAS, on the other hand, tried to appeal to Islamic sentiments within the Malay community. A common PAS election slogan is “Vote PAS and go to Heaven”. There were also allegations that certain PAS members had claimed that voting for PAS at the

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<sup>113</sup> Pathmanathan, Murugesu, “Malaysia in 1984: A Political and Economic Survey” in *Southeast Asian Affairs* 1985, p.224

<sup>114</sup> *Straits Times*, 17 August 1984

<sup>115</sup> *Asiaweek* 31 August 1984, p.19

<sup>116</sup> Datuk Abdullah bin Haji Badawi, Minister of Education, cited in *Straits Times* 8 August 1984

<sup>117</sup> *Straits Times* 31 August 1984

polls was equivalent to going for *umnah* or mini-haj.<sup>118</sup> Surprisingly, Datuk Nik Aziz Nik Mat, senior PAS leader and Menteri Besar of Kelantan, commented that his party's campaigning methods of threatening their opposition with life in hell after death, were bordering on unIslamic.

PAS has criticized UMNO as being less Islamic than itself and Muslims who did not accept their interpretation of Islam were termed *kafirs* or unbelievers. The party has also labeled UMNO Muslims "infidels", claiming that they are not Muslim for sitting in cabinet meetings with Chinese and Indians.

As a political party, PAS does not offer any alternative national policy although its main aim is directed at the creation of a state modeled on an Islamic republic. Despite striving for pan-Malaysian support, its campaign activities are primarily concentrated in the northern states of Kedah, Perlis, Kelantan and Trengganu.<sup>119</sup>

UMNO had to modify its secular image to counter the political threat posed by PAS by basically displaying a renewed Islamic fervour within the party's ranks. In 1981, the new leadership of Musa Hitam as Deputy Prime Minister and Mahathir Mohammad as Prime Minister marked a turning point in Malaysia's history. Two major policies, the 'Look East' policy and the 'Islamisation' policy were introduced in Malaysia. The former was a discouragement of emulating the West while the latter encouraged everything Islam. UMNO's official policy is a pragmatic implementation of Islamisation in the country, the aim of which is to instill universal Islamic values in Malaysian society. Since UMNO believed in the gradual implementation of Islamisation within the boundaries defined by the Federal Constitution, it issued a stern warning to political and religious groups against forcibly instilling Islamic laws on non-Muslim communities under the guise of the Islamisation programme:

The infusion of Islamic values is a policy that can strengthen the foundations of national development and the people's happiness. ....

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<sup>118</sup> *Straits Times* 29 April 1984

<sup>119</sup> Thambipillai, Pushpa, Malaysia: Twenty Five and Pragmatic in *Southeast Asian Affairs 1983*, p 205 - 226

We must not misinterpret and regard this as forcing others to follow our ways or try to intimidate others because Islam is not a religion of compulsion but requires us to preach goodness and restraint.<sup>120</sup>

PAS however views the government's attempts at instilling Islamic values in the country as "a deliberate dilution of Islamisation to demoralise the uphill struggle of the Islamic state ... this slow process of Islamisation by UMNO is to make sure that Malaysia never becomes an Islamic state."<sup>121</sup>

PAS objects to UMNO's official promotion of nationalism, which it claims to be a Western secular concept, while it advocates what it terms as the "universalism of Islamisation". Commenting on the difference in the manifestos of UMNO and PAS, Datuk Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat claimed that "If UMNO wants to accept Islamic policies, then there will be no problem between us. But as long as it pursues nationalistic policies, it has to carry on with its own way and we have our own way too"<sup>122</sup>.

In essence, the lack of any clear demarcation between politics and religion in Malaysia has made it relatively easy for political organizations to exploit religious issues and for religious organizations to encroach onto the political realm. This is a volatile combination given the plural make-up of Malaysian society as evidenced by the various incidents previously analyzed in this Chapter.

To compound the problem, political issues within the Malay community are often portrayed as religious issues and this inevitably leads to increased religious competition among the various organisations bent on furthering their political ambitions. A prime example of this is the political rivalry between UMNO and PAS which has been translated as which party can better champion the Islamic cause in the country. The overriding emphasis placed on everything Islam in Malaysia will inevitably alienate the

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<sup>120</sup> Tunku Abdul Rahman, the Yang di-Pertuan Agong, cited in *Straits Times* August 30 1984

<sup>121</sup> Haji Yusof Rawa, PAS President, cited in *Asiaweek* 5 October 1984

<sup>122</sup> *Straits Times* 19 April 1997

other ethnic and religious communities in the country, a belief previously articulated by Lee Kuan Yew:

If Islamization is accelerated as a manifestation of the turbulence in Malay politics, the organised response of the non-Muslims to the threat will become more apparent. Because non-Muslim religious groups lack political clout, they will necessarily seek assistance from established non-Malay political parties. If this situation develops, non-Muslim religions will become politicized and the boundaries between religious and political conflicts in Malaysia will become blurred.<sup>123</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The issue of nationalism in a plural society is frequently the cause of conflict between the different ethnic and religious groups. This is clearly evidenced by the events in India, Burma and Malaysia, which reflect similar, if not identical, patterns in their quest for self-determination. The struggle for independence in these three countries led to a rise in national consciousness among the indigenous population. The nationalist movement is initiated when the different ethnic and religious groups rally together against the existing colonial power. This united movement then gradually fragments into various factions, militant and secular, usually formed on the basis of religious convictions: "A common feature of the independence struggle in colonial territories in Asia in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was the use of religious organisations and institutions as the vehicles for early forms of protest against imperial rule."<sup>124</sup>

Divisions in the nationalist movement are often the result of the emergence of religio-nationalism, the use of one religion, commonly that of the majority, as a basis for nationalism. This serves to alienate the other religious minorities, who in turn break away from the movement. Breakaway nationalist organisations then either propose an alternative concept of nationalism based on their religious or political convictions, or

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<sup>123</sup> Lee, *Asian Survey*, p.418

<sup>124</sup> Ling, p.79

demand secession from the State. The end result is usually communal strife and an undermining of national stability.

It is fitting to sum up this Chapter in the words of the secularist Jawaharlal Nehru who claimed that “...the alliance of religion and politics in the shape of communalism is a most dangerous alliance, and it yields the most abnormal kind of illegitimate brood.”<sup>125</sup>

The following Chapters will examine the various instances of inter-communal and intra-communal strife in Singapore from 1950 to 1990, and analyse how the politicisation of religious issues and/or groups can impact on the harmonious co-existence in a plural society like Singapore.

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<sup>125</sup> Lewy p.296

## CHAPTER 2

### THE MARIA HERTOIGH CASE<sup>1</sup>

Originally a custody dispute between two families which gradually evolved into a serious conflict between different ethnic and religious beliefs, the Maria Hertogh incident of the 1950s sparked off one of the bloodiest controversies in the modern history of Singapore. The case highlighted clearly how the mishandling and exploitation of any religious issue by political or social groups in a plural society can provoke communal passions, often with dire results. This Chapter will provide a chronological overview of events in the Hertogh affair, the ensuing riots in Singapore and finally, an analysis of the various factors which contributed to the controversy.

Adrianus Petrus Hertogh was an army sergeant in the Royal Netherlands East Indies Army stationed in Indonesia. When he was interned by the Japanese during their Occupation of Indonesia<sup>2</sup>, his wife Adeline found herself unable to cope with the burden of a large family. She offered Aminah binti Mohamed, a family friend, one of her six children for adoption. On the understanding that the child would be considered her own and brought up in the Islamic faith, Aminah agreed to adopt Adeline's fifth child. The girl, born on 24 March 1937, was christened Huberdina Maria Hertogh<sup>3</sup> in a Roman Catholic Church in Java. Since there were no strict legal procedures governing adoption during the Japanese Occupation, Maria was simply handed over to Aminah on 15 November 1942 in the presence of Adeline's brother Soewaldi. He signed a note<sup>4</sup> certifying that the girl, named Bertha<sup>5</sup> alias Maria, aged four years and sixth months,

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<sup>1</sup> This Chapter is based primarily on material contained in the book *The Nadra Tragedy: The Maria Hertogh Controversy* by Haja Maideen and in the documentary with the same title produced by the Singapore Broadcasting Corporation. Both will be treated as subjective sources. Despite its stylistic indulgences, Maideen's book is the only English account currently at my disposal and for the purposes of this Chapter, I have simply isolated the historical facts from Maideen's largely emotive recounting of events. Information from the following sources were also utilised: *Colony of Singapore Annual Report 1951*; Marican, Mohamed Ansari, *The Maria Hertogh Riots, 1950 (Rusuhan Nadra, 1950)*, Academic Exercise, Singapore (Department of History, NUS, 1974); Stockwell, A.J., 'Imperial Security and Muslim Militancy, With Special Reference to the Hertogh Riots in Singapore (December 1950)' in *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 17(2) September 1986, 322-335; audio tapes from the National Archives of Singapore and material from personal interviews.

<sup>2</sup> Japanese forces captured Indonesia on 8 March 1942.

<sup>3</sup> She will be referred to as 'Maria' throughout this Chapter.

<sup>4</sup> There would later surface some discrepancy regarding the existence of such a note.

<sup>5</sup> The Dutch contraction of the name 'Huberdina'.

was voluntarily handed over to [Aminah]Maarof<sup>6</sup> of Bandung without attached reservation or conditions. After the adoption, Aminah gave Maria the Muslim name 'Nadra binti Maarof'<sup>7</sup> and a year later, Maria underwent a Muslim circumcision.

Aminah and Adeline soon lost touch with one another, the latter having moved to Surabaya, Indonesia, in search of a job.

The end of the Japanese Occupation was a time of political instability in Indonesia so in the interest of their personal safety, Aminah and Maria relocated to Kemaman<sup>8</sup>, Malaya.

In 1949, Arthur Locke, the British Administrative Officer (East) met Maria during a school talent competition. Learning about Maria's Dutch background, Locke expressed his interest in meeting Aminah to personally find out the details surrounding Maria's adoption.

After his meeting with Aminah, Locke attempted to persuade L.A. Massie, the legal advisor of the State of Terengganu and Kelantan in 1949, to have the British authorities restore Maria to her natural parents. Massie, however, advised Locke not to involve himself in the personal affairs of the local community as it was a potentially sensitive issue, advice that Locke chose not to comply with.

When Locke returned to Kemaman in mid-February of 1950, he arranged for another meeting with Aminah during which he claimed that:

It was sometime back when the Dutch officials requested us to look out for a Dutch girl brought up by a Malay woman. The Dutch Consulate in the Colony of Singapore advised me that the parents of the child were keen to contact both the foster mother as well as the child. ... the information that you gave tallied with the Dutch Consulate's

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<sup>6</sup> Aminah's second marriage was to Maarof bin Haji Abdul, hence the reference to her as 'Maarof'.

<sup>7</sup> The Muslims involved in the events of 1950 referred to Maria as 'Nadra' but for convenience, I will continue to refer to her as 'Maria'.

<sup>8</sup> A border town of the State of Terengganu on the East Coast of the Malay Peninsula.

briefs. I informed them about the discovery of the child and the Dutch Consulate informed me that Maria's parents, now living in Holland, wanted to see her.<sup>9</sup>

Locke alleged that he had advised the Consulate about his lack of authority to insist that Aminah and Maria make the trip to Holland. He assured Aminah that the Consulate had agreed to his suggestion that they help prepare the papers to legalise her adoption of Maria. On 10 April, Aminah and Maria made a trip to Singapore to visit the Dutch Consulate for the purposes of finalising the adoption.

On 18 April 1950 however, officials from the Dutch Consulate visited Aminah in Singapore and informed her of their intention to return Maria to the Hertoghs, with the reassurance that she would be compensated Straits \$500 for the eight years she spent maintaining Maria. When Aminah refused to consider allowing Maria to return to Holland, she was accused by the Dutch officials of illegally keeping a Dutch girl against the wishes of her birth parents.

Meanwhile, Maria's adoption by a Muslim woman received wide media coverage in Holland where a different interpretation was accorded to the events. For example, it was reported by one Dutch newspaper that Aminah, who was inaccurately described as a "maid servant"<sup>10</sup>, had asked for compensation for the years she had spent looking after Maria<sup>11</sup>.

On 22 April 1950, Aminah was served with a summons from the High Court in Singapore<sup>12</sup>, ordering her to turn Maria over to the custody of Singapore's Department of Social Welfare, pending a court ruling. The Dutch Consulate's case was based on the allegation that because Adeline Hertogh had only handed Maria to Aminah for "safe-keeping", the Hertoghs had every right to have Maria returned to them. Two days later,

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<sup>9</sup> Maideen, Haja, *The Nadra Tragedy*, p.49

<sup>10</sup> Aminah was in fact a middle-class businesswoman, trading in jewellery.

<sup>11</sup> Cited in Maideen, p.61

<sup>12</sup> Summons No 124, issued under the Guardianship of Infants Ordinance by the acting Netherlands Consul General in Singapore.

Maria was sent to the Department of Social Welfare's Girls Homecraft Centre in York Hill, Singapore.

Aminah sought the advice of M.A. Majid, the President of the Muslim Welfare Association<sup>13</sup>, who recommended Ahmad Ibrahim<sup>14</sup> as the lawyer to handle the case. During the hearing on 19 May Singapore's Chief Justice ruled that Maria be placed under the custody of the Netherlands Council, which would then return the child to her parents in Holland. K. Gould, representing the Hertoghs and the Dutch Consul General, sought to have Maria looked after by the Department of Social Welfare until the delivery of the Chief Justice's order.

The Dutch Consulate arranged for Maria to leave for Holland on 23 May but a day before Maria's planned departure, Aminah's lawyers managed to get a Stay of Execution Order; Maria was to remain in the Centre until the hearing appeal against the Order was over.

Because of Aminah's expressed unhappiness about Maria staying at the Centre among its mostly juvenile delinquent residents, Majid drew up a list of conditions to be observed by the Centre's administrators during Maria's stay there. Majid requested that Maria be excused from working in the kitchen in case pork was cooked there and that she be allowed to cook her own food separately. The other condition was for the Centre to provide facilities for Maria to study English and Malay. The final request was for Maria to be left undisturbed during her daily prayers and recitation of the Quran.

T.E. Hughes, the head of Singapore's Social Welfare Department, assured Majid that since Maria's admission to the Centre, pork had not been allowed in the area and that at no time was Maria compelled to eat any food which went against her religious beliefs. During the Muslim fasting month of *Ramadan*, Maria indicated her wish to observe the fast and the authorities at the Centre made arrangements to accommodate Maria's request.

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<sup>13</sup> The Association was established in the Colony in 1947.

<sup>14</sup> The founder of the Young Muslim Men's Association (YMNA) and a member of the Muslim Advisory Board.

At the appeal hearing on 28 July in the Singapore Supreme Court, the judgement was delivered in Aminah's favour on the grounds that:

the affidavit filed in support of the originating summons did not show the age of the infant, the nature and amount of its property and the names and addresses of the infant's nearest relatives as required ... Nor was there originating summons served on the infant or on Aminah binti Mohamed, the person who had custody of her.<sup>15</sup>

The media in Holland, in reporting the Supreme Court ruling in favour of Aminah, condemned the manner in which the issue was being handled by the British authorities in the Colony. A letter sent by a Red Cross representative requesting Queen Juliana of Holland to intervene in the matter did not receive an official reply from the Palace, prompting the newspapers to express regret at the Dutch government's reluctance to involve itself in helping restore Maria back to the Hertoghs. The Dutch media capitalised on the dispute by turning it into an issue of Dutch nationalistic struggle where provocative articles claiming that Holland's prestige and honour were at stake were deliberately designed to stir up fierce nationalistic sentiments in the Dutch population.

There was also much feedback in the media from the Dutch public expressing support for the Hertoghs. One letter contended that having been baptised as a Catholic, Maria had no right to embrace Islam. There were also numerous letters expressing disappointment with the British judicial system. Petrus Hertogh summed up the general opinion in Holland when he remarked that:

[The British authorities'] decision to give Maria to Aminah is entirely due to political reasons by which the British believe they can win the hearts of the native population [in Singapore] in order to consolidate their colonial rule.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Maideen, p.91

<sup>16</sup> Maideen, p.93-94

Comment was not only restricted to individuals; various Dutch religious groups also involved themselves in the issue by condemning the situation and insisting that Maria be returned to her Dutch parents.

The situation in Holland escalated to a point where it began to be exploited for political gains. The Dutch Opposition Party (Christian Orthodox) used the issue of Maria to its own advantage by claiming that the ruling coalition government<sup>17</sup> had handled the affair incompetently. In order to consolidate its own position during an up-coming general election, the Catholic People's Party (KVP) voiced strong objections to the ruling by the Singapore Court of Appeal, deeming it peculiar that a court would chose to award custody of a Dutch girl to a Malay foster mother against the expressed will of the child's natural parents. The Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs subsequently lodged a protest with its London counterpart over the court ruling and on the advice of the latter, the Dutch government filed a new court case against Aminah for custody of Maria.

The events which occurred in Singapore on 1 August 1950 added a further controversial dimension to a situation already tense with religious and political overtones. It was on this day that the marriage of Maria to Al-Mansoor Adabi bin Abdul Kader Adabi<sup>18</sup> was officially solemnised by a Muslim *kadi*<sup>19</sup> in Singapore. Since it was permissible under Islamic law for girls to be married on attaining puberty<sup>20</sup>, Majid encouraged the marriage to take place, arguing that if anything, the marriage would serve to put an end all to the legal claims by the Hertoghs on Maria.

The marriage was conducted according to the precepts of the *Shafie* school of Islam which regulated that five rules had to be complied with before a marriage can be solemnised. The first two rules required the presence of the bride and groom while the third rule specified

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<sup>17</sup> The Dutch Coalition government at that time comprised the Catholic People's Party (KVP), the Labour Party (PVBA), the Christian Historical Union (CHU), and the People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD).

<sup>18</sup> Mansoor Adabi, a Muslim man in his twenties, was a school teacher in Singapore. He had on two occasions accompanied Aminah when she visited Maria in the York Hill Home, and had subsequently requested Maria's hand in marriage. Maideen maintains that the marriage was genuine and not a calculated move to prevent Maria from being sent back to Holland.

<sup>19</sup> An Islamic religious authority in charge of a district.

<sup>20</sup> At the time of the marriage, Maria was thirteen years of age.

that a guardian be present to give away the bride. Two witnesses were also needed to be present during the ceremony. The final requirement was the agreement of both the bride and groom to the marriage.

Since Petrus Hertogh was not present to give Maria away, compounded with the fact that he was not a Muslim, the role of guardian was assumed by the *kadi* officiating the ceremony. In keeping with Majid's advice of conducting the marriage secretly to avoid attracting unwanted publicity, news of the marriage was only leaked to the *Singapore Straits Times* two days later.

Newspapers in Singapore<sup>21</sup> and Holland were quick to carry news of Maria's marriage, each with its own brand of reporting. With the exception of the *Indian Daily Mail* and the *Malayan Tribune*, all the other English language dailies expressed disapproval of the marriage which further served to offend many in the Muslim community. The reaction of

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<sup>21</sup> In 1950, there were fourteen newspapers circulating in the Colony of Singapore. Of these, five were English, three Malay, three Chinese, and three Indian. Two of the English newspapers, the *Straits Times* and the *Singapore Free Press* were owned by the British; the *Singapore Tiger Standard* was owned by a Chinese entrepreneur, while the *Indian Daily Mail* was published by and for Indians, and *Dawn* was owned by Karim Ghani, a Muslim. The vernacular press in Singapore comprised of the following:

Malay:

- (i) *Utusan Melayu* - generally publishing articles reflecting the views of conservative nationalists and UMNO, the Malay political party.
- (ii) *Melayu Raya* - a rival newspaper run by ex-Malaya Nationalist Party leaders which frequently carried reports from or about Indonesia.
- (iii) *Sinaran* - Karim Ghani's Malay version of *Dawn*.

Chinese:

- (i) *Nanyang Siang Pau*
- (ii) *Sin Chew Jit Poh*
- (iii) *Chung Shing Jit Poh*

All three newspapers generally published articles designed to unify the Chinese community in Singapore and Malaya and were therefore circumspect in their treatment of controversial issues.

Indian:

- (i) *Tamil Murasu* - its owner and publisher a devout Hindu.
- (ii) *Malaya Nanban* - published by the Muslim Publishing House.

Both newspapers were dependent on advertising revenue obtained from the Muslim merchant community and were therefore prudent in reporting news offensive to Muslims.

- (iii) *Kerala Bhandu* - a Malayalam newspaper concentrating mainly on literary articles.

the Muslim-owned vernacular newspapers was to condemn what it perceived as a pro-Western bias against a Muslim marriage. The *Utusan Melayu* even went so far as to warn other newspapers against “comment[ing] or writ[ing] about the Muslim marriages.”<sup>22</sup>

While debate about the issue continued in Singapore’s newspapers, the media in Holland was not slow to exploit the Maria-Mansoor marriage. *Nieuws Van de Dag*, one of the many Dutch newspapers, labelled the marriage “scandalous” and stated that the people in the Colony should be “ashamed of what has happened. A Dutch child has been treated indecently ...”<sup>23</sup> Various unsubstantiated explanations were given for the Maria-Mansoor marriage. One Dutch publication alleged that Maria was drugged before the marriage while another claimed that she was forced to consent to the marriage by the pressure exerted on her by Aminah and Mansoor.

The Dutch authorities meanwhile felt that the events unfolding in the Colony were political manoeuvrings instigated by anti-Dutch elements from the old Dutch East Indies. The Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs began consulting legal advisors about the possibility of taking action against the marriage. According to Dutch law, a marriage is deemed illegal if the bride is below the age of sixteen and marriage by minors was only permitted if granted special permission by the Queen.

Soon after their marriage, both Aminah and Mansoor received letters from the Hertoghs’ solicitors and the Dutch Consulate stating that Maria should be turned over to the custody of the Dutch Consul General or face legal action. Meanwhile, Maria had written to her parents’ lawyers requesting to be left alone, insisting that she had renounced her Dutch nationality and the Christian faith in favour of Islam since 1942.

The Dutch authorities’ demand that Mansoor return his wife to the care of their Consulate annoyed many Muslims in Singapore who perceived the demand as a personal attack on their religion. It was from about this time on that the issue began to acquire potentially dangerous religious overtones which would escalate with time. On 9 August 1950, Singapore’s Malay newspaper *Majlis* carried a leading article stating that the issue of

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<sup>22</sup> Cited in Maideen, p.111

<sup>23</sup> Cited in Maideen, p.104

Maria was no longer a simple custody case between Aminah and the Hertoghs but had now evolved into a religious and national matter. This was the first sign of impending trouble which the Colonial and Dutch authorities failed to recognise and the seriousness of the implications contained in the article was left unchecked.

Singapore's Muslim Welfare Association set up a five-member team<sup>24</sup> with the aim of stirring up sympathy in the region and soliciting help to prevent Maria from being forcibly separated from Mansoor. There was tension in the Muslim community which was further fanned by the numerous provocative articles which were published in the Singapore vernacular newspapers alleging that Islamic sensitivities were being undermined by Colonial powers.

The Colonial government was disturbed by the developments in Singapore and to contain potential problems, it withdrew the police permit originally allowing the Muslim Welfare Association to carry out a door to door appeal for funds on behalf of Maria. No reason was given for the permit withdrawal which prompted Majid to declare that such an act meant that the Colonial government "is prejudiced in favour of ... the Dutch Government ... or it's a case of colour prejudice."<sup>25</sup>

Majid's appeal to the Secretary of State for Colonies to reissue the Association's permit was turned down, leading Karim Ghani<sup>26</sup> to report in his newspapers that the police withdrawal of the permit was an act of discrimination against the Muslim Welfare Association's attempts to obtain support and funds from the Muslim community.

Ghani had frequently utilised the premises of the Muslim Publishing House to hold regular meetings for Muslim radicals in Singapore, and it was during one of these meetings that the issue of Maria and Mansoor was raised. Abdul Salam Jamali, a part-time editor of the *Malaya Nanban*, stated emphatically that the issue at hand was related to the "honour of Islam" and the "Dutch government's interference in this Islamic marriage ... has reached a chronic stage - whereby all our Muslim brothers in the Colony fear that our dignity is at

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<sup>24</sup> The Nadra Action Committee.

<sup>25</sup> Maideen, p.127

<sup>26</sup> President of the Muslim League, All Malaya Muslim Missionary Society, and editor of the *Malaya Nanban*, *Dawn*, and *Sinaran*.

stake.”<sup>27</sup> Syed Ali Al-Attas, a respected businessman of Arabic descent, viewed the Dutch insistence that the marriage be nullified in a secular court an insult to Islamic principles and beliefs.

The Maria-Mansoor marriage provided the basis for the Age of Marriage Bill which was gazetted on 1 September 1950, adding another dimension to the controversy. It was introduced in the Singapore Legislative Council by John Laycock, a Christian and a member of the Progressive Party. The Bill called for declaring void “marriages between persons either of whom is under the age of sixteen”. Laycock claimed that he tabled the Bill because he was “aroused” by “an event [in August 1950] ... which drew the attention of the public to the undesirability of girls being allowed to marry at the age of 12 or 13.”<sup>28</sup>

Ghani’s editorial of 4 September, titled “Fundamental Rights of Islam”, condemned the Laycock Bill. Disclaiming that he was a proponent of under-age marriages, Ghani nevertheless maintained that as long as a Muslim girl has attained puberty, she should be allowed to marry as permitted under Islamic law. Ghani’s editorial also carried the explicit warning that the Bill would inevitably result in a clash between Muslims and the Colony’s secular laws.

Five days later, Ghani penned another editorial in condemnation of the *Singapore Standard* editorial which supported the Laycock Bill. Ghani strongly intimated that secular law should refrain from intruding into the institution of Muslim marriages which he insisted, should only be governed by Islamic law. He further declared that Muslims in Singapore should be allowed the freedom to exercise their fundamental rights within the framework of Islamic law. Ghani called for members of the Muslim Legislative Council to voice their opposition to the Laycock Bill.

M.J. Namazie, a Muslim member of the Council, opposed the Bill on the grounds that it was contrary to Islamic principles, which ruled that marriage eligibility was ascertained in accordance with physical maturity. In reply the Progressive Party, which favoured the Bill,

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<sup>27</sup> Cited in Maideen, p.129

<sup>28</sup> Cited in Maideen, p.134

pointed out that the Bill followed the Sarda Act<sup>29</sup> already in existence in India. This debate about the wisdom of the Laycock Bill was further intensified by demonstrations staged by various Muslim organisations<sup>30</sup> and mass protest meetings were also held at the Sultan Mosque in Singapore.

Events took an unexpected turn when the President of the Singapore Malay Women's Welfare Association, Zahara, spoke up in support of the Laycock Bill and urged Muslim parents to consider seriously before lending their support to the Muslim organisations opposing the Bill. Zahara highlighted the potential hardships which faced many Muslim child-wives when their husbands chose to divorce them. Zahara's outspoken and controversial views attracted many comments, one of the most telling coming from the secretary of the All Malaya Muslim Missionary Society who labelled Zahara incompetent and "un-Islamic" and "too shallow in her knowledge"<sup>31</sup>.

A further split occurred in the Muslim community when on 21 December, the *Utusan Zaman*<sup>32</sup> carried an article suggesting the importance of enacting marriage and divorce laws for Muslims in both Singapore and Malaya. The *Straits Times* carried numerous articles highlighting the differing views existent in the Muslims camp, which finally prompted all of Singapore's Muslim organisations to agree unanimously that Muslims should not be required to conform to secular laws. By doing so, the Muslims intimated that the Bill was anti-Islamic and the Laycock Age of Marriage Bill was finally amended to exclude Muslims in the Colony.<sup>33</sup>

This victory over the Laycock Marriage Bill signalled to Ghani the effectiveness of joint protests. He now planned to hold a demonstration by uniting all the Muslim organisations under one banner to protest the court ruling on the Maria issue.

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<sup>29</sup> The Sarda Act penalizes the parents if a girl married under the age of sixteen. The marriage itself however is not invalidated because of the consequences which may result if a girl who married before turning sixteen had children and the marriage was then annulled.

<sup>30</sup> The Muslim Welfare Association; the Tamil Muslim Union, and the All Malaya Muslim Missionary Society.

<sup>31</sup> Cited in Maideen, p.134

<sup>32</sup> A Singapore Malay weekly newspaper.

<sup>33</sup> It is interesting to note that the Colonial Secretary did not regard the Laycock Bill significant enough to warrant a mention in his *Annual Report*, despite the fact that the proposed Bill contributed to the agitation in Singapore. See also Appendix 1.

On 18 August 1950, the Dutch *de Telegraaf* carried an article allegedly obtained from a Muslim in the Colony intimating that Maria was almost a prisoner in Majid's house. The report also claimed that the marriage of Maria to Mansoor was in fact initiated by the Secretary of the Muslim Welfare Association. According to the newspaper, Maria was "told a pack of lies and ordered ... to forget her parents and to consider that she was a Muslim."<sup>34</sup> In Maideen's opinion, the Dutch saw the issue of Maria as:

a personification of the struggle which had been going on in the old Dutch Indies between themselves and the Indonesians and that they [the Dutch] pressed on with such zeal as a way of getting their own back on the Muslims, of reasserting the virility of old colonialism.<sup>35</sup>

Soon many Muslim radicals decided to lend their weight to what they perceived was a fight against the undermining of Islamic dignity and honour. Dr Burhanuddin Al-Helmy<sup>36</sup>, the editor of the *Melayu Raya*, placed the newspaper at Ghani's disposal to aid him in his fight against the Colonial authorities. He was joined by his other political journalist friends, Darus Sheriff<sup>37</sup> and Mohamed Mustaza<sup>38</sup>. These men, who nursed radical Malay political aspirations, were hoping that the use of their Muslim publications would aid in stirring up the emotions of the masses and gain sympathy for the Muslim cause. Almost every Muslim publication in the region carried articles condemning the British and their handling of the Maria case. The *Majlis* even went as far as reminding its readers about the numerous martyrs who willingly gave up their lives for the Islamic cause.

In the first week of November 1950 a large crowd gathered at the Missionary Society's Hall to hear Ghani speak about the issue at hand. There were representatives from all the Muslim organisations in Singapore, as well as various committee and village heads. The

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<sup>34</sup> Cited in Maideen, p.136

<sup>35</sup> Cited in Maideen, p.174

<sup>36</sup> The founder of the Malay Nationalist Party.

<sup>37</sup> Secretary of the Malay Welfare Association and a *Melayu Raya* journalist.

<sup>38</sup> A member of the editorial staff of the *Melayu Raya* and the founder of the *Pemuda Radikal Melayu* (Young Malay Radical Movement).

meeting commenced with a recitation of Quranic verses after which Ghani launched into his speech:

Today, on this island, an injustice has been enforced against our Muslim brother and Muslim sister. They are now intimidated in the name of the law - harassed for being husband and wife - punished for being Muslim. ... Today, the authorities have formed a 'new army' to fight us. ...In an English court they are going to argue whether a Muslim marriage is valid. ... They are prejudiced that the Muslim sister was once from a Dutch family. They cannot bear to see the girl being brought up by a Malay Muslim family. ...They believe there is no unity among the Muslims. ...We can prove to them that we are not those who would bow down to injustice. And we are not those who can easily compromise because there is no compromise when our honour is at stake. ... In the event of a call for your support [in the Muslim newspapers], I want all the Muslim organisations to mobilise immediately.<sup>39</sup>

The articles written by Ghani in the various Muslim publications served to stir up feelings of sympathy and nationalism among the Muslim community. The Colonial authorities were to come under attack from three different sectors of the Singapore Muslim community which were intent on employing the Maria issue to promote their own personal political and social agenda.

The Indonesian community in Singapore was displaying strong anti-Dutch feelings, especially with regard to Dutch interference in a Muslim marriage. It was a time of heightened national xenophobia and Burhanuddin used his *Melayu Raya* to inflame anti-Dutch sentiments. The Indonesian community also displayed hostility towards the British who were seen as collaborating with the Dutch on the issue. Sensing an opportunity to further his personal agenda, Burhanuddin published several provocative letters in his paper. These letters, which he alleged were written by his readers, accused the Dutch and

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<sup>39</sup> Maideen, p.146-147

the British of playing with the “boiling and burning lava inside a dormant volcano, which was awaiting the first sign of cracking.”<sup>40</sup>

Second, there was the politically motivated group led by Sardon Jubir, an unofficial Legislative Councillor in Singapore, who had sufficient influence to be able to persuade Malaya’s leading political party, the United Malay National Organisation (UMNO), to oppose the British should there be an unfavourable ruling in the Maria case.

Finally, there was Ghani, who was purported to be fighting for the dignity and the fundamental rights of Islam. He believed that only practising Muslims understood the Islamic *Syariah* and therefore, the secular courts were not in any position to rule on the validity of a Muslim marriage conducted in accordance with *Syariah* laws.

Each of these three groups, while advancing their personal agendum, managed to consolidate the region’s Muslim communities which consequently presented a united front and a force to be contended with.

On the day of the hearing, 20 November 1950, a large crowd of mainly Malay and Indian Muslims gathered outside the Colonial High Court in Singapore. During the course of the hearing, the plaintiff’s lawyer claimed that Maria could not be classed as a Muslim just because she referred to herself as one. The fact that Maria’s status as a Muslim was questioned by the court angered many. Burhanuddin summed up the general feelings of the Muslim community when he declared that:

If the court declares that Maria is not a Muslim - it means the value of the *kalimah syahadat* has become questionable. I don’t think we should allow such insults to wound our dignity.<sup>41</sup>

To further complicate matters, Muslim leaders in the region were not in complete agreement on the issue. The *Sheikh-ul-Islam*<sup>42</sup> from Kuala Lumpur had sworn an affidavit

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<sup>40</sup> Cited in Maideen, p.170

<sup>41</sup> Maideen, p.185

<sup>42</sup> An Islamic scholar.

for the plaintiff to the effect that the marriage in question was invalid. His counterpart in Klang, Tungku Mahmood Zuhdi, swore another affidavit stating that Islam did not allow the adoption of persons of different blood. A *moulavi*<sup>43</sup> agreed to affirm the second affidavit but failed to show up in court on the day of the hearing, allegedly because he had received threatening letters. Ghani however believed that had the complete circumstances of the adoption been explained to the *moulavi*, the latter would not have agreed to endorse Tungku Mahmood's controversial affidavit.

Singapore's chief *kadi* on the other, disagreed with Tungku Mahmood's affidavit on the grounds that Muslim law did not exclude children of different bloods being adopted by Muslim families and being brought up in the Islamic faith. He claimed that the practice was common in the region where Chinese children were frequently adopted by Muslim families.

Given that the judgement on the Maria case was to be delivered on 2 December, Taha Kalu<sup>44</sup> suggested that Maria and Mansoor should leave the Colony for Malaya where "...the Head of State, the Ruler, is also the head of the religious affairs. In this respect neither the Colonial nor the Dutch governments had any jurisdiction to interfere in an Islamic marriage."<sup>45</sup>

Maria and Mansoor, however, remained in Singapore for the hearing.

On the day of judgement, Justice Brown declared that based on the facts presented to him, he was compelled to conclude that:

this purported marriage was a manoeuvre designed to prejudice these proceedings, which is discreditable to all concerned.... as the [natural] father never abrogated his legal right or consented to his

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<sup>43</sup> A person who professes in the study of religion.

<sup>44</sup> An ex-police Inspector turned politician. Taha Kalu was briefly the President of the Malay Nationalist Party(MNP), and a founding member of the Nadra Action Committee.

<sup>45</sup> Maideen, p.193

child embracing the Muslim faith, she cannot be in law regarded as a Muslim. I hold that the purported marriage is invalid.<sup>46</sup>

Justice Brown then ordered that Maria be returned to the Hertoghs in Holland and not to the Consul-General for the Netherlands.

An application for appeal against the Judge's refusal to grant a Stay of Execution was set for 11 December and until then, Maria was to reside at the Convent of the Good Shepherd. The Dutch Consulate also made the announcement that while at the Convent, Maria would be "re-educated", ostensibly in the Christian faith. Burhanuddin saw this claim for re-educating Maria as an act to forcibly convert a Muslim girl into another faith.

Two days after Justice Brown's judgement, a large crowd of Muslims gathered at the office building of the Muslim League Association. In his address to the crowd, Ghani declared that at the recent convention of the *Majlis Ulamak* (Religious Council), it was proposed that the Muslims engage in a *Jihad* and *Fi-Sabeel* or 'Holy War'. It was however agreed that the issue at hand should first be resolved via legal and constitutional channels and if all else fails, *Jihad* will be the final resort. According to Ghani:

Muslims have to be loyal to the State and abide by the law so long as that loyalty does not conflict with our loyalty to God and His Laws. ... we have so many Muslim brothers in the police and the military forces. They are loyal to the State ... they should not forget that their loyalty does not go against their loyalty to God and His Laws. [the Colonial Government] are uncertain of the loyalty of our Muslim brothers. In the previous court hearing, they brought Gurkha police personnel. The British are apprehensive and they are uncertain of the loyalty of the Malays and other Muslims in the police force. ... if the loyalty which we supposed to provide to the State goes against our loyalty to God and His laws, I need not spell out what you have to do.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Cited in Maideen, p.197-198

<sup>47</sup> Maideen, p.207

Again, subjective media reporting of the latest developments in the Maria case served as a catalyst in arousing feelings of religious fervour and nationalism in Holland and the Asian region.

The Singapore *Straits Times*, carried an article reporting that Maria, “on her own free will” had knelt before a statue of the Virgin Mary<sup>48</sup> and this understandably incensed the Muslims. In rebuttal, the *Melayu Raya*<sup>49</sup> condemned the girl’s “forceful conversion” and claimed that Maria had complained to the newspaper reporters about the undue pressure that had been exerted on her. The next day, the same Muslim publication posed the question about what would happen to Maria should she be forced to drink *air suci* (holy water) of the Catholic Church which was purported to be able to change one’s faith. The publication also hinted at the possibility that Maria was being forced to consume pork at the Convent. In spite of numerous reports to the contrary in Muslim publications, the English newspapers continued to maintain that Maria was happily adapting to Catholicism.

On 7 December, the *Melayu Raya* carried a statement by a highly respected Muslim theologian, noting that every Muslim was duty-bound to defend or safeguard the purity of Islam or “be regarded a traitor”. He also declared it obligatory for all Muslims to save Maria from Christianity.

The press in Indonesia and Pakistan also involved themselves in the issue by expressing their unhappiness about the events unfolding in Singapore. The Indonesian Minister of Religion, Kiyai Hadji Wachid Hasjim, reiterated the general Muslim position that the Colonial Court’s judgement on the Maria-Mansoor marriage conflicted with the Muslim marriage decree. This, he claimed, came as no surprise because “Singapore, being a British Colony, discriminated racially and religiously”<sup>50</sup>.

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<sup>48</sup> 5 September 1950 cited in Maideen, p.209

<sup>49</sup> 6 December 1950 cited in Maideen, p. 211

<sup>50</sup> Cited in Maideen, p.213

Meanwhile, the Dutch newspapers carried a report by the Associated Press that Maria was glad to be reunited with her natural mother. Petrus Hertogh gave his explanation of the recent events:

Our child was captured by Aminah, hidden by her all these years and raised to hate Europeans. She taught her to hate her own parents, race and religion. ... If Aminah could have kept Maria, it would be her triumph over the white race.<sup>51</sup>

Even the London Press claimed that it was the miracle of “maternal love” which had won in the end. When *De Waarheid*, a Dutch newspaper, took a neutral stand on the issue, it was condemned by other Dutch publications of engaging in “perverted journalism”.

Dato’ Onn bin Jaafar, the leader of UMNO, declined to get involved in the matter which he claimed was neither “political, social or religious”<sup>52</sup>. He refused to exert any pressure on the Singapore government, labelling the events a “domestic issue” and the work of leftist Muslims bent on disrupting the government. Dato’ Onn’s insistence on UMNO’s non-involvement angered many Muslims in Singapore and Malaya. The situation also served to highlight rivalry and dissatisfaction among the various Muslim political parties. The *Melayu Raya*, which was owned by ex-Malay Nationalist Party (MNP) leaders, carried reports claiming that if UMNO failed to take up the issue with the British government, then the Peninsula Malay Union (*Persekutuan Melayu Semenanjung*) was willing to do so. They also demanded that Maria be removed from the Convent. The *Melayu Raya* implied in its publication that UMNO was not doing enough in the Maria issue and by extension, for the Muslim cause. This led to a growing sense of dissatisfaction in the Muslim camp.

The President of the Penang Muslim League, Shaikh Mohamed Ismail, was under pressure to issue a statement of condemnation of the British interference in a Muslim marriage. Ismail subsequently sent a message of support to the Singapore Muslim League for whatever action they wanted to pursue in the matter.

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<sup>51</sup> Cited in Maideen, p.213

<sup>52</sup> Cited in Maideen, p.227

The *Malaya Nanban*, *Sinaran* and *Dawn*, carrying open letters to the police force and the Appeal Judges, were distributed free of charge to the Singapore public on the day of the Court hearing.

Acting on a message from Taha Kalu about Muslim indignation at Maria's placement in the Convent, N.G. Morris, acting Deputy Commissioner of Police, CID, sent a memorandum to the Colonial Secretary W.L. Blythe recommending Maria's removal from the Convent. Blythe however decided against intervening in the matter. On 7 December, Blythe received another memorandum, this time from A.E.G. Blades, the Assistant Commissioner of the Police Special Branch, based on an intelligence report the latter had secured:

...the chief grievance appears that Maria has already been put under Christian influence. Criticism would subside temporarily if Maria were to be placed in a non-religious custody, for example, the Social Welfare Department. There was no complaint when she was earlier placed in the custody of York Hill Home.<sup>53</sup>

Blythe again refused to intervene, claiming that he had not received any indication from Singapore's Muslim leaders that a Malay girl held in a Catholic Convent was improper. He was confident that violence was unlikely to break out in Singapore.

Ghani's motives for wanting to lead the Muslim community in the Maria issue came under close scrutiny by conservative Muslims in Singapore. They thought that Ghani was either using the issue at hand to consolidate his own political position or that he was being used as a front for the defunct Malay Nationalist Party to propagate their ideologies. The latter opinion found its basis in the fact the party-owned *Melayu Raya* gave much publicity to Ghani's involvement in the Maria case. For his part, Ghani denied that his desire for involvement stemmed from any political motives. There was mounting opposition against Ghani from conservative Muslims who disagreed with his increasingly aggressive position on the issue.

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<sup>53</sup> Maideen, p.211

In anticipation of unrest during and after the High Court hearing, cordons of Gurkhas were put on standby for deployment. There was also a police guard stationed outside the Catholic Good Shepherd Convent while police and plain-clothes police officers were posted in the predominantly Muslim areas around the Sultan Mosque.

The Court of Appeal was convened in the Supreme Court to determine the validity of Justice Brown's refusal to grant a Stay of Execution. If ruled invalid, then Maria would be sent back to Holland. Otherwise her stay in the Convent would be extended for the duration of another round of litigation. Either way, the Muslim community would not be appeased.

On the morning of 11 December, a procession of about twenty people marched towards the Supreme Court carrying three white banners with the slogan "We want Maria to be released from the Convent" and a single green flag with a crescent and star painted on it. When told by E.G. Linsell, Assistant Superintendent of Police, that they would not be permitted to proceed any further, the group marched off but reappeared minutes later approaching the Supreme Court from another direction. A police barrier formed directly outside the Court did not deter the group's progress. When the procession began to chant "*Allahu Akbar*" (God is Great), the Malay policemen forming the barrier did nothing to halt the procession, which then marched through the barrier and took up position across the road from the Supreme Court.

Linsell, who had not expected his Muslim personnel to defy orders, immediately requested for a Gurkha riot squad to be deployed to the scene. The crowd outside the Court slowly swelled to three thousand. K.L. Johnson, the Superintendent of Police, who was at the scene to help Linsell, attempted to diffuse the tense atmosphere by talking to the crowd. He was greeted by chants of "Release Maria" while the Malay police officers at the scene remained idle.

When Majid came out of the Court, the crowd surged forward to hear the verdict. Majid's announcement of a hearing adjournment was greeted with suspicion and disbelief. When requested to disperse, the crowd turned hostile and pelted Johnson with stones. The Gurkha squad was then ordered to disperse the crowd.

A.H.L. Velge, a Eurasian sanitary inspector employed by the Singapore Municipality and an officer of the Singapore Volunteer Corps, was jumped on by several Muslims as he left his office building which was situated next to the Supreme Court. Velge managed to extricate himself by drawing his revolver. He seized one of his assailants and handed the latter to two British police officers. The crowd demanded the release of the apprehended man and in the face of the crowd's hostility, the police officers shouted at Velge to do as the crowd wanted. When Velge tried to evade the crowd, he was assaulted from behind with a bicycle handle bar. When he fell to the ground, several others in the crowd joined in the assault. Fearing for his life, Velge fired three shots from his revolver; the crowds ran wild and started to attack the police and the Gurkha squad moved in to quell the attack. Velge's shooting had injured two Malays in the crowd, and Linsell felt that it was precisely this which had provoked the crowd to further violence and hysteria. Johnson immediately summoned for a police van to transport the two injured Malay men to hospital. He tried to pacify the by now extremely hysterical crowd by telling them that the shots were fired, not by a policeman but a civilian who was currently under arrest. The crowd however refused to be mollified and Johnson instructed the officer-in-charge of the Gurkha squad to fire tear-gas if faced with further hostility.

Majid, who had meanwhile returned to the Supreme Court, told the crowd to disperse and Taha Kalu reinforced this request by asking the assembled people to return to the Mosque. The crowd agreed to disperse only on the condition that the Gurkha squad was withdrawn from the scene. Johnson acceded to this request although he warned that this was going to be the only concession he was prepared to make in the matter.

Almost immediately, a man from the crowd rushed forward and broke the windscreen of a car parked nearby. This served to incite the rest of the gathered people to start a riot, damaging passing vehicles and throwing stones at the police. Entreaties from both Majid and Taha Kalu were unheeded so the Gurkha squad had to resort to firing tear-gas at the wild mob. The crowd dispersed but regrouped outside the Sultan Mosque.

When the news of the rioting crowd reached Ghani, he disclaimed any responsibility for the situation and laid the blame squarely on the Colonial government. When requested by

the Singapore government's public relations officer to appeal to the crowd for calm and order, Ghani refused.

On receiving the report that the Sultan Mosque had become an arms depot for the rioters Livett, the Deputy Commissioner of Uniform Branch, with two police officers, made their separate ways to the Mosque to investigate. Livett was accompanied by four police constables while the other two officers were assisted by thirty Gurkhas and thirty Malay policemen respectively. On nearing the Mosque, Livett saw a crowd of about three hundred people watching an army-type truck burn. Fearing hostility, Livett did not stop to investigate but proceeded directly to the Mosque. Outside the Mosque, Livett was confronted by an angry mob, comprised mostly of Malays and Indian Muslims, claiming that the police had shot some of their people. When he informed the crowd of his intention to enter the Mosque and remove the arms in there, the crowd became even more hostile.

Meanwhile, a few military vehicles carrying policemen pulled up beside the burning Land Rover. The military policemen began hitting the assembled crowds with truncheons, ostensibly to exact revenge for one of their vehicles being on fire. Two military policemen entered the Mosque and rendered the same treatment to the Muslims hiding in there. The crowd retaliated, shouting abuse at the police. Seeing that matters were deteriorating fast, Livett ordered the officer-in-charge of the military police to remove his men from the scene as quickly as possible.

Livett's men then proceeded into the Mosque and removed a rifle, ammunition, crowbars and clubs which were harboured in there. On coming out of the Mosque, Livett saw that two more military vehicles had been set alight while the Malay police constables stood around passively, refusing all direct orders to stop the crowds. Livett, with his limited manpower, was no match for the violent crowd so he ordered his men to leave immediately; some of the police personnel were injured in the process.

On hearing that the police had raided the Mosque and entered the place of worship with their shoes on, the Muslim crowd became more frenzied, chanting that they wanted to teach the Europeans a lesson. Passing buses and cars were stopped and searched for signs of European and Eurasian passengers. The first reported attack was on an European who

was dragged out of a van by about a hundred rioters, assaulted with sticks and dumped into a canal.

Acting Commissioner of Police, Wiltshire, refused to seek military assistance on the grounds that his police force could control the situation. By early evening that day, two more Europeans had been killed, one an Air Force Corporal who was assaulted by rioters after being dragged out of a passing bus. His body was thrown into a drain, doused in petrol and set on fire. On receiving the report that the police were unable to control the frenzied mob, Wiltshire finally acknowledged the seriousness of the situation and requested military assistance.

Ghani finally agreed to accompany Thompson to the riot-torn areas to appeal for calm, although he still maintained that the Colonial government was solely responsible for the deteriorating inter-communal situation in Singapore.

Blades also received reports that the Chinese, possible Communist sympathisers, were backing the Muslim rioters by providing them with bottles and wooden handles.

Orders were finally given for police and military personnel to shoot on sight rioting mobsters. The two casualties were an Indian shot while pelting a policeman with stones, and a Chinese who was setting a vehicle on fire. Geylang, an area populated mostly by Malays and Indonesians, was badly affected by the riots; all Europeans travelling in the area were hunted and beaten to death. A total of nine people were killed by the rioters while two were killed by the police or military.

Late that evening, Radio Malaya carried broadcasts by various Muslim leaders appealing for law and order in the country. The plea of the chief *kadi* in Singapore, Haji Ali bin Haji Saleh, was broadcasted in all languages:

The violent incidents which have taken place in the Colony today have no support from devout Muslims. We have a duty to set an example of peace and respect for the welfare of the community of which Muslims are an integral part.

The action of hooligans in attacking people and destroying property is one which we condemn and those who have taken part in it must realise that they have no support in the precepts of Muhammad and from the leaders of the Muslim community.

I appeal to all Muslims to refrain from violence and to assist the authorities in restoring and maintaining the peace which we all as merchants and workers depend on for our livelihood.<sup>54</sup>

The next day, 12 December, saw the Appeal Court convene under strict security measures. The presiding judges turned down the appeal on the Stay of Execution on the understanding that Maria would be returned to Singapore by the Consul General for Netherlands if the appeal against Justice Brown's judgement was successful or in the event that Maria wanted to return.

When the Court decision reached the Muslim community, a group wanted to organise a mass procession to the Convent of the Good Shepherd. The Special Branch, having received reports about a group of Indonesian freedom fighters planning to prevent Maria from being taken to Holland, arranged for Maria and Adeline to be escorted to a secret location. A specially appointed task force had secretly organised the travel plans for the pair and their departure time from the Colony was a closely guarded secret. Radio Malaya blacked-out the news of Maria's departure for fear of provoking further rioting.

When Ghani received information that the flight with Maria and Adeline was scheduled to make a stop-over in Karachi before reaching Amsterdam, Ghani called for the Pakistani authorities to hold the aircraft when it landed. Muslim leaders in Karachi also received a cable from Ghani stating that a "Muslim girl is being forcibly taken to Holland. Please stop her from being taken to Holland." Fearing that the Pakistanis might be instigated into holding back the flight, the Dutch Consul-General informed his government to reroute the flight from Karachi to Calcutta. At the stop-over in Calcutta Airport, the plane was under tight security and reporters were prevented from entering the plane.

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<sup>54</sup> Cited in Maideen, p.265

The height of the rioting on 11 and 12 December in Singapore saw eighteen people killed; one hundred and thirty one injured, one hundred and nineteen vehicles damaged, and seventy two reported cases of arson<sup>55</sup>. From 14 December, the situation resumed normality with curfew areas being relaxed and business activities recommencing.

A delegation of ten Muslim leaders, among whom were M.J. Namazie, Dato'' Onn bin Jaafar and Singapore's chief *kadi* met with Governor Sir Franklin Gimson at the Singapore Government House on 16 December. During the meeting, the Governor was handed a list of resolutions<sup>56</sup>, which stated:

In order to make effective and fruitful any order of the Court of Appeal or King-in-Council giving the custody of Maria Hertogh alias Nadra binte Maarof to any person in the Colony it was resolved that

- (a) there should be obtained from His Majesty's Government as an assurance that in the event aforementioned His Majesty's Ambassador to the United Kingdom of the Netherlands will appoint as his nominee such person as may be approved of by the Muslim Advisory Board for the purpose of ascertaining the wishes of the said Maria ... as to whether she desires to remain in Holland or to return to the Colony.
- (b) there should be obtained from the Governor of the Colony an assurance that the undertaking given by the Consul General for the Netherlands to the Court of Appeal on the 11th December 1950 at the Colony to return the said Maria... to the Colony will be carried out.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> W.L. Blythe, *The Colony of Singapore Annual Report 1950*, p.16

<sup>56</sup> The resolutions were drawn up during a meeting of prominent Muslim leaders, held on 14 December and chaired by Dato'' Onn. The resolutions were confirmed a day later at a meeting with the Muslim Advisory Board.

<sup>57</sup> Cited in Maideen, p.270

Despite assurance from Sir Franklin that the Colonial Government regarded the Maria issue from a purely judicial angle and that the final decision was the Court's, many Muslims were convinced that there was a conspiracy between the judiciary and the government to rule in favour of the Europeans.

Ghani continued to push the Muslim community to carry on the fight for the Muslim cause. He decided to appeal for help from the Muslims in the mainland in order to further consolidate the Muslim position. Ghani eventually chose Kuala Lumpur as the site for meetings with various Muslim organisations in the region but failed to find the overwhelming support he had been expecting. He then decided to concentrate all his efforts in Penang, where the more zealous members of the Muslim League distributed leaflets in mosques urging Muslims to attend Ghani's scheduled talks to be held in one of the local mosques. R.P. Bingham, the Resident Commissioner of Penang, met with Shaikh Mohamed Ismail, the President of the Penang Muslim League, and requested the latter to send Ghani off the island without any disturbing incidents. Ghani finally decided against visiting Penang fearing that the still hostile Muslim community might be provoked into taking drastic action.

On 18 December in the Colony, Ghani was detained along with Taha Kalu, Dr Burhanuddin, Syed Ali Al-Attas, Mohamed Mustaza, and Darus Sheriff under the Detention Orders issued under Emergency Regulation 20. *Dawn*, Ghani's English language newspaper, was suspended from publication.

In January 1951, members of the Muslim Advisory Board made a series of visits to Police Divisional Canteens to dispel misconceptions of conflict between Islamic religious duty and responsibility as members of the Force, making it clear that there was no justifiable religious basis for the Muslim police officers' failure to discharge their duties during the riots.<sup>58</sup>

A Riot Inquiry Commission was convened by the Singapore Criminal Investigation Department to gather evidence to charge the rioters and its investigation was completed in

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<sup>58</sup> This significant fact is curiously absent from Maideen's recounting of post-riot events in his book.

June 1951. Of the seven hundred and seventy eight arrests, four hundred and three people were released unconditionally while one hundred and six detainees were released subject to various conditions<sup>59</sup>. Rioting charges were brought against two hundred of the detainees; a hundred of whom were convicted and twenty five acquitted. Sixty two cases were referred to the Advisory Committee on the Commission of Enquiry, while the remaining seven were tried at the Assizes Court on the charges of wanton killings. All seven were found guilty and sentenced to the death penalty, although two of the seven appealed against their sentences and had them reduced to a seven year jail term each.

On 5 February 1951, Sir Franklin announced that a Commission of Enquiry had been appointed to:

...enquire into, and report on the disorders in Singapore on 11th December and on subsequent days with special reference to the cause of those disorders and to the measures taken to protect life and property and to restore law and order.<sup>60</sup>

The Commission began its investigation into the riots on 14 February 1951 and its Report, signed on 17 May 1951, was published in Singapore on 7 August 1951. The Commission established that the primary cause of the riots was the intense feelings aroused by the original adoption issue which was further exacerbated by Maria being placed in a Catholic Convent. The Colonial Secretary was criticised for “rejecting the advice tendered to him by the Special Branch” despite his claim when giving evidence to the Commission that his personal request to the Consul-General for the Netherlands<sup>61</sup> for permission to remove Maria from the Convent had been refused. Sir Franklin however, in a covering letter to the Commission Report, ruled that the criticism of Blythe was not justified on the grounds that:

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<sup>59</sup> They were to report to the Police Station once a month and were not allowed to leave their houses between the hours of sunset and sunrise.

<sup>60</sup> W.L. Blythe, *Colony of Singapore Annual Report 1951*, p.3

<sup>61</sup> The Consul-General for Netherlands represented the Hertoghs, who had originally arranged for Maria to be placed in the Good Shepherd Convent pending the Court ruling.

...at no time before the event did the Special Branch expect an outbreak of violence....no further representations of any kind were made to any Administrative Officer, either by the Special Branch or by the acting Commissioner of Police...and no leader of the Muslim community made any approach whatsoever to the Colonial Secretary on the question of the child and the Convent.<sup>62</sup>

The Commission also found that the issue was exploited by the “unscrupulous campaign” of the Nadra Action Committee, organised by Muslim radicals in Singapore. The Commission attributed the failure of the Muslim officers to discharge their duties during the riots to their belief that the Court proceedings was an attack on their religion and that Maria was being forcibly converted to Christianity.

In September 1951, a disciplinary tribunal was set up to investigate charges brought against six police officers by the Riot Inquiry Commission. The Acting Commissioner of Police was forced to resign; four officers were exonerated and the fifth officer, after being criticised for his ineffective handling of the affair, was also exonerated from disciplinary action.

When Tunku Abdul Rahman took over the UMNO leadership from Dato’ Onn on 25 August 1951, he made it his priority to save those sentenced to the death penalty. To this end, he set out to raise money to fund the appeals of the rioters and sent letters advocating clemency to the British authorities but received no official response. The Johor Baru branch of UMNO wrote to the Head of the Religious Department in Kuala Terengganu informing him that:

UMNO proposes to send a letter of petition to the British Government through the Governor of the Colony, to appeal for clemency for the Malays and other Muslims who were sentenced to death and long jail term sentences in connection with the riot in the Colony. We are of the opinion that the appeal is not only within

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<sup>62</sup> *Annual Report 1951*, p.4-5

UMNO's duty but should also be participated by all Malays and Muslim organisations and associations in the Malay Peninsula and in the Colony to help those of the same race and religion.<sup>63</sup>

The Religious Department however was reluctant to involve itself in the affairs of Singapore:

*Pejabat Ugama* (Religious Department) is a Government Department. Its administration is purely for the interest of the Muslim religion particularly for the State headed by H.H the Sultan. I don't think our Religious Department should interfere in this matter but I do not see any objections for individual persons to support the issue.<sup>64</sup>

Hussein bin Onn, the Secretary-General of UMNO, stressed that his party's interest in the issue was not politically motivated but rather, an expressed intention to help their Muslim brothers in Singapore. Despite the Religious Department's indication of non-commitment, the Nadra Appeal Fund was a success, receiving both monetary support and letters from social organisations and individuals around the country. Support also came from organisations outside the region, the Malay Society of Great Britain for example.

On 16 May 1951, information reached Singapore that the Civil Court in Holland had annulled the Maria-Mansoor marriage on the grounds that Maria was a Dutch national and not being of legal age, could not be married according to Article 86 of the Civil Code. Mansoor then applied to the Court of Appeal for leave to appeal to the Privy Council. On 25 March 1952, the Appeal Court rejected his application. Seeing that there was no hope of winning the case, Mansoor's lawyer decided not to proceed to the Privy Council claiming that the marriage had now become a purely academic question.

Muslims from all over the world sent in letters protesting against the handling of the events in Singapore. Many demanded that the marriage of Maria to Mansoor be restored

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<sup>63</sup> Cited in Maideen, p.285

<sup>64</sup> Cited in Maideen, p.285

and for the rioters arrested to be released. Bowing to the pressure, the British authorities finally reduced the death penalty for those convicted to life imprisonment.

## CONCLUSION

Many factors contributed to the Maria Hertogh conflict and each will be dealt with in turn. First, the role of the Colonial government in fanning discontent among its subjects in Singapore. The fundamental miscalculation of the British authorities was their failure to fully understand the religious and cultural sensitivities of the indigenous population. The authorities for example, should have recognised that the placement of Maria in a Catholic Convent instead of in secular custody would be perceived by the Muslims to be a blatant disregard of their religious sentiments.

Despite Sir Franklin's claim to the contrary, it is my opinion that the Commission's criticism of the Colonial Secretary's handling of the matter was justified. Blythe had sufficient and reliable information from both Morris and Blades regarding the escalating dissatisfaction among the Muslims to have taken positive action, which might have alleviated some of the tension in the country. Again, given that Muslim religious feelings were running high, the British authorities should have, on this particular occasion, instructed the police to remove their footwear before entering the mosques, to avoid further aggravating the community.

The media, both in Holland and in the Asian region, with its subjective and passionate reporting of the issue, stirred up strong nationalistic and religious feelings. Many of the articles which appeared during the course of the event were uninformed and highly emotive. In fact, the media was often used as a propaganda tool by various groups with a vested interest in the case. Ghani's open letters to the police and judges<sup>65</sup> in his publications on the day of the Supreme Court hearing are a case in point because they were wilfully designed to inflame passions and encourage discontent among the masses.

Political parties in Holland, Singapore and other Asian countries manipulated the Hertogh case to further their respective standing. Even political parties in countries not involved in

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<sup>65</sup> See Appendix 2.

the dispute capitalised on the issue. The Malaya Communist Party for example, seized the opportunity to further their political objectives by offering to support Ghani in the dispute.<sup>66</sup>

Radical manipulation usually manages to transform a relatively moderate issue into a serious conflict. For example, political and religious radicals gradually turned the Hertogh custody case into a fight for Dutch or Islamic nationalism, depending on whether they were Dutch or Muslim. Taha Kalu for example, claimed that the court case regarding Maria was “between two religions and not two mothers”<sup>67</sup>. Radical religious groups, both in Holland and Singapore, deliberately emphasised religious differences between the different groups involved in the matter in an effort to incite enmity and intolerance, thereby assuring themselves of strong support from their respective communities.

The Maria Hertogh case and the resulting religious riots in Singapore clearly illustrate two main points. First, the disastrous effects of the insensitive handling of a religious issue in a plural society, and second, its potential for exploitation by various social and political groups, usually through the media. These, if left unchecked, may result in communal and religious strife in the country.

Sir Franklin Gimson delivered a poignant address to the Singapore Legislative Council on 19 December 1950:

We have seen in Singapore an outbreak of violence unparalleled in the peacetime history of this centre...It has been our pride in Singapore that... all races and creeds could live..in mutual respect and tolerance and Cupertino. It is our aim to build...a generation of

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<sup>66</sup> The Commission of Enquiry however found no evidence of “Communist inspiration behind the riots, and ‘no acceptable testimony of any organisation directing the rioters’.” *Annual Report*, p.4. This ruling is in contradiction to Maideen’s version which hints at communist involvement in the events. He claims that on the day before the appeal hearing, Ghani was approached by two Chinese men who identified themselves as being anti-British and Malayan Communist Party sympathisers, and pledged their support for the Muslim cause. Being fully aware that accepting any form of help from communists would only result in the Muslim cause being labelled ‘communist inspired’ and split the Muslim community, Ghani allegedly refused their support.

<sup>67</sup> Maideen, p.186

men and women whose first loyalty will be to the peace and prosperity of Singapore....

The issue is clear for men and women of all religions, races and political creeds. The supreme law is the safety of the people. Without law and order there can be neither peace of mind nor freedom of movement....

It is a challenge to activity to increase our defence against threats from within and without: to increase our activity to restore and strengthen the good relationship between the communities, which are all playing their part in building one Singapore...to ensure that the generation in our schools will learn the essential lessons of racial harmony and religious tolerance.<sup>68</sup>

It is a lamentable fact that Sir Franklin's expressed hope that the Hertogh case will serve to teach people the need for harmony and religious tolerance has never been fully realised. The events described in this Chapter highlight that the delicate balance which exists between the various communities in a plural society can be easily undermined. All it takes is for a social, political and/or religious group to exploit a potentially sensitive issue and inter-communal passions are inflamed, often with disastrous consequences. The intervening years since the Hertogh riots have witnessed further incidents of religious intolerance in Singapore and although not to the same severity, they still had serious repercussions for the country, as will be discussed in ensuing Chapters.

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<sup>68</sup> *Annual Report 1950*, p.16-17

## APPENDIX 1

The Maria-Mansoor marriage held far-reaching influence on marriage laws in Singapore. In 1952, amendments were made to two marriage statutes in the country.

(i)The **Christian Marriage (Amendment) Ordinance** invalidated “marriages solemnized under the Christian Marriage Ordinance, 1940, if at the date of the marriage either party was under the age of sixteen years, unless such marriage was solemnised in accordance with a licence issued by a titular head of a Christian denomination.” (*Colony of Singapore Annual Report 1952*, p.187).

(ii)The **Civil Marriage (Amendment) Ordinance** stipulated that “...no party under the age of sixteen may be married under the Civil Marriage Ordinance, 1940.” (*Colony of Singapore 1952*, p.188).

When a Hindu Monogamous Marriage Bill was proposed by the Honourable Mr C.R. Dasaratha Raj in 1953, the Singapore Tamil Reform Association(TRA)<sup>69</sup> also employed the Maria-Mansoor case as a basis for some of its objections to the Bill. In a memorandum to the Select Committee on the Bill, the TRA warned of the danger in interfering with the religion of the people. Citing the Laycock Bill and the resulting agitation among Muslims, the TRA claimed that the proposed Bill insisting on monogamy for the entire Hindu community, amounted to an interference in Hindu personal law which tolerates polygamy:

It is common knowledge that any piece of legislation which envisages a radical and fundamental change of the religion of one community in a multi-racial country like Malaya, whose Government is pledged not to interfere in the religion of its subjects, will be setting up a dangerous precedent which will, no doubt, incite agitations for similar interferences in other religions. This fear is already borne out by the activities of certain individuals belonging to other communities in the Colony and whose moves have already been strongly deprecated by their religious institutions.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Formed in 1932, the Association was concerned with serving the educational, social and religious interests of the Tamils in Singapore.

<sup>70</sup> The Tamils Reform Association, *Memorandum to the Select Committee on the Hindu Monogamous Marriage Bill 28 June 1954*, p.17-18.

## APPENDIX 2

An excerpt from Karim Ghani's open letter addressed to the Supreme Court judges, published in the *Melayu Raya* on 11 December 1950.

### OPEN LETTER TO THE TRINITY WHO WILL SIT IN JUDGEMENT TODAY

Dear Brothers,

I am writing to you not in your capacity as judges but in your capacity as human beings responsible to God .... And I ask you not to judge in our favour, because though in legal terminology it is Aminah vs. Mrs Hertogh, before the higher tribunal of spiritual values it is a case of Muslim vs. Catholics....And because we Muslims try to follow Christ and Mohamad who came after him, we try to be loyal to God and the King. But when my duty to God demands that a thing is done, it does not matter if the King is displeased and I have to stand before a modern Pilate to be expelled from the Colony...because in the reign of Caesar, to whom we are trying to be loyal, there is no crucifixion....the Court [that] is trying to establish its prestige should not become guilty of contempt of the higher Court of humanity and still the higher Court of the Judgement Day. Tomorrow you will be Pilate trying NADRA who is imprisoned in a convent which though not in law but in fact is a prison, where she stays against her will...Of course, they in the convent are not torturing her as Christ was tortured on his way to the Cross but the blind fanatics who did the crucifixion about 1927 years ago only whipped the body and nailed the hands, finally speared the hips while NADRA, who all Muslims regard today as either their own sister or daughter, is having torture of the Heart.

To us, the Oriental, bleeding the heart of a human being is more torturous than the crucifixion of past history....

## CHAPTER 3

### THE ROLE OF MUSLIMS AND THE ADMINISTRATION OF ISLAM IN SINGAPORE

The Muslim community in Singapore is not completely homogenous in its ethnic composition, being comprised of Malay and non-Malay Muslims. The 1980 census recorded that of a total population of 1 981 962 persons aged ten and above, 323 867 were classed as Muslims. 90.2% of these were Malay<sup>1</sup>, while the remaining 9.8% were Indian, 0.4% Chinese and 0.8% made up of 'Others'<sup>2</sup>.

More than 99% of the Muslims in Singapore are Sunnis; the majority of whom follow the *Shafi'i* school of Islamic jurisprudence, while the rest follow the *Hanafi* school. Shi'ites form about 0.1% of the Muslim population, and less than 0.01% of Singaporean Muslims are Ahmadis, commonly known as *Qadiani*<sup>3</sup>.

The Muslim minority community in Singapore finds itself in an ambiguous position because Singapore is situated in the Malay Archipelago where in the neighbouring countries of Malaysia, Indonesia and Brunei, Muslims constitute a majority. Moshe Yegar aptly captures the essence of the Singapore Muslim community in his book, *Islam and Islamic Institutions in British Malaya*:

Despite being a minority, the Muslims in Singapore seem to be the most vociferous of all the religious groups in Singapore. Their religious and ethnic sensitivities seem to be more easily aroused, and although they are by no means militant, they do boast a strong religious fervour.<sup>4</sup>

This Chapter will analyse the way in which this "strong religious fervour" has been displayed in post-war Singapore. Compared to the other ethnic groups in Singapore, the

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<sup>1</sup> Although the Malay community in Singapore is not totally homogeneous, the sub-ethnic differences within the community are minimal.

<sup>2</sup> 'Others' is a census category, which in this case, is dominated by the Arabs.

<sup>3</sup> MUIS has officially declared the *Qadiani* as a separate religious group, outside of Islam. This ruling followed the decision of the trans-national Muslim organisation, *Muktamar Islam*, based in Saudi Arabia.

<sup>4</sup> Yegar, Moshe, *Islam and Islamic Institutions in British Malaya*, (Jerusalem, 1979), p.17

Malay community poses the greatest challenge to the government. Because ethnicity and religion are almost synonymous with Singaporean Malays, any policy which is seen as being discriminatory against Malays is often perceived by the community to also be a discrimination against Islam. In order to fully appreciate the attitude of the Malay community *vis-à-vis* the state and the other religious communities represented in Singapore, it is necessary to investigate the historical background of the Malay community and of Islam in the country.

#### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE MALAY COMMUNITY

By the eighteenth century, Singapore had become part of the Johore Empire, and was ruled by a Malay Temenggong, a Viceroy of the Sultan of Johore.

The late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries saw the beginning of trading contact between the British and the Malayan peninsula. On 6 February 1819, Stamford Raffles signed a treaty with Sultan Hussein of Johore and the Temenggong of Johore, providing for the establishment of a British East India trading centre in Singapore.

For the next few years, the island was jointly controlled by a British Resident, the Malay Sultan and the Temenggong. In 1824, the Resident signed a treaty with the Temenggong and the Sultan of Johore, and the Anglo-Dutch Treaty of the same year led to the cession of Singapore to the East-India Company in return for a cash grant and monthly pensions from the British. The Straits Settlements of Penang, Singapore and Malacca were brought under the Presidency of Bengal in 1830, and transferred to the control of the Governor-General of India in 1851. Singapore finally became a British colony in 1867.

Until World War II, Anglo-Malay relations in the Malayan peninsula were governed by a series of treaties drawn up between 1874 and 1930, while the Straits Settlements of Malacca, Penang and Singapore were governed as British colonies. These treaties guaranteed the sovereignty of the Malay Rulers, the autonomy of the Malay States, and the recognition of Malaya as a Malay country.

In 1946, the colonial government issued a White Paper detailing the formation of a Malayan Union, which would comprise the four former Federated Malay States of

Perak, Selangor, Pahang and Negri Sembilan; the five Unfederated Malay states of Johore, Trengganu, Kelantan, Kedah and Perlis, and the two Straits Settlements of Malacca and Penang. Singapore, designated a separate Crown colony, was not included in the Union for two main reasons, one of which was that Singapore was still an important base for the British Navy. Second, because the proponents of the scheme envisioned a common citizenship for all people in the Malayan Union which would consequently confer political rights to non-Malays, the Malays feared the island's Chinese majority would upset the racial balance in the Malayan peninsula.

Orders-in-Council constituting the Malayan Union and the Colony of Singapore came into effect on 1 April 1946 but were abandoned three months later because the scheme would have undermined the Anglo-Malay treaties. The Malayan Union was proposed by the British with the intention of merging the nine existing Malay states with Malacca and Penang into a single political entity. One of the proposals under this scheme was to separate Singapore from the Malay Peninsula. There was widespread dissatisfaction among the Malay community over the Malayan Union proposal. The Malays opposed the transfer of jurisdiction from the State Rulers to the British Crown. The Malays also feared that the new citizenship conditions would result in Chinese domination of the peninsula. As a result of this opposition, the United Malay Nationalist Organisation (UMNO) was formed in Malaya in March 1946. UMNO was successful in preventing the implementation of the Malayan Union scheme, and forced the British to devise an alternative constitutional arrangement for Malaya. Although the Union itself existed briefly from 1946 to 1948, the Malayan Union proposals were never fully implemented.

The Federation Agreement of 1948 replaced the Malayan Union scheme, and under the Agreement, Singapore was separated from Malaya in 1948.

When the British colonial authorities proposed the formation of an independent Federation of Malaya after World War II, one of the main considerations was that of ethnic sensibilities. In 1949, the Malays agreed to share political power with the country's non-Malays in exchange for the latter's help in improving the economic status of Malays.

During the Singapore Constitutional Conference of 1955-6 the Labour Front led coalition government guaranteed that Singapore would not become a Chinese State. This was on the condition that the island's Malay political parties agree not to push their three proposed demands: establishing Islam as the official religion, Malay as the national language, and special privileges for the Malay population in Singapore.

When the Federation of Malaya attained independence on 31 August 1957, its new constitution elevated Malay as the national language and Islam as the state religion, while guaranteeing that the head of state would always be a Malay. Singapore remained a British colony at this time.

On 3 June 1959, Singapore was granted full internal self-government and Lee Kuan Yew, lawyer and leader of the People's Action Party (PAP), became the country's first Prime Minister. Lee hoped to achieve full independence from Britain by a federal merger with independent Malaya. In July 1961, Lee signed such a pact with Tunku Abdul Rahman, Malaya's Prime Minister, and the Federation of Malaysia<sup>5</sup> finally came into being on 31 August 1963.

When Singapore joined the Federation in 1963, questions arose about the national identity of the Federation. While the Malaysian government advocated special privileges for the Malays, Lee pressed for the concept of a "Malaysian Malaysia" as opposed to a "Malay Malaysia". He warned of the danger of communalism which would surely emerge as a result of any championing for a "Malay Malaysia":

...in this plural society of Malaysia also lies the danger of her own destruction. If under external pressure of Indonesian confrontation, the leaders of the various communities in Malaysia respond not as Malaysians, but as so many Malays, Chinese, Indians and others, then the end must be disintegration. ...The real danger is Malaysia's own weakness.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The Federation of Malaysia comprised all the Malayan states; Sabah and Sarawak in Borneo, and Singapore.

<sup>6</sup> Lee Kuan Yew, *Malaysia-Age of Revolution*, Singapore (Ministry of Culture, 1965), p.30

The Tunku began to view Lee and the PAP as political agitators and a threat to the established position of the Malays in Malaysia. In August 1965, the Tunku expelled Singapore from the Federation, an event commonly referred to as 'Separation'. Legislation was passed in December 1965, retrospective to 9 August, pronouncing Singapore a Republic.

The constitutional position of the Malays in Singapore has varied considerably through the various political periods in the country's history. In a relatively short space of time, Singapore Malays progressed from being a political minority whose special rights were recognised by the Colonial government, to becoming a majority in a wider Federation during Singapore's merger with Malaysia, and upon Separation, becoming a minority group again. The interests of the Malay community in Singapore has always been a useful tool to manipulate politically. In his thesis on *Multi-racialism, Meritocracy and the Malays of Singapore*, Russel Henry Betts observed:

In the acrimony which resulted, and which ultimately led to Singapore's eviction from Malaysia, the Singapore Malay community became, in sequence, catalyst, pawn and intensely interested bystander in a dispute over fundamental questions of social, economic and political organization in plural societies.<sup>7</sup>

Excluding the Constitutional stipulations providing for Malay interests, there are other basic political reasons why the special position of the Malays has been safeguarded by the Singapore government. For example, during the 1955/56 Constitutional negotiations, the Singapore coalition government, made up of the Labour Front, the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), and the Singapore Malay Union (KMS)<sup>8</sup>, felt that it was important to accommodate Malay demands because it needed the political backing of Singapore UMNO and *Kesatuan Melayu Singapore* (KMS) to remain as the majority government.

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<sup>7</sup> Russel Henry Betts, *Multi-racialism, Meritocracy and the Malays of Singapore*, (PhD Thesis, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1975) cited in Zainal Abidin Rasheed, *New Dynamics of Multi-Racial Singapore*, 21 Jan 1995, p.7

<sup>8</sup> The Labour Front was a non-communal party while UMNO and KMS represented the interests of the Malay community.

There was also a predominance of communal politics at that time, and it was felt that if the minorities, especially the Malays, were not placated, there would be an increased threat of racial tension in the State.

When the PAP came to power in Singapore, it too was careful to take an active interest in Muslim affairs and negate any accusation of it being a party concerned only with Chinese interests. Between 1959 and 1961, there was a power struggle between the moderates and the pro-Communists within the PAP. The communist faction of the party had the support of the Chinese Singaporeans, thereby promoting the image that the PAP was primarily a Chinese party. To counter the strength of the Communists, the moderates, led by Lee, actively sought the support of the Malays. The PAP also wanted to show its neighbours that Singapore was in no danger of becoming a solely Chinese State. Singapore's position in the Malay Archipelago means that its very survival would be threatened if it projected an image of a "Third China" in the region.

It was further recognised that Malay support for the PAP was crucial in its campaign for merger with Malaya. The Tunku was not in favour of a merger with Singapore, fearing that the Chinese majority in the island would invalidate Malay political dominance and threaten the special position of the Malays in the Federation. The PAP had to therefore show that they were keen to promote the special interests and position of the Malays.

From the beginning of the establishment of modern Singapore, the Malays constituted the largest segment of the population. When Raffles arrived in Singapore, the island was inhabited by approximately one hundred and fifty people, thirty of whom were Chinese.<sup>9</sup>

By 1836 however, the Chinese population outnumbered the Malays and Indians<sup>10</sup>.

While the British had signed a treatise with the Malay rulers in Malaya to accord Islam special favours, no such agreement existed in Singapore because the island was to be administered as a British colony; however the same policy of non-interference in the Malay religion and custom as practised in Malaya was generally adhered to in

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<sup>9</sup> By 1891, the population had swelled to 184 554, with the Chinese forming the majority and the Malays, the second largest ethnic group. According to the 1911 census which provided information on the religious affiliation of the various ethnic groups on the island, by the twentieth century Singapore had become a multi-ethnic and multi-religious population.

<sup>10</sup> The Indians still constitute the smallest ethnic group in Singapore.

Singapore. In 1823, Raffles laid down the policy for dealing with the Malays in the island:

In all cases regarding the ceremonies of religion and marriages and the rules of inheritance, the laws and customs of the Malays will be respected, where they shall not be contrary to reason, justice or humanity. In all other cases the law of the British people will be enforced with due consideration to the usages and habits of the people<sup>11</sup>

Although the population of Singapore since 1819 has been made up of immigrants largely from Malaya, China and India, in his thesis Ismail Kassim differentiates the two types of migration, that of the Malays as “intra-regional” as opposed to the “inter-regional” migration of the other communities into Singapore.<sup>12</sup> In 1958, the British Parliament conferred on Singapore a State Constitution in which was noted that the special position of Malays was to be recognised in the country.

In 1957, the Report of the Malaya Constitutional Commission recommended that “certain fundamental individual rights which are generally regarded as essential conditions for a free and democratic way of life” be included as part of the Constitution of Malaya. The Commission felt that these constitutional safeguards were needed given the region’s underlying racial and religious tensions; economic and political instability; and the threat of communist subversion, both from within and outside the country. However, it was primarily the region's turbulent history of religious conflict<sup>13</sup> which resulted in the right to religious freedom being enshrined in the Federal Constitution.

Article 3 of the Federal Constitution declared Islam as the State religion, although freedom to practise other religions was assured. However, this guarantee of religious freedom was tempered with laws relating to public order, health and morality (Article

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<sup>11</sup> Yegar, p.147

<sup>12</sup> Kassim, Ismail, *Problems of Elite Cohesion: A Perspective From a Minority Community*, Singapore (Department of Political Science, 1974), p.29

<sup>13</sup> As opposed to any overriding governmental concern about human rights.

11(5)). The Federal Constitution also allowed for States in the Federation to restrict the propagation of doctrines among Muslims in the region (Article 11(4)).

Article 153 approves of positive discrimination in favour of Malays<sup>14</sup> and the natives of Sabah and Sarawak. This is to be accomplished by a quota reservation system in public service, scholarships, licences for business and in educational establishments. Article 153(1), however, qualifies this reservation of quotas on the proviso that no one else in the country is deprived of these benefits in the process. There is no equivalent of Article 153 in the Singapore Constitution.

Although Article 16(2) prohibits discrimination in laws relating to the educational establishments of religious groups, Article 12(2) allows for the Malaysian Federal and State governments to establish educational institutions for the Muslim religion.

Upon Separation, most of the Federal Constitutional provisions safeguarding religious freedom were incorporated into the Singapore Constitution, although a number of Articles were dropped or otherwise amended. For example, Article 3 of the Federation Constitution pertaining to an official State religion was omitted from the Singapore Constitution because it was felt that the basis for the article was no longer justified in the Singapore context.

Recommendations from the Singapore Constitutional Commission in 1966 led to Clause 11(4) being excluded from the Constitution. The Commission argued against the retention of the said clause because:

[we are] not aware of any law in Singapore which controls or restricts the propagation of any religious doctrines or beliefs among persons professing the Muslim religion and because we think it would be inappropriate and indeed inconsistent that there should be any provision in the Constitution of a democratic secular state such as Singapore expressly singling out a particular religion for special treatment of this nature.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Article 160(2) defines a “Malay” as a person who among other things, professes the religion of Islam.

<sup>15</sup> Report of the Constitutional Commission, 1966 (Singapore, 1966), Paragraph 38.

Although the Federal Constitution guarantees every person the right to practise and propagate his religion, State law could restrict or control the propagation of any doctrine or religious belief among Muslims in Malaysia. The Constitutional Commission did not recommend that this exemption clause be retained in the Singapore Constitution as it would be inconsistent with the country's policy of religious freedom in a secular State.<sup>16</sup> It nonetheless accepted that it was undesirable to attempt to convert or proselytise among Muslims in Singapore.

As the indigenous people of Singapore, the "special position" of the Malay community is also duly recognised in the Constitution:

...[it is] the responsibility of the Government to protect, safeguard, support, foster and promote their political, educational, religious, economic, social and cultural interests and the Malay language.<sup>17</sup>

Article 153 further holds that provisions must be made by the Legislature for regulating the religious affairs of the Muslims in the country. It also calls for a Council to be constituted with the aim of advising the President on matters relating to Islam. Following on from this, the next part of the Chapter will trace the history of the administration of Islam in Singapore.

#### ADMINISTRATION OF ISLAM IN SINGAPORE

In response to the numerous complaints about the mismanagement of religious trusts in Singapore, the Mohammedan and Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments Bill was passed in September 1905, empowering the colonial government to establish the Mohammedan and Hindu Endowments Board in 1960. The function of the Board was to deal with religious charity trusts and funds. In 1952, the Board changed its name to the Muslim and Hindu Endowments Board. It was subsequently dissolved in 1968.

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<sup>16</sup> Report of the Constitutional Commission, 1966 (Singapore, 1966), Paragraph 9.

<sup>17</sup> The Constitution, Article 152(2).

The colonial government also established a Muhammedan Advisory Board in Singapore on 10 June 1915. According to Sharon Siddique<sup>18</sup>, the Board was set up primarily in response to the 1915 Indian Mutiny. During World War I the 5th Light Infantry Regiment, an all Indian Muslim unit, on hearing the rumour that they were to be sent to fight the Muslim Turks, staged a mutiny in Singapore. To counter the problem, the colonial government, which usually refrained from involvement in any racial or religious conflicts in the region, immediately set up the Board with the purpose of advising the government on matters relating to Islam. The Board also functioned as a help body, liaising between the Muslim community and the government.

In 1941, the Board was revived as the Muslim Advisory Board, consisting solely of Muslim members. It played a key role in promoting legislation for the administration of Muslim law in the country.

The *Shariah* Court in Singapore was established in 1958 under the 1957 Muslim Ordinance. It was given jurisdiction over cases dealing with Muslim marriage and divorce, and it also took over the *kadi*'s function of adjudicating on dowry and alimony claims when the sums did not exceed five hundred dollars, and maintenance claims which were less than one hundred dollars a month. The Ordinance also stipulated that the Government appoint the Chief *kadi*, who was the only person who could solemnise a Muslim marriage in which the girl had no '*wali*' or guardian.

The 1957 Muslim Ordinance was amended in 1960 by the PAP government in Singapore.<sup>19</sup> Under the amendment, the power of the *Shariah* Court was extended to deal with all monetary claims without a limit placed on the amount of the claim. The amended Ordinance also tried to control the practice of polygamy among the Muslims in Singapore without actually banning it outright.

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<sup>18</sup> Siddique, Sharon. "The Administration of Islam in Singapore" in *Islam and Society in Southeast Asia*, Taufik Abdullah and Sharon Siddique (eds.), Singapore (Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1986), p.323

<sup>19</sup> Muslim (Amendment) Ordinance, 1960 No. 40 of 1960, Supplement to the Laws of the State of Singapore, 1960 (Singapore Government Printer, 1963)

On 13 December 1965, the Administration of Muslim Law Bill was introduced in the Singapore Parliament as a replacement of the 1957 Muslim Ordinance.<sup>20</sup> This Bill sought to establish an authoritarian Muslim Religious Council, known as the *Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura* (MUIS), to replace the Muslim Advisory Board in the country.<sup>21</sup> The Bill stipulated that MUIS was to consist of a President, who was to be appointed by the President of Singapore, and a *Mufti* chosen by the Public Service Commission. Not more than five members were to be appointed to MUIS by the President of Singapore on the advice of the Minister, and not less than seven members representing various Muslim organisations appointed from a list of nominees recommended by the President of MUIS.<sup>22</sup>

When the government announced its intention to table the Bill, there was much reaction from the Muslim community in Singapore. The Select Committee on the Bill received eighteen representations from Malay and Muslim organisations and individuals.

Fifteen local Muslim organisations attended a meeting organised by a Malay political party, *Angatan Islam*, to discuss the proposed Bill. A Muslim Review Action Committee (MLRAC) was set up to study the Bill. No consensus was reached at the meeting, the disagreement centring around the autonomy of the proposed MUIS. Many felt that under the present proposal, with the high proportion of members to be government appointed, MUIS would essentially be a government-controlled body. In its submission to the Select Committee, UMNO noted:

The Majlis should be absolutely independent of any Government influence. The Majlis must be clear of any political pressure. Such a Majlis will and can only be respected by the Muslims of Singapore.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Kassim believes that the Bill was introduced to in part to further the government's own political interests and partly to satisfy the demands of some Muslim organisations in the country. Kassim, (1974), p.48

<sup>21</sup> *The Administration of Muslim Law Act, 1966* (Singapore, Govt Printing Office, 1966), Part II (1).

<sup>22</sup> M. Siraj, "The Singapore Administration of Muslim Law Act, 1966", *World Muslim League*, III, 11 (Jan 1967) p.21

<sup>23</sup> *Report of the Select Committee on the Administration of Muslim Law Bill*, Appendix II, B30

The suggestion that twelve instead of seven members be appointed from Muslim societies was rejected by the government which claimed that the organisation of MUIS was identical to the Religious Councils in the Malaysian States, which provided for the Ruler to directly appoint members. UMNO refused to accept this explanation, stating that Singapore was a secular State and different from Malaysia, an Islamic country, and therefore, MUIS in Singapore should be entirely autonomous and independent from secular government control.<sup>24</sup> This objection however was not accepted by the Singapore government.

Despite reservations from several quarters in the Muslim community, the Administration of Muslim Law Bill was generally welcomed by Malays in the country. The Bill was passed in August 1966 and came into force on 1 July 1968. MUIS was thereby established as a government statutory board.

The role of MUIS is to advise the President of Singapore on matters relating to Islam. According to Siddique, an important result arising from the establishment of MUIS was the appointment of a *Mufti*<sup>25</sup> to head the *fatwa* committee that issues religious rulings in the country.<sup>26</sup> MUIS acts on behalf on the Muslim community in Singapore in dealing with the various government organisations.

MUIS' role as the government's advisor on Muslim affairs and the government-sanctioned supreme religious authority on Islamic law in Singapore can be seen as being severely paradoxical. In its dealings with the Muslim community at large and to secure Muslim loyalty, MUIS must de-emphasise its status as a government body. At the same time, its designation as a statutory organisation means that it has to work within the parameters prescribed by the government:

In fulfilling these two different roles, MUIS has developed machinery to penetrate all levels of Muslim life in Singapore. At the

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<sup>24</sup> Kassim, (1974), p.49

<sup>25</sup> The *Mufti* although holding an Islamic title, is a civil servant, appointed by the President of Singapore.

<sup>26</sup> Cited in Ali, Mariam Mohd., *Uniformity and Diversity Among Muslims in Singapore*, Singapore (Department of Sociology, 1990), p.11

general level, it controls all institutions concerned with the transmission of Islamic ideas by bureaucratising their administrative organisation. Through its monopoly over the information media, through its *Khutbah Jumaat* 'Friday sermons' and free publications, MUIS effectively selects the doctrines it thinks appropriate to the daily lives of Muslims (especially Malay Muslims) in Singapore. It is also deeply involved in education, *wakaf* administration, finance and the collection of *zakat* and *fitrah* tithes.<sup>27</sup>

Not all Muslims in Singapore however recognise the authority of MUIS as the supreme Islamic religious authority in Singapore. Many Malay Muslims still perceive the organisation to be essentially an extension of the government and as such, distrust the organisation's agenda. The Indian Muslims, on the other hand, see MUIS as a primarily Malay-Muslim organisation, catering only for the needs of the Malays in the country.<sup>28</sup>

As observed by Kho Ee Moi:

It is somewhat incongruous for a Secular State to have a Muslim Religious Council as a statutory body. Apparently the Government is not willing to give Islamic leaders a free rein because in the past, Muslim leaders had exploited religious issues and created trouble in Singapore.<sup>29</sup>

Another government-sanctioned Muslim organisation in Singapore is the Muslim Affairs Bureau (MAB). The Malay political arm of the ruling PAP, the MAB comprises of all the Malay Members of Parliament in Singapore, and its aim is to "represent and articulate the Malay interests within the Party".<sup>30</sup> The MAB meets to discuss issues that affect the country's Malay community and makes representations on these issues to

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<sup>27</sup> Ali, (1990), p.13-14

<sup>28</sup> Interview with Mariam Mohamad Ali, 27 May 1996.

<sup>29</sup> Kho Ee Moi, *Religion and State in Singapore 1959-1978*, Academic Exercise, Singapore (Department of History, 1980) p.41-42

<sup>30</sup> Zohri, Wan Hussin, *The Singapore Malays: The Dilemma of Development*, Singapore (Singapore Malay Teachers Union, 1990), p.60

Cabinet through the Minister-in-Charge of Muslim Affairs. Based on these recommendations, a policy or Bill can be modified before being introduced in Parliament.

Just like MUIS, the MAB has to reconcile its dual roles of representing the interests of the Malay community while working within national principles of multi-racialism and meritocracy. The contribution made by MAB in promoting Malay interests will be addressed below.

### MALAY MUSLIMS IN SINGAPORE – AN ISSUE OF IDENTITY

It is no exaggeration to say that of all the ethnic and religious groups in Singapore, the Malay Muslims have been involved in most disputes, either with the government or with other communal groups in the country. The problem stems from the identity of Singaporean Malays in a multi-ethnic and multi-religious population. This identity crisis is further compounded by the government's all encompassing espousal of secular policies in the country:

It is the term "Singaporean" that some Muslims have to grapple with because it indicates, even among Muslims, at least a semi-secular approach to world affairs and questions of inter-racial harmony.

Daily, Singaporeans see the need to synthesise divergent views. Daily, [Muslims] find that compromises are inescapable and that Muslims have to take a practical approach. This accommodation of the requirements of other religions, and the daily reminders of the need for give and take that are part of Singapore life, have taught us one important lesson:

SECULAR REALITIES WILL PREVAIL. IN OTHER WORDS, YOU MAY BE RIGHT BUT YOU CAN'T HAVE IT ALL YOUR OWN WAY.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Rasheed, Zainal Abidin, *The Ummah in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, 16-18 August 1991, p.2

The PAP's decision to contest the 1964 Federal elections inadvertently resulted in serious repercussions, one of which was that the "PAP emerged from the elections 'not only as a political enemy, but to a large extent as an enemy of the Malay community'".<sup>32</sup> Matters proceeded as follows.

In July 1964, Singapore UMNO<sup>33</sup> organised a Malay Convention, during which the Singapore Malay National Action Committee was formed. The Committee pressed for the recognition of Malay interests in Singapore. At a meeting with representatives from about 100 Malay organisations in the country, Lee announced that the special privileges enshrined in the 1957 Federal Constitution will not be made available to the Singapore Malays. He maintained that the Malay problem could only be successfully resolved through better educational attainment.<sup>34</sup> This inter-party rivalry between the PAP and Singapore UMNO, and the inter-government rivalry within the Federation, compounded the already tense situation in the area. The Singaporean Malays were of the impression that merger with Malaya would automatically mean that the special concessions enjoyed by their Malayan counterparts would be extended to apply to them.

Extremist members of UMNO accused the PAP of uniting the Chinese against the Malays and being anti-Malay. UMNO organised a 'hatred campaign' in Singapore, exploiting the issue of ethnicity in an effort to win the island's Malay voters. Both the Malayan and Singapore branches of UMNO further fuelled the communal feelings of the Malays by attacking the PAP for its apparent discrimination of the Malays, and not keeping with the Constitutional ruling of promoting the welfare of the Malay community.

Thus provoked, the Singapore Malays put on a protest demonstration to show their resentment of the PAP's challenge of their Constitutional entitlement to special privileges. To compound the problem, the then on-going Confrontation<sup>35</sup> with Indonesia served to

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<sup>32</sup> Chew, Ernest and Lee, E., *A History of Singapore*, Singapore (Oxford University Press, 1991), p.145

<sup>33</sup> Merger with the Federation meant a more favourable political state of affairs for the party. Singapore UMNO had the support of the Malays who now formed the majority, and coupled with backing from Malaysian UMNO, the dominant party in the Federal Alliance Government, felt a heightened sense of political leverage with the Singapore government.

<sup>34</sup> Zohri, p.19

<sup>35</sup>

incite the religious fervour of the more fanatical segment of the island's Malay community. These various incidents culminated in an outbreak of Malay-Chinese rioting during the Prophet Mohammad's birthday celebration procession in Singapore in 1964. The atmosphere itself was definitely conducive for an outbreak of communal conflict as noted by Leifer:

Religious celebrations are notorious in plural societies as occasions of low boiling point. The heightened fervour of such times can easily induce attitudes of religious chauvinism towards non-believers.<sup>36</sup>

The unrest lasted for several days in July and broke out again for a few days in September. Altogether, a reported six hundred were injured and thirty three people killed.<sup>37</sup> As a result of these riots, all processions in honour of Prophet Mohammad's birthday have since been banned in Singapore.

One allegation that surfaced in the wake of the riots was that members of Malaysian UMNO had been agitating the Malays in the island. It was also seen as a political move designed to embarrass the Chinese-dominated PAP government in Singapore.<sup>38</sup> The other allegation was that on the eve of the riots, the Singapore Malay National Action Committee, formed in July 1964 under the sponsorship of UMNO<sup>39</sup>, had distributed pamphlets urging Malays to kill the Chinese.<sup>40</sup>

Barely a year after the 1964 riots, the Malays in Singapore were again involved in another confrontation, this time with the Christian community in the country. This conflict was triggered by articles published in *Utusan Melayu*, a Malay-language newspaper in Malaysia with a branch in Singapore, condemning Christian missionary activity in

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<sup>36</sup> Michael Leifer, "Communal Violence in Singapore", *Asian Survey*, IV, 10 (Oct 1964), p.115

<sup>37</sup> Leifer, p.115

<sup>38</sup> Leifer, p.115

<sup>39</sup> After Separation, Singapore UMNO lost political backing from Malaysia, and found itself having to readjust its operations in the multi-racial environment of Singapore. At the threat of being deregistered as a political organisation, Singapore UMNO changed its name in 1967 to *Pertubuhan Kebangsaan Melayu Singapura* (PKMS) or the Singapore Malays National Organisation.

<sup>40</sup> Leifer, p.115

Singapore. One article for example, written by a Sheikh Abdullah Basmeh, accused Catholics of employing “dirty tactics” like offering money and making promises of employment and housing, in an attempt to convert Singapore Muslim youths to Christianity.<sup>41</sup> These accusations<sup>42</sup> compounded with the allegations that there were some Muslims in Singapore converting to Christianity, served to agitate the local Muslim community.

On 30 September 1965 Lee Kuan Yew called a meeting of Christian leaders in Singapore and members of the Inter-Religious Organisation<sup>43</sup> to address the issue. During the meeting, Lee stressed the need for religious harmony in the country:

...this is a multi-racial, multi-lingual, multi-religious society and that tolerance between racial groups, linguistic groups and religious groups is of the essence for our survival;...I see no need for going around looking for the 12% of Muslims to try and convert them because I think there are some 60-70% of people who are in need of some form of religious and moral guidance.<sup>44</sup>

This situation has to be examined in perspective in order to appreciate the severity of the issue. It unfolded in the wake of Singapore’s separation from Malaysia and after the PAP’s questioning of the special position and privileges accorded to the Malay community. It was also a time when the Singapore government was trying to obtain global political recognition and to establish the island’s position in the Afro-Asian Commonwealth of Nations.<sup>45</sup> Lee noted that the anti-Christian campaign was a political manoeuvre, designed to embarrass his good standing with African Muslim leaders like President Nasser and President Sekou Toure. Given the circumstances, Lee claimed that he would be placed in a difficult position trying to explain to the African leaders any

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<sup>41</sup> *Mirror*, I (29), 18 September 1965

<sup>42</sup> The veracity of these claims is not known because Christian leaders in Singapore did not publicly reply to the allegations.

<sup>43</sup> The functions of the organisation will be analysed in-depth in Chapter 9.

<sup>44</sup> *Prime Minister’s Speeches*, 1965

<sup>45</sup> *Mirror*, I (30), 25 September 1965

potential outbreak of religious conflict between the Christian and Muslims in Singapore.<sup>46</sup>

There were basically two ways in which the government could have handled the issue. One was by officially legislating against all forms of proselytising and conversion among Muslims in Singapore. This would not have been well received by the other religious groups, which would have perceived this as an infringement of their religious rights to propagate their religion. The second option, which was adopted by the government, was for the Christian leaders to state publicly their non-intention of preaching to Muslims in Singapore. After the 30 September meeting, the Christian leaders issued a statement which was published in the *Utusan Melayu*:

...We recognise that there are many ways of approach to God and believing in the freedom of religion, we respect the right of the individual to determine what his approach shall be...

It has never been the tradition or the practice of the Christian Church in this country to go out of its way to convert Muslims to Christianity.

The Roman Catholic Church would like to stress that it has been their policy here to refrain from making converts of Muslims to their faith.<sup>47</sup>

Lee accused *Utusan Melayu* of engaging in an insidious campaign against Christians, especially the Roman Catholic Church. Dato' Hussein Nordin, the Chief Editor and managing director of the *Utusan Melayu* in Singapore, was threatened with legal action if he continued to carry articles in his newspaper "which could arouse a religious war".<sup>48</sup> For his part, Nordin assured the government that he was sympathetic to its efforts to maintain harmony and stability in the country.

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<sup>46</sup> *Prime Minister's Speeches*, 1965

<sup>47</sup> *Straits Times* 1 October 1965

<sup>48</sup> *Mirror*, I (32), 9 October 1965

In 1970, the government's insistence for a separate edition of the *Utusan Melayu*, with separate facilities in Singapore, resulted in the cessation of the paper's publication in the country.<sup>49</sup>

In 1966, six Malay extremists belonging to two underground groups, the *Pasokan Gerak Cepat Bumiputra Singapura* and the *Gerakan Pemuda Islam Singapura*, were detained in Singapore under the Sedition Act, on the charge that they were trying to incite racial hatred and create disorder in the country.<sup>50</sup>

In 1969, racial riots erupted again between the Chinese and Malays, and although not as severe as the 1964 incident, it nonetheless served to highlight the fact that religious and ethnic undercurrents were still evident in Singapore.

These 1969 riots in Singapore were actually spillover effects from what has since been labelled the 'May 13<sup>th</sup>' racial riots in Malaysia. The riots started when the Malaysian Malays believed that their country and Islam were threatened by the other ethnic groups, while the Malaysian Chinese and Indians felt that the Malay community was receiving many privileges which were denied to them. Fighting broke out between these various ethnic groups and the ensuing riots led to a state of emergency being proclaimed on 13<sup>th</sup> May in Kuala Lumpur.

No official announcement was made by the PAP government in Singapore when the riots broke out in Kuala Lumpur. It feared that any publicity given to the Malaysian riots would incite the various communal groups in Singapore to follow suit. Both the police and the military were deployed to deal with the sporadic incidents of fighting which broke out in the island and to contain the spread of the riots. The Singapore government also imposed a media blackout on the Malaysian scene.

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<sup>49</sup> Russel Henry Betts, *Multi-racialism, Meritocracy and the Malays of Singapore*, (PhD Thesis, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1975) p.237 cited in Khoo Cheng Eng, *Management of Ethnic Relations in Singapore: Changes in 1986?*, Singapore (Department of Political Science, 1988), p.19

<sup>50</sup> Shee Poon Kim, "The Evolution of the Political Systems" in *Government and Politics of Singapore*, Jon S.T. Quah, Chan Heng Chee and Seah Chee Meow (eds.), Singapore (Oxford Uni Press, 1987), p.15

According to one commentator, the cause of the riots can be traced to the Malaysian general election that year. It was claimed that political opposition parties inflamed racial tensions in Malaysia by playing on the communal sentiments of the people.<sup>51</sup>

This incident resulted in the amendment of the Malaysian Sedition Act (1948) in 1970 which now rules against public questioning of the Constitutional Provision regarding the special position of the Malays in Malaysia.<sup>52</sup> This amendment means that religious freedom in Malaysia is now subject to the special Constitutional status accorded to Islam.<sup>53</sup>

In March 1970, youths from Singapore's *Pertubohan Kebangsaan Melayu* (PKM) burned copies of a history textbook to protest the book's portrayal of the country's Malays. The protesters claimed that the textbook failed to acknowledge the contribution made by the Malay community to the early development of Singapore. They also objected to the book's depiction of Singapore's pre-Colonial history as "pure legend".

On 20 June Singapore's *Majlis Pusat* sent a letter to the Minister of Education detailing its objections to the book and received an assurance from the Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Education<sup>54</sup> that amendments would be made to the relevant sections of the book.

In August the PKM organised a meeting of all the country's Malay/Muslim organisations to discuss the book. The meeting was attended by about twenty Muslim organisations<sup>55</sup> in Singapore. By 20 August an Action Committee was formed by these organisations and one of its first actions was to dispatch a letter<sup>56</sup> to the Education Minister requesting a meeting. The Ministry however maintained that a meeting was unnecessary in the light of its decision to revise the offending textbook.

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<sup>51</sup> Tun Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman, cited in the *Straits Times* 20 September 1992

<sup>52</sup> Emergency (Essential Powers) Ordinance No 45 of 1970.

<sup>53</sup> See the section on 'Malaysia' in the *Introduction* for more details.

<sup>54</sup> Letter dated 8 September 1970 cited in Kassim, p.48

<sup>55</sup> *Majlis Pusat* however was not present at the meeting, having previously accepted the Ministry's assurances of amending the textbook.

<sup>56</sup> 28 August 1970 cited in Kassim, p. 49

The Action Committee rejected the amendment offer, insisting instead that the book be withdrawn. This difference in opinion as to whether the book should be revised, as accepted by *Majlis Pusat* and a few other Malay organisations, as opposed to PKM and Perwanit, which favoured nothing less than a complete withdrawal of the book, signified a split in the country's Malay camp. According to Kassim:

*Majlis Pusat* leaders were not willing to get involved with PKM on the premise that if PKM became involved, the issue might be turned into a political issue and hence the chances of success would be lessened.<sup>57</sup>

This issue was resolved with the Ministry's amendment of the history textbook with no more protests being voiced by the Action Committee.

#### MALAYS IN THE SINGAPORE ARMED FORCES

Another point of contention between the Malays and the government has been the issue of the position of Malays in the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF).

Under British colonial administration, about 80% of Singapore's army and police forces was composed of Malays. History bears testimony to the fact that colonial governments have relied upon security forces composed of minority groups to keep the majority of the population in a state of submission, as evidenced by the army of the British Raj in India and Burma, and that of the Dutch in the Netherlands East Indies.<sup>58</sup>

This state of affairs is not appropriate for a post-independence government, especially if the loyalty of the ethnic minority group towards the new State is questionable. According to Bedlington:

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<sup>57</sup> Kassim, p.53

<sup>58</sup> Bedlington, Stanley S. "Ethnicity and the Armed Forces in Singapore" in *Ethnicity and the Military in Asia*, DeWitt C. Ellinwood and Cynthia H. Enloe (eds.), New Brunswick (Transaction Inc., 1981) p.257

...the race riots, plus Indonesian confrontation, during the 1963-1964 period, when Singapore Malay hostility to the PAP government emerged in various forms, served to heighten the government's inherent distrust of Malay motivations, hastening the desire to drastically change ethnic proportions in the security forces.<sup>59</sup>

Hence the Singapore government's decision in 1965 to replace the Malays in the country's security forces with non-Malays until the ethnic composition of the army and police reflected the ethnic population make-up of the State itself.

Immediately after Separation from Malaysia, the Singapore government realised the need to build a credible defence force, and to this end, it instituted a policy of compulsory military training. Under this policy, all Singaporean males would be required to undergo a two-year period of national service.

However in light of its decision to reduce the number of Malays in the country's security forces, very few Malays within conscription age were called up for full-time National Service as compared to males from the other ethnic communities. This served to fuel rumours that Malays were being discriminated against by the government.<sup>60</sup> Further accusations of discrimination ranged from the allegation that those Malays already in National Service were being passed over for promotion, to the belief that existing Malay SAF officers were being consigned to non-sensitive administration posts. A frequently cited example in the Malay community involved a senior police officer who was reassigned to a non-sensitive post in the civil service dealing with the organisation of sporting events.<sup>61</sup>

There were also practical socio-economic implications with the Malays not being called up for national service. The Malays have traditionally looked towards the military and police as important avenues for employment, something which the colonial government had always encouraged. Therefore the PAP's policy of not recruiting Malays in the

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<sup>59</sup> Bedlington, p.258

<sup>60</sup> Kassim, p.48

<sup>61</sup> Bedlington, p.258

security field meant that one of the established lines of occupations for the community was effectively closed, adding to the problem of unemployment among the Malays.

To further aggravate the problem, all males in Singapore have to produce a Certificate of Completion of, or an Exemption from, national service before they can be employed. Because Malay males were not called for National Service, they could not produce a Certificate of Completion to gain employment. They were also not issued with Certificates of Exemption because this government policy regarding the Malays and national service was not made public. The Malays were therefore severely at a disadvantage; in keeping with government policy, Malay males in Singapore were denied an opportunity to enlist for national service, and at the same time, they were not able to be gainfully employed because they could not furnish their potential employers with the required national service certificate.

Members of existing Malay political parties in the country were not reported as taking an official stand on the matter, and neither did any other Malay social or religious organisations, local or regional. The PAP government chose not to respond officially to the accusations levelled at its policies; a few Malay MPs however made references to the issue. The then Senior Minister of State, Ya'acob Mohammad, maintained that there was no racial discrimination but admitted that there were other logistical problems such as appropriate food for Malay SAF personnel. Ya'acob also claimed that he had previously requested Lee Kuan Yew not to exempt the Malays from National Service so that the latter could get jobs in order to contribute to the family finances. Two other Malay MPs<sup>62</sup> also commented on the matter. One noted that only the English-educated Malays were called up for military training, alleging also that Goh Keng Swee, the then Defence Minister, did not have "sufficient trust in Malays at present". The other MP maintained that the Malays were discriminated against, not on a racial basis but on administrative grounds. He also hoped that "perhaps the story might be told in full in the future."

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<sup>62</sup> Kassim does not name these government officials in his book.

In the face of overt Muslim discontent<sup>63</sup>, the government quietly changed its policy to accept more Malays for national service in 1973.

Ironically seventeen years later, a non-Malay government leader who in fact addressed the issue of Malays in the SAF, was strongly criticised by Malays in the country and in the region. Replying to a question raised during a National Agenda Forum on 23 February 1987 in Singapore, Brigadier-General Lee Hsien Loong<sup>64</sup> admitted that the Republic's Malays did not usually hold high positions in the SAF:

We live in South East Asia. If there is a conflict, if the SAF is called upon to defend our homeland, we don't want to put any of our soldiers in a difficult position where his emotions for the nation may come in conflict with his emotions for his religion, because these are two very strong fundamentals, and if they are not compatible, then they will be two very strong destructive force in opposite directions. Soldiers in combat must have no qualms about what they are fighting for.

And we don't want to put anybody in that position where he feels he is not fighting a just cause, and perhaps worse, maybe his side is not the right side. That would be an intolerable position for the person and an unworkable position for the armed forces.

It is a reality of life and it is something we cannot dodge, but which, gradually, as a national identity develops, will grow to be less of a problem.<sup>65</sup>

The Malays in Malaysia have always been quick to rush to the rescue of their ethnic kin in Singapore on occasions when it was perceived that the latter were being “persecuted” by either the government and/or the other non-Malay communities, as illustrated by the

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<sup>63</sup> “*Surat terbang*” (“flying letters”) or underground pamphlets addressing the alleged discrimination of Malays in the SAF were circulated by the Malays in Singapore.

<sup>64</sup> The eldest son of Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew. BG Lee is the Minister for Trade and Industry and the Second Minister for Defence (Services) in Singapore.

<sup>65</sup> Cited in *Petir* April 1987, p.9

Herzog incident of 1986<sup>66</sup>. It is therefore not surprising that the comment made by BG Lee received much criticism from across the Causeway. The Deputy Chairman of the opposition *Parti Socialis Rakyat Malaysia* (PSRM) accused the PAP government of “chauvinism” for questioning the loyalty of the Malays. He called for Singapore’s Malays and the Malay PAP leaders to protest against the government’s military policy.<sup>67</sup>

Accusations of discrimination against the Malays in Singapore were also received from Indonesia, where a newspaper, *Merdeka*, carried an editorial on 1 April 1987 alleging that the “injustice towards the Malays in Singapore” was now confirmed by the government’s “arrogant military policy”. It further claimed that this military policy put “Malay values, the credibility of the Malay people, Islam and the Malay culture, in their widest meaning, a target of that policy”. The editorial also maintained that in the opinion of “ultra-nationalist Malays”, Singapore although an independent and sovereign nation, is historically “the land of the Malays”. Justifying Indonesia’s right to comment on the issue, the newspaper noted that:

...because the military policy contains aspects of anthropology, race, culture and religion as its background, the sensitivity which has been incited has expanded beyond the confines of Singapore.

There should not be any surprise then over the fact that Malay sensitivity and Malay solidarity over the injustice towards Malays in Singapore have surfaced, especially when various aspects of the discrimination were being carried out right under the noses of the Malay people.<sup>68</sup>

#### POSITIVE PROVISIONS FOR MALAYS

Despite these perceptions by Malaysian critics, it must be noted that the Malays in Singapore were not on the receiving end of entirely negative discrimination by the State. By virtue of their religious traditions alone, Muslims in Singapore are accorded many privileges. Muslim government servants, for example, are allowed to be absent from the

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<sup>66</sup> To be discussed in Chapter 4.

<sup>67</sup> *Straits Times* 1 March 1987

<sup>68</sup> *Merdeka* 1 April 1987 in *Straits Times*, 2 April 1987

office from noon to 1pm to attend public worship. They are also entitled to pilgrimage leave to perform the Haj. The Muslim Women's Welfare Home, which was initiated by the Muslim Advisory Board, was subsequently taken over by the Social Welfare Department.<sup>69</sup>

Muslims in Singapore are also exempted from certain sections of the Women's Charter of 1961.<sup>70</sup> Section 4 of the Charter institutes monogamy in the country, but Muslims are exempted from this on the basis that Islam sanctions polygamy. Although it is not known if the practice of polygamy is rife among Muslims in Singapore, the fact that they are nonetheless made an exception to the edict indicates the willingness of the PAP to accommodate the interests of the Muslim community wherever possible.

Provisions in the Women's Charter dealing with the issues of marriage, divorce and annulment also do not apply to Muslims in Singapore. Section 84 of the Charter only permits divorce on stipulated grounds and these grounds are applicable to both husband and wife. The Muslim husband however retains the right to repudiate his wife.<sup>71</sup> The Charter also stipulates that the minimum age of marriage for Singaporean males and females is eighteen years, although in special circumstances, a woman under eighteen years of age can be granted permission by the Minister to marry. Again, Muslims are exempted from the minimum age provision in the Charter.

The Singapore Housing and Development Board (HDB) undertook to beautify HDB blocks of flats<sup>72</sup> by painting wall murals and graphics with cultural themes. The MAB raised this issue with the Ministry of Community Development because it felt that "the possibility of having HDB blocks painted with the picture of the pig as one of the

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<sup>69</sup> Ahmad bin Mohd. Ibrahim, "The Legal Position of Muslims in Singapore" *World Muslim League*, I, 1 (Nov 1963) p.50

<sup>70</sup> 'Women's Charter', Ordinance No. 18 of 1961, *Supplement to the Laws of the State of Singapore, 1961*, Singapore (Government Printer, 1964). The Charter is the most significant measure of family law reform in the country; from 15 September 1961, the Charter made the practice of monogamy mandatory for all non-Muslim citizens.

<sup>71</sup> The *kadi* could dissolve a Muslim marriage if both husband and wife appeared together and signed the register voluntarily. Hickling, R.H. "The influence of Islam on Singapore Law" in *Essays in Singapore Law* (Pelanduk Publications, Malaysia, 1992), p.148

<sup>72</sup> The majority of Singaporeans live in HDB apartments.

Chinese Zodiac designs would be repugnant to the Malay residents of the affected blocks.”<sup>73</sup> The Ministry assured MAB that given its opposition, Chinese Zodiac signs will not be painted on HDB blocks but will instead be painted “sparingly” on commercial buildings in town centres.

In 1983, the *Straits Times* published a letter in its Forum page criticising the content of a history textbook, *Singapore Social and Economic Developments from 1819 to 1965*<sup>74</sup>, which it claimed was “causing doubts among the people of Singapore especially the Malays”<sup>75</sup>. The leader of the team from the Curriculum Development Institute of Singapore which was developing the textbook was reported to have claimed that “the period[sic] [of Singapore’s history] before 1819 was covered with tales which are either mixed with legends or are too vague to be accepted to be true...”<sup>76</sup>. The MAB objected to the statement and reminded the Ministry of Education that the issue was reminiscent of the History book burning incident of 1970. In light of MAB’s recommendation, the Ministry amended the book to include a section on Singapore’s history before 1819.

In 1987 a few Muslims in Singapore raised questions about the government’s policy of demolishing mosques which were sited on land acquired for public development. It was alleged that the government had on occasions, acquired ‘*wakaf*’ land, land donated by philanthropists for the building of mosques, religious schools, Muslim cemeteries and charitable homes. It was also claimed that government compensation paid for the acquired land was lower than market rates. The 28 August issue of *Mingguan Islam*, a Malaysian weekly, carried a letter by a Malaysian writer accusing Lee Kuan Yew of being “anti-Islam” and “anti-Malay”.<sup>77</sup>

Replying to this accusation, Dr Ahmad Mattar, then Singapore’s Minister for the Environment and Minister-in-Charge of Muslim Affairs, claimed that far from being discriminated against by the government, the Muslim community in Singapore enjoyed

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<sup>73</sup> Zoohri, p.62

<sup>74</sup> The textbook was designed for use in Lower Secondary schools in Singapore.

<sup>75</sup> *Utusan Melayu*, 31 January 1983, p.18 cited in Zoohri, p.63

<sup>76</sup> Cited in Zoohri, p.63

<sup>77</sup> *Mingguan Islam*, 28 August 1987

privileges which were not available to the other religious groups in the country. For example, land allocated for the building of mosques in housing estates are provided by the government at three or four times less than its market value, terms not offered to other religious organisations. Furthermore, land allocated for mosque construction is made available on a ninety-nine year lease, while sites for other religious institutions are let by the government on a thirty-year lease in cases of resettlement or sixty-year leases through public tender.<sup>78</sup>

The President of MUIS, Zainal Abidin Rasheed, also cited another occasion when the Muslims were accorded priority by the government. When Lee Kuan Yew was Prime Minister, he was approached by both the Muslim and the Chinese communities requesting a piece of prime land in a housing estate, the former to build a mosque and the latter wanted the land for recreational purposes. Lee decided to award the land to the Malay community.<sup>79</sup>

Anticipating strong Muslim displeasure when the Aminah Mosque<sup>80</sup> was to be demolished, the Ministry of National Development acceded to MAB's request for an alternative mosque to be built near the Aminah Mosque. In fact, development on the site of the original mosque was postponed until the new alternative mosque was completed.<sup>81</sup>

It was reported in 1986<sup>82</sup> that there were Christian missionaries in Singapore distributing Malay-language pamphlets containing Christian religious teachings to Muslims in Singapore. *Berita Harian*<sup>83</sup> reporters conducted a month-long investigation into these allegations and found that members of the Malay Christian Fellowship<sup>84</sup>, formed sometime in the late seventies or early eighties, were distributing Christian literature to Malays through mailboxes or stuffing them under the doors of Muslim

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<sup>78</sup> Government Press Release No 9/Oct 1987, 02-0/87/10/03

<sup>79</sup> *Straits Times*, 21 Jan 1995

<sup>80</sup> The Mosque was situated in the Kampung Ubi constituency, a once predominantly Malay area.

<sup>81</sup> Zoohri, p.63

<sup>82</sup> *Straits Times* 6 September 1986

<sup>83</sup> The only Malay-language newspaper in Singapore.

<sup>84</sup> This group was not formally organised or registered with the Registrar of Societies in Singapore.

households. MUIS issued a statement to *Berita Harian* noting that the increased zealous evangelical activities of some Christians was a disturbing trend for Singapore Muslims.<sup>85</sup> The *Mufti* of Singapore, Syed Isa Semait, also called for Christian groups actively engaged in evangelism to leave the Muslim community out of their proselytisation endeavours.<sup>86</sup>

On 24 April 1987, four Malays were detained in Singapore under the Internal Security Act for spreading race-riot rumours.<sup>87</sup> The four were members of unregistered *silat* (martial arts) groups in the country. The Home Affairs Ministry alleged that the detainees were preparing for impending racial clashes in commemoration of the 1969 May 13<sup>th</sup> riots in Malaysia. The statement also claimed that the accused had prepared and distributed red sashes which would have supposedly rendered the wearer invulnerable during the clashes. According to the Ministry, news about the arrests was delayed<sup>88</sup> on the advice of the Minister-in-Charge of Muslim Affairs because it was the Muslim fasting month and the approaching *Hari Raya Aidilfitri* festivities. The government also wanted to avoid creating any public anxiety on or around May 13<sup>th</sup>.

## CONCLUSION

The “Malay problem” in Singapore is multi-faceted, involving the economic, educational and social position of the Malay community. In 1975 R.H.Betts summarised the issue thus:

Since 1965, Singapore has attempted to realise its non-communal egalitarianism through a state experiment in accelerated social mobilization and modernization, the objective of which has been the creation in Singapore of a 21st-century multiracial meritocracy. As this process has proceeded, “the Malay problem” has become one of the more perplexing development/modernization/integration issues compelling the attention of the government and of the community itself. The logical imperatives of multiracialism have dictated the

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<sup>85</sup> *Straits Times*, 30 October 1986

<sup>86</sup> *Straits Times*, 28 August 1986

<sup>87</sup> Eight others implicated in the act were let off with warnings.

<sup>88</sup> A report about the arrest was only published in the *Straits Times* on 4 June 1987.

increasing political unacceptability of community-specific considerations designed to enhance Malay competitiveness or to promote Malay integration while, in the face of accelerating rate of general socio-economic development in Singapore, there is growing Malay concern that in the absence of such consideration the Malays are threatened with being left irrevocably on the periphery.<sup>89</sup>

This observation by Betts is no longer entirely accurate for the Malay community in Singapore which has managed to survive rather successfully living by the meritocracy principle advocated in Singapore. The main concern with regard to the Malays in Singapore at present deals with the issue of religion.

In his analysis of Islam in Asia, Espoused<sup>90</sup> indicated that the Muslim's concern with Islam changes in response to major global socio-political developments. The seventh century concern with gaining converts shifted to concern about the expansion of the Islamic empire a few centuries later. With the advent of colonialism in Asia, Islam was compartmentalised and confined to the private domain, thereby allowing the 'non-Islamic' socio-political system dominance in the public sphere. This led to the emergence of the various revivalist movements which sought to reassert the relevance of Islam to public life.

The rise of Islamic revivalism among Muslims in Singapore has been attributed to the "educated members of the Malay population":

...[they] were the ones who first opted for such a construction of religion, due to contacts with various trans-national organisations and the body of religious literature which they disseminated. These organisations in turn have enforced their own perspectives by dominating local religious institutions, such as mosques, and consciously attempting to change the mode of religious orientation amongst family and friends.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Betts, 1975, cited in Rasheed, Zainal Abidin, 21 Jan 1995, p.8

<sup>90</sup> (1987) Cited in Ali, p.5

<sup>91</sup> Ali, p.4

Given the acknowledgement that Islamic fundamentalism is gaining ground in Singapore, it is entirely possible that the Muslim community will continue to clash with the government and/or the various religious groups in the country:

Islam, if misunderstood, be it by the Muslims, or the non-Muslims, can pose serious credibility crises among Singaporeans.<sup>92</sup>

Furthermore, the world-wide resurgence of Islam means that there is a call for a greater identification of Muslims to the *ummah*. In Singapore, this translates into a rising concern about the fundamental incompatibility between loyalty to religion and one's country. In addressing the issue a Muslim Member of Parliament gave the assurance that Muslims in Singapore understood their role as a Singaporean and as a member of the *ummah* and therefore face no conflict of loyalties, even in a secular environment:

We Muslim Singaporeans are the product of a unique environment.

We are Muslims. We are Malays. We are Singaporeans....

The first, that is Muslim, is the category by which we define ourselves.

The second is the cultural qualification of that definition.

The third – Singaporean – is the context in which that definition is set.<sup>93</sup>

The rise of fundamentalism in the other religions in Singapore also poses a threat to Islam. In a speech at the opening of the Parliament of Religions in 1989, BG Lee noted that the government was extremely concerned about the increasing reports of Christian groups trying to convert Muslims in the country:

It is no secret that the Government discourages Christian groups from aggressively proselytising among the Muslim community in

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<sup>92</sup> Zainal Abidin Rasheed, The People's Association Lecture Series, 21 January 1995, p.16

<sup>93</sup> Zainal Abidin Rasheed, cited in *Straits Times*, 14 March 1998

Singapore. A few extremists groups do deliberately seek to do just this.

The Internal Security Department has reported individual cases of preachers delivering fiery sermons, exhorting their congregations to convert Malays to Christianity, even if this means bloodshed and martyrdom.

It would be hard to imagine a surer and swifter recipe for disaster.<sup>94</sup>

Ironically, although proselytising among Muslims is frowned upon, there is no such restriction within the Muslim community itself. For example, the Muslim Converts' Association of Singapore is actively engaged with the propagating of Islam to non-Muslims in Singapore.

According to Rajaratnam, communal conflict is always coloured by language and religious differences, but the root of communalism is economic discontent. In his opinion, righting the economic imbalance between the races would ultimately eradicate communalism.<sup>95</sup> This sentiment was also recently echoed by Zainal Abidin Rasheed, who questioned if economic dissatisfaction could be a link to inter-racial conflict. He cites the example of an economist who once noted that as long as Singapore manages to maintain its 6% economic growth, the “superficially skin-deep racial harmony in Singapore” will last:

When our economy was in the midst of a recession in the mid 80s, way below the 6 percent growth bench mark, issues such as the controversy over the Israeli President's visit and the Malays in the SAF surfaced, challenging, if not threatening, the stability of the multi-religious fabric of our society.<sup>96</sup>

The 1964 and 1969 race-riots previously discussed are prime examples of how economic disparity between the Malays and other ethnic groups in the country has the

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<sup>94</sup> *Straits Times*, 1 May 1989

<sup>95</sup> 'The Cultural Approach to Politics', *Petir*, II (15), 7 Sept 1960.

<sup>96</sup> Abidin, 21 Jan 1995, p.9

potential to manifest as ethnic and religious tension between the communities. Any insinuation that the Malay community or their religion was on the receiving end of discrimination was more than sufficient motivation to agitate the community as demonstrated by the Maria Hertogh case. If left unchecked, such issues needlessly result in the undermining of smooth relations between the different groups in a plural society.

All the examples in this Chapter serve to indicate that the Islamic community is constantly faced with the challenge of their role as Muslims in a secular nation-state like Singapore. When it involves the question of loyalty to the country, the Muslims are an unknown factor in Singapore as indicated by the previously discussed events. Their strong religious fervour, coupled with the renewed calls for a greater identification with the *ummah* means that more than the other religious communities in the country, the Muslims in Singapore pose a serious challenge to the government. This is because it is not known if the increased identification with the *ummah* ultimately diminishes the community's loyalty to the country, and if so, if this will be a potential threat to the peaceful ethnic and religious coexistence in Singapore. This theme will be expanded on further in the next few Chapters.

## CHAPTER 4

### THE HERZOG VISIT TO SINGAPORE: AN INSULT TO MUSLIMS?

Communal tension in Singapore has not always been triggered solely by factors within the country itself. There have been occasions when racial and religious dissension in the Republic have been instigated by outside influences. This chapter will serve to highlight the ease with which the country's existing harmonious religious coexistence can become vulnerable to external determinants. In November 1986, two 'controversial' figures visited Singapore, providing the impetus for varying degrees of opposition from numerous groups in the ASEAN region. On 18 November, President Herzog of Israel paid a three-day official visit to Singapore and two days later, Pope John Paul II made a five-hour stopover in the Republic. This chapter will provide a brief chronological overview of these said events, focusing primarily on the role played by political, social and religious groups in Singapore and in neighbouring countries, particularly Malaysia. The treatment accorded by the media in these countries to related issues will also be scrutinised.

In 1984, Singapore's then Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew, agreed to a State visit by Chaim Herzog, the President of Israel. According to Lee's subsequent recollection of events, he had only yielded to the visit on the proviso that Herzog was visiting the region and not only Singapore.<sup>1</sup> The visit, scheduled for April/May 1985, was subsequently cancelled by Israel.

Singapore's Ministry of Foreign Affairs later extended another official invitation for Herzog to visit Singapore as part of his 1986 Asian Pacific tour, which included Australia, New Zealand, Fiji, Tonga, Hong Kong and Sri Lanka. Although Philippines was initially included in the official tour, that particular stopover was later cancelled. The invitation to visit Philippines was allegedly extended to Herzog by Jose Cojuangco, the brother of President Corazon Aquino, without prior consultation with the Philippine Foreign Ministry. Because of the renewed Muslim secessionist problem in southern

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<sup>1</sup> *Straits Times*, 15 December 1986

Philippines at that time, the proposed visit was deemed inopportune and consequently called off by the Philippine government.<sup>2</sup>

On 23 October 1986, the Israeli Embassy in Singapore released an official announcement to the *Straits Times*, Singapore's main daily English newspaper, about Herzog's forthcoming visit.

The following day, the Deputy Head of Kedah's<sup>3</sup> UMNO Youth requested Singapore to reconsider the invitation, deeming it insensitive to Malaysia's policy. As a result of the on-going Middle East conflict, Malaysia does not recognise the State of Israel, supporting instead the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO). On 25 October Malaysia's Prime Minister, Datuk Sri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, resisted lodging a formal protest against the visit, claiming that would amount to interference in Singapore's domestic affairs. Malaysia's other government ministers however displayed no such restraint; its Defence Minister, Education Minister, and Deputy Foreign Minister openly criticised the visit as being an insult to Malaysia and other countries in the region. On 30 October, the PLO representative in Malaysia organised a meeting of Arab missions in Kuala Lumpur.<sup>4</sup> Viewing the proposed visit with "strange astonishment", the PLO representative nonetheless thanked his "Malaysian brothers" for their brave opposition to the visit.<sup>5</sup>

Malaysia was not the only country in the region which protested against President Herzog's visit. Indonesia's Foreign Ministry expressed concern at the consequences the visit might bear on ASEAN solidarity and in protest, recalled its ambassador to Singapore. Despite being the largest Muslim state in ASEAN, Indonesia's reaction to the visit was not as impassioned in comparison with Malaysia's. In fact, observers in Indonesia judged their country's objection to Herzog's visit as being perfunctory:

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<sup>2</sup> *Sunday Times*, 16 November 1986

<sup>3</sup> A state in northern Malaysia.

<sup>4</sup> In 1986, Malaysia was the only ASEAN country to have given permission for the PLO to establish a diplomatic office in the country.

<sup>5</sup> *Straits Times*, 15 December 1986

...Indonesia has no choice but to protest against the visit of Mr Herzog, especially after certain groups in Malaysia have kicked up a storm over the first-ever visit of an Israeli leader to this region....

Indonesia,... has to make its position clear for the benefit of friends in the Islamic world, and for domestic consumption too.

As a result of tough government policies on Muslim hardliners in the country, Indonesia's majority Muslim population has not been as vocal as their co-religionists in Malaysia...<sup>6</sup>

Meanwhile in Singapore, some political and social organisations also began to voice their unhappiness about Herzog's visit. The Singapore Malay National Organisation (PKMS), the Singapore branch of what was UMNO before Separation, issued a press statement to Singapore's Malay newspaper *Berita Harian* on 5 November criticising the government's decision to continue with the visit despite strong objections from Malaysia. Three days later, the same organisation delivered a protest to the Foreign Minister with copies sent to local Muslim organisations and embassies. Two Singapore opposition parties also condemned the visit; *Barisan Socialis* termed it "foolhardy" and claimed that it could prove damaging to Singapore's political and economic interests, while the United People's Front urged the government to issue a last-minute cancellation.

Malaysian opposition to the visit was not only confined to political groups; various social and religious groups in the country also added their voices to the protests. Malaysia's World Assembly of Muslim Youths (WAMY) labelled the visit a provocation against Muslims in the region. WAMY urged Arab nations to review relations with "certain countries" in the region and to "take note of who their allies really are".<sup>7</sup>

The Malaysian People's Action Committee (PAC), comprising various social and political<sup>8</sup> groups, was formed in mid-November to coordinate protests against the visit.

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<sup>6</sup> *Straits Times*, 18 November 1986

<sup>7</sup> *Straits Times*, 14 November 1986

<sup>8</sup> The political parties also included those in the ruling National Coalition Front.

One of its first acts was to send a memorandum to Mahathir requesting that all transport links to Singapore, air and rail, be severed during the duration of Herzog's visit to the country.

Amid mounting pressure in Malaysia to voice governmental displeasure to the proposed visit, on 14 November Mahathir announced his decision to recall Malaysia's High Commissioner to Singapore; no reasons were given for the recall. That same day, 500 members of the Malaysian opposition political party *Parti Islam Se-Malaysia* (PAS) from the Federal Territory staged a protest outside the Singapore High Commission in Kuala Lumpur, during which they burned an effigy of Lee Kuan Yew and the national flags of Singapore and Israel.

An editorial in *Berita Minggu Malaysia* on 16 November labelled Singapore's attitude to the feelings of its neighbours "stubborn" and "hypocritical":

To be friendly with Tel Aviv would mean that Singapore not only recognises and supports atrocities committed by Israel, but also allows itself to be a willing tool for Jewish interests in the region.... Singapore must remember the policy of interdependence, whether pertaining to its economy or security in South-east Asia.... The Zionist movement wants to expand its base and influence in the Asian region and to smear Islam....<sup>9</sup>

That same day, another demonstration against Herzog's visit was staged in Kuala Lumpur. Demonstrators carried placards denouncing Lee Kuan Yew as "the enemy of Islam".

On 17 November *Jamiyah*, the Muslim Missionary Society of Singapore, issued a statement requesting the government rethink the "usefulness of the visit" in view of the opposition voiced by Muslims in the region. The statement also reminded the government

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<sup>9</sup> *Straits Times*, 18 November 1986

of the gravity the humanitarian and religious aspects of the Palestinian problem posed for the Muslims.

Meanwhile across the Causeway in Malaysia, the Youth Wing of UMNO sent a letter of protest to Singapore's High Commissioner to Malaysia urging Lee to cancel the visit, declaring that if their directive was ignored, they would insist Mahathir sever all diplomatic relations with Singapore. UMNO Youth further recommended that in view of the visit, Malaysia and other ASEAN countries should re-evaluate their ties with Singapore and if necessary, expel the latter from the Association. The organisation viewed the visit by the "Zionist terrorist leader" as:

...opening the way for an expanded Zionist influence and undermining the peace, stability and harmony of South-east Asia.  
The Singapore government...had become a "Zionist tool"...<sup>10</sup>

Extreme forms of retribution against Singapore such as cutting off Malaysia's water supply to the island demanded by PAC and other Malaysian organisations were ruled out by the Mentri Besar of Trengganu for fear of inviting world-wide criticism.

On the day of Herzog's arrival in the Republic, various forms of protest were staged around Malaysia. About two hundred PAC protesters gathered outside the Singapore High Commission in Kuala Lumpur, shouting anti-Zionist slogans and condemnation of the Singapore government. PAC members, representatives from the *Parti Socialis Rakyat Malaysia* (PSRM) and PAS demonstrated outside the Johor Baru<sup>11</sup> Railway Station, demanding a stop to all Malaysian rail and air services to Singapore. A Singapore-bound Malaysian Railways train was delayed when protesters stood in its way while two men, one of whom was Abdul Razak Ahmad<sup>12</sup>, lay on the track. The

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<sup>10</sup> Straits Times, 18 November 1986

<sup>11</sup> The Malaysian state closest to Singapore.

<sup>12</sup> Abdul Razak Ahmad, one of the major proponents of the protests against Singapore, was the Deputy Chairman of PSRM. Razak was a former student at the University of Singapore where he was the President of its Socialist Club. He was banished from Singapore in November 1966 for his role in campus unrest and for taking part in illegal processions and demonstrations staged by the Ngee Ann College students in Singapore. In February 1965, Razak was detained by the Malaysian Special Branch for sixty days under the Internal Security Act.

train resumed its journey when the protesters were removed from the scene by police and Railway officials.

The same group of protesters then headed to the Causeway in an attempt to stop the First Earth Run, a United Nations' initiated global peace run. Initially, the peace torch was scheduled to be handed over by the Johor Mentri Besar to Singapore's Acting Trade and Industry Minister on 18 November. These plans were altered at the last minute by Malaysia in protest of the Herzog visit. Not knowing of the change in plans, the protesters gathered near the Singapore Immigration point at the Causeway, ready to stop the proposed handing over of the torch. Their plans were foiled when the peace torch was transported in a police van across the Causeway into Singapore.

Meanwhile in Singapore, thirty members of Singapore's PKMS gathered outside the Istana<sup>13</sup> intending to hand over a protest note to the country's President, Wee Kim Wee. The group dispersed peacefully before Herzog arrived at the Istana, while another man carrying a placard telling the Israeli President to "go home" was arrested for public obstruction, but later released on bail.

In his speech during the official dinner he hosted for Herzog on 18 November, Wee alluded to the close ties the Republic shared with Israel<sup>14</sup>. Suggesting that peace in the Middle East could be achieved if Israel was brave enough to return territory it occupied since the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, Wee also urged Herzog to accept a Palestinian State and restore Jerusalem to its original status.

Not surprisingly, protestors in Malaysia only reacted to one comment contained in Wee's entire speech, the issue of Singapore's links with Israel stemming from the former's use of Israeli military and intelligence officers in its defence arena. The Deputy Chairman of PAC, Dr K.S. Jomo, claimed that in view of Singapore's acknowledgement of having military ties with Israel, suspicions have been raised in the region about the government's plans in Singapore. According to Jomo, besides posing a threat to peace in Southeast Asia, Singapore's military and intelligence ties with Israel also demonstrated "Singapore's

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<sup>13</sup> The official residence of the President of Singapore.

<sup>14</sup> Israel helped Singapore build its defence forces after the latter had attained its Independence in 1965.

hostility towards its neighbours, including Asian countries, just like Israel is hostile to its Arab neighbours.”<sup>15</sup>

Many unsubstantiated and inaccurate claims were made about Singapore’s employment of Israeli military advisors. In another letter published in *The Star*, Jomo alleged that since its expulsion from Malaysia, Singapore has been:

...used by ‘Israel’ as its main centre in this region for its political strategy and economic ends. ‘Israel’ advisers are still used by the Singapore Government,...though their presence thus far has been disguised and hidden.<sup>16</sup>

During a forum broadcast over Malaysia’s TV3 on 17 November, Professor Syed Hussin Ali, the President of the Malaysian Social Science Society, charged that the Israeli military advisors to Singapore from 1965 to 1974 pretended to be from Mexico.

These and other similar accusations made by various Malaysian personages insinuated that the Singapore government took great pains to conceal its use of Israeli advisors, evidence that the island harboured antagonistic intentions towards its Muslim neighbours.

A newspaper article written by Malaysia’s former Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman, effectively undermined, albeit unintentionally, these allegations about Singapore’s covert employment of Israeli advisors. The Tunku admitted that although it was known that Singapore brought in Israeli military advisors to help build its defence forces after Independence, Malaysia had decided not to act on the matter.<sup>17</sup>

The Tunku, who labelled Herzog’s visit “an insult to the Muslims in the region”, contended that Singapore habitually disregarded Malaysia’s feelings. He cited the example of Singapore, while still part of the Federation of Malaysia, continuing to trade with South

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<sup>15</sup> *Straits Times*, 20 November 1986

<sup>16</sup> *Straits Times*, 6 December 1986

<sup>17</sup> *The Star*, 24 November 1986

Africa despite the Malaysian imposed trade sanctions in protest against apartheid. This, the Tunku asserted, proved that “before the separation and worse still after the separation Singapore Government had shown no true friendship for Malaysia.”<sup>18</sup>

This however, could be interpreted as Singapore pursuing a completely non-aligned foreign policy which has not altered over the years, despite forceful opposition from its neighbours.

The media in Malaysia and Indonesia differed to some extent in their treatment of Herzog’s visit. Their English press and other vernacular newspapers were almost restrained in their approach to the matter while Malay publications allocated the greatest coverage to the visit, carrying highly emotive and provocative headlines. Editorials in newspapers, forums broadcast over television and radio, were largely designed to stir up feelings of dissatisfaction among the general public, even to the extent of carrying unsubstantiated reports, as illustrated by Malaysia’s *Utusan Melayu* which carried an editorial on 17 November, accusing Singapore of being:

...more inclined towards playing an unofficial role of creating chaos in the political and economic systems of the neighbouring countries. Most of the rumours affecting Malaysia’s politics and economy were said to have come from the Republic.<sup>19</sup>

An hour-long televised forum<sup>20</sup> in Malaysia attempted to analyse the implications of Singapore’s relations with Israel. The panel, chaired by the Secretary-General of Malaysian Youth Council, comprised a representative from WAMY, Kamaruddin Mohd. Noor; Usman Awang, Chairman of the Malaysian People’s Action Committee; and the President of the Malaysian Social Science Society, Professor Syed Hussin Ali. A few unsubstantiated claims surfaced during the forum, the allegation that Singapore was harbouring hopes of becoming the middleman for Israel’s arms sales, and that Herzog’s visit was to investigate the possibility of using the region as a nuclear testing site.

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<sup>18</sup> *The Star*, 24 November 1986

<sup>19</sup> *Straits Times*, 20 November 1986

<sup>20</sup> *Bicara [Discussion]: Zionism in South-east Asia*, 21 November 1986

During the forum, an erroneous claim was also made about Singapore having an envoy in Israel. The forum was basically aimed at portraying Singapore as the “Israel of Southeast Asia” and an enemy of the Muslim people in the region.

19 November saw Brunei become the third ASEAN country to express its official dissatisfaction over Herzog’s visit, the same day Singapore issued its first official comment on the matter.

Singapore’s Senior Minister (Prime Minister’s Office) S. Rajaratnam maintained that the Republic “had done nothing wrong” in inviting President Herzog to the country. He asserted that Singapore should regard the protests from Malaysia and Indonesia as an important lesson in being self-reliant in times of crises. Rajaratnam challenged Malaysia’s reaction to the visit:

Did Malaysia protest when the late President Anwar Sadat visited Israel, when King Hassan of Morocco received the Israeli Prime minister and when President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt received Mr Shimon Peres,...nobody in Malaysia protested then. So why us?... We are not Muslims. Egypt is Muslim and so are Morocco and Jordan.<sup>21</sup>

Rajaratnam’s statements were gradually converted by the Malaysian protest organisations into a calculated attack on Islam. Datuk Dr Yusof Noor, Malaysia’s Deputy Minister in the Prime Minister’s Department, accused Rajaratnam of belittling Malaysia and Islam:

He(Rajaratnam) should not view our religion(Islam) as backward and I believe that was the view of a person who is behind time and who is ignorant of Islam.

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<sup>21</sup> *Straits Times*, 20 November 1986

He should not repeat such a statement if he is willing to read and listen to matters related to Islam. The fact is he may not want to do so.

However, if he repeats the statement, then it is a statement based on blind hatred, not truth.<sup>22</sup>

Noor also claimed that Herzog's visit signalled the start of Zionism in the region and paved the way for Jews to enter Singapore. In light of his statement, one is left to wonder whether Noor was under the illusion that Singapore was a "Jew-free" state.

Rajaratnam's remarks also came under fire in Indonesia where the vice-chairman of the *Muhammadiyah* movement<sup>23</sup>, Luqman Harun, accused Singapore of harbouring "identical designs" with the Zionists in the Middle East.<sup>24</sup>

In a surprising development in Singapore, certain Muslim groups now voiced their objections to the Pope's stop-over in the country on 20 November. Two days after Herzog and Pope John Paul II had left Singapore, *Majlis Pusat*<sup>25</sup> asserted that these official visits would "mar" the country's multi-racial and multi-religious harmony. The Association claimed that by extending invitations to the Israeli President and the Pope, the Singapore government was being insensitive to the Muslims who "make up a part of the loyal multi-racial and multi-religious people of the country". The Association opposed the two visits on the grounds that Israel's Zionist ideology is anti-Islamic and whose objective was to destroy Muslims. It felt that the Pope's stopover in Singapore could "fire up" Catholic missionary movements which, it claimed, "have lately been threatening our young generation":

Indirectly, this visit can also be considered as a lopsidedness in the Government's treatment of a certain religious group here...<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> *Straits Times*, 27 November 1986

<sup>23</sup> An influential Muslim organisation.

<sup>24</sup> *Straits Times*, 23 November 1986

<sup>25</sup> The Central Council of Malay Cultural Organisations in Singapore.

<sup>26</sup> *Straits Times*, 22 November 1986

*Majlis Pusat* also called on MUIS, the Singapore Muslim Religious Council, to take a stand on the issue, which subsequently submitted the views and sentiments of the country's Muslim community to the government.

*The Jakarta Post* editorial on 21 November alleged that remarks made by the Pope during his celebration of mass in Singapore could be construed as being offensive to Muslims. The remark in question was in regard to birth control. The Pope reiterated the Roman Catholic teaching that every couple had a fundamental right to decide on the number of children they wanted without any coercion from the State. The writer of the editorial claimed that:

Muslim religious scholars show a realistic understanding that limiting the net population growth ...is a matter of national urgency in order to prevent aggravating social problems...

We hope that the leader of the Roman Catholic Church will in due time show better understanding and make the necessary doctrinal adjustments regarding the pressing population problems faced by so many developing nations.<sup>27</sup>

In an attempt to gather more support for their cause, Malaysian protest groups began to associate the Herzog controversy with the honour of Malaysia. The aim of the protest was shifted from its original religious/humanitarian basis into a fight for nationalistic honour. In a rally held in Johor Baru on 28 November, a call was made for all Malaysians to uphold the honour of their country by uniting against Singapore, the "common enemy". This ploy only served to raise doubts about the actual agenda of the protest groups. On 29 November, Mahathir questioned the motive behind PAC's stringent protests over the visit, "I am not sure whether the (Johor) committee is working for Malaysian interests or for certain objectives....<sup>28</sup>".

Political observers listed various reasons why they also questioned if the furore about the visit was in fact an act aimed at the Malaysian government. Citing the rivalry

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<sup>27</sup> *Straits Times*, 6 December 1986

<sup>28</sup> *Sunday Times*, 30 November 1986

between the various political parties in the country, observers noted the long-standing debate about 'Islamicness' between the two leading political parties in Malaysia, UMNO and PAS. The issue as to which of the two was more Islamic featured again in the Malaysian general elections held in August 1985. UMNO probably felt that assuming a strong stance on the issue might help strengthen its tenuous position among the country's Muslim majority. PAS, on the other hand, was simply living up to its image, always quick to exploit any religious issue for political gain.<sup>29</sup>

Political observers also felt that the protest against Singapore was a backlash from sensitive issues which were being discussed in Malaysia at that time. In reaction to the criticism levelled at Malaysia's non-Malays for questioning the political supremacy of the country's *bumiputeras*<sup>30</sup>, the MCA<sup>31</sup> questioned the right of the Malays to be the real 'sons of the soil'.

The Indonesian media also carried reports and letters dealing with Herzog's visit to Singapore. The editorial in the Indonesian newspaper, *Pelita*, claimed that the Malaysian people are of the opinion that President Herzog's visit to Singapore was "unnatural" and should have been stopped.<sup>32</sup> The cancellation of the Philippines visit was later interpreted by certain Indonesians as indicating the Philippine government's respect for Muslim sensitivities. Manai Sophiaan, writing in the *Merdeka*, another Indonesian newspaper, alleged that although "the reason given was security, I think the cancellation was made out of respect for the feelings of ASEAN member countries which are anti-Israel."<sup>33</sup>

An editorial in a Saudi Arabian English newspaper also attempted to convince its readers that the cancellation of Herzog's visit to the Philippines was a result of respect for Muslim sensitivities in the region:

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<sup>29</sup> The political rivalry between PAS and UMNO is dealt with in greater detail in the section on 'Malaysia' in the Introduction.

<sup>30</sup> This was contained in a speech made by the Malaysian backbencher, Datuk Abdullah Ahmad, while in Singapore.

<sup>31</sup> The major Chinese partner in UMNO.

<sup>32</sup> *Straits Times*, 2 December 1986

<sup>33</sup> *Straits Times*, 28 November 1986

...a visit by the Israeli President could not be seen by the Muslims except as an act of deliberate provocation. Good sense, however, prevailed and the visit was cancelled, no matter what excuse was used by Manila.<sup>34</sup>

A few media reports in Indonesia also alluded to Singapore's continued "arrogance" in its dealings with its ASEAN counterparts. Singapore's disregard of Indonesian protests against Herzog's visit was perceived as being comparable to its actions during Confrontation, when despite direct appeals from President Suharto, Singapore went ahead with the execution of two Indonesian marines for their involvement in Confrontation.<sup>35</sup>

Protests in Indonesia gradually tapered off after Herzog left Singapore. Dr Mochtar Kusumaatmadja, Indonesia's Foreign Minister, claimed that being an independent country, Singapore had every right to invite an Israeli leader for a visit, while General Benny Murdani, the commander of the Indonesian armed forces, labelled the visit an "internal matter".<sup>36</sup>

The Malay press in Malaysia however continued to give press coverage to the controversy weeks after Herzog ended his visit to Singapore. The *Utusan Malaysia* carried articles alleging that Singapore was now seen as the "loyal and docile second "mistress"" of the United States and that by its actions, Singapore was inviting the "superpowers' fierce big power rivalry" in the region, "... this Singapore's contribution to the ASEAN declaration of making the region a zone of peace, freedom and neutrality?"<sup>37</sup>

The author of another letter claimed that political observers should have no trouble recognising that Singapore's invitation to Herzog was designed purely to regenerate

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<sup>34</sup> *Straits Times*, 28 November 1986

<sup>35</sup> In 1995, Singapore was to come under fire again for its uncompromising stand on issues relating to its ASEAN neighbours. A Filipino maid working in Singapore was charged and convicted for the murder of her four-year old charge. The Singapore government was accused of being "arrogant" and "insensitive" to Philippines when it disregarded numerous appeals from the latter to reverse the execution order.

<sup>36</sup> *Straits Times*, 22 November 1986

<sup>37</sup> *Straits Times*, 22 November 1986

“former anti-Malaysia sentiment among its people”.<sup>38</sup> Another newspaper article reached a dubious conclusion based on Herzog’s remark about Malaysia’s attitude to his visit being “out of date” as a clear indication that “secret relations exist” between Israel and Singapore.<sup>39</sup>

There were also numerous letters published in Malaysia highlighting Singapore’s apparent resemblance to Israel:

Firstly, both countries have emerged to become modern nations because of the political and military strategies of the Western colonial governments since World War I to divide, destabilise and dominate Muslim countries which are situated in strategic areas in the world.

Secondly, these strategies are implemented by exploiting the communal sentiment of a particular race - the Jews in the Arab world and the Chinese in the Malay world.

Thirdly, these strategies are the imperialists' designs to check the resurgence of Muslims and oppressed people of all races in the world.<sup>40</sup>

A letter published on December 12 in *Utusan Malaysia* listed five so-called historical similarities which the writer claimed proved that Singapore and Israel were like “Siamese twins”:

Israel was created out of Palestine. From where does Singapore originate?

More than 90 per cent of Israel's population are immigrant Jews.

What about Singapore’s population?

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<sup>38</sup> *Sunday Times*, 30 November 1986

<sup>39</sup> *Straits Times*, 11 December 1986

<sup>40</sup> *Straits Times*, 29 November 1986

Almost all settlements of Israel's indigenous people were seized by the government on the pretext of development. Didn't this also happen in Singapore?

The majority of the settlers were driven out of their lands to make way for shopping complexes, and flats for Jews. Just try to compare this with Singapore.

Mosques in Israel were pulled down or destroyed. In Singapore only the mosques remain but the surrounding residents have been resettled.<sup>41</sup>

In contrast, the Malaysian Chinese newspaper, *Nanyang Siang Pau Malaysia*, carried an editorial on 1 December advising against overdoing the protest action in Malaysia. It noted that the continuing protests against Singapore was damaging tourist-related trade in Johor. Citing Singapore's foreign policy of non-alignment, the editorial continued:

President Wee Kim Wee, in a reception given to President Herzog, had candidly urged Israel to take a realistic line by recognising the right of the Palestinians to self-determination and to return to their homeland, and to take the initiative in establishing friendly ties with the Arab nations.

This shows that the Singapore Government is not completely oblivious to international justice.<sup>42</sup>

On 5 December, Singapore's nine Muslim MPs issued a statement regarding Herzog's visit. In their statement, the MPs reaffirmed Singapore's right to extend invitations to leaders of countries with which it had diplomatic ties. The MPs reiterated that the concern expressed by the country's Muslims about the visit should not be interpreted as disloyalty to Singapore. The statement claimed that the sentiments of Singapore's Muslim community were distorted and misconstrued by other countries for their own ends. They declared that the views expressed by Wee in his official speech to Herzog highlighted the Republic's stand on the Palestinian issue and was, in fact, a reiteration

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<sup>41</sup> *Sunday Times*, 14 December 1986

<sup>42</sup> *Straits Times*, 5 December 1986

of the stance held by all other ASEAN countries. The MPs also denounced the reaction of certain groups in Malaysia to the visit:

The condemnation and opposition to the visit have turned into an anti-Singapore tirade.

As Singaporeans we deplore the expressions and intentions of ill-will against our people and nation,...

There must be a recognition and respect for Singapore's dignity and sovereignty as a nation.<sup>43</sup>

6 December saw Singapore's Parliamentary Secretary (Foreign Affairs), Yatiman Yusof, urging the country's Muslim leaders to view the issue from a broader perspective. He stressed the need for balancing sectional and national interests:

If they [Muslim leaders] leaned too much towards sectional interests, they could trigger a repeat of the 1964 racial riots...

But if they pulled too much in the other direction, they would not only lose the Malay ground but would also seriously damage Singapore's ability to continue as a cohesive and harmonious multi-racial society.<sup>44</sup>

Yusof also noted that the protests made by some Muslim Singaporeans over the Pope's visit were "unwise". Addressing the community's fears that the Pope's visit was likely to precipitate aggressive Catholic missionary activities among Muslims in the country, he asserted that it was not the Catholics, but other evangelical groups in Singapore who were reported as attempting to convert young Muslims in the country.

The media in Singapore adopted a very different approach in its treatment of the Herzog affair. During the course of events, Singapore's main English newspaper the *Straits Times*, restricted itself mainly to reporting the reaction of other countries to the Herzog visit. Editorials in the *Straits Times* were restrained in tone when compared to the media

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<sup>43</sup> *Straits Times*, 6 December 1986

<sup>44</sup> *Straits Times*, 7 December 1986

in Malaysia and to a lesser extent, Indonesia. Letters to Singapore's newspapers regarding Herzog's and the Pope's visits were only published on 2 and 6 December, two weeks after the events. All the one hundred and ten letters received by the *Straits Times* were in support of the actions of the Singapore government. A few of the letters also highlighted the need for Singapore to become self-reliant, especially in its water supplies. Letters on the reaction of Majlis Pusat to the Papal visit, published in the *Straits Times*, highlighted the fact that the Pope himself had commented approvingly on the quality of religious harmony experienced in Singapore, and that to maintain such peaceful religious coexistence, respect for all religions should be paramount.<sup>45</sup>

On 23 November 1986, the President of Singapore's Malay Journalists Association, Saadon Ismail, sent a letter to Rajaratnam informing him that the words "We are not Muslim" contained in the latter's statement on 19 November "hurt and offended the feelings of Malays and Muslims in the Republic." Ismail alleged that those words could be read as implying that there were no Muslims in Singapore:

We may not be saddened so if the statement had said: "We are not a Muslim country..." This is because there is a vast difference between "We are not Muslim" and "We are not a Muslim country".<sup>46</sup>

Rajaratnam's reply was published in the *Straits Times*<sup>47</sup> in the form of an open letter addressed to "a Malay Singaporean". The Minister maintained that the four words contained in his statement of over two hundred and fifty words were deliberately misunderstood by the Association to "give it an interpretation calculated to rouse religious and communal feelings among Singapore Muslims."

Denouncing the Association's action as "not a case of spontaneous combustion of genuine emotions" but a manoeuvre to show "solidarity with The Crowd on the other side of the Causeway", Rajaratnam listed thirteen points to support his declaration. In

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<sup>45</sup> *Straits Times*, 6 December 1986

<sup>46</sup> *Straits Times*, 12 December 1986

<sup>47</sup> *Straits Times*, 12 December 1986. All subsequent quotes from Rajaratnam's reply have been cited from the above.

the first three points, he noted that the Association voiced no objections to the Republic's seventeen year diplomatic relations with Israel<sup>48</sup>; its use of Israeli military advisors since 1965, and the visit of General Moshe Dayan, Israel's Foreign Minister, to Singapore in May 1979.

In his fourth point, Rajaratnam claimed that the Association should have been aware that the Singapore government's stand on the Middle-East issue was identical to that of its ASEAN partners. He also noted that no other Arab or Muslim country, including the PLO, has ever accused Singapore of "being insensitive to Muslim feelings just because we had normalised relations with Israel." According to Rajaratnam, the Head of the Political Department of the PLO, during a visit to Singapore in 1977, conveyed to Lee Kuan Yew Yasser Arafat's "sincere appreciation" for the support shown by the Singapore Government for the Palestinian cause in various international forums."

Noting the Association's lack of protest when an announcement was first made on 23 October about Herzog's forthcoming visit to Singapore, and during subsequent occasions<sup>49</sup>, Rajaratnam questioned why the Association felt it necessary, "...after a long interval, to join in the chorus that the Singapore Government had deliberately hurt the feelings of Malays and Muslims?"

In his letter, Rajaratnam noted that it was only on 22 November, two days after they had left the country, did Singapore's *Majlis Pusat* deem it necessary to protest against the visits by Herzog and the Pope.

Rajaratnam claimed that because of the heterogeneous nature of Singapore's population make-up:

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<sup>48</sup> When Singapore established diplomatic ties with Israel in 1965, it became the third ASEAN country to have diplomatic relations with the latter. Thailand and Philippines have had diplomatic ties with Israel since 1954 and 1957 respectively.

<sup>49</sup> Rajaratnam cited the following dates: 27 October, the day Razak pitched his attack on the visit; 6 November when the Singapore Malay National Organisation publicly protested against the visit; and again on 19 November when the Singapore Malay Chamber of Commerce spoke out against the visit.

...the special biases of a particular group cannot automatically be translated into national policy. National policy is designed to serve national interests.

Ours is not a Muslim foreign policy - or Israeli or Chinese or Indian or anybody else's foreign policy. Ours is a Singapore foreign policy.

Rajaratnam utilised the Association's protests to highlight the point that:

...even after twenty seven years of nation-building efforts by the Singapore Government, some loyal citizens of all communities could melt momentarily or permanently under the heat of communal passions, whether stoked from within or without.

He claimed that to survive in a multi-racial and multi-religious society, minority groups should contemplate two "unavoidable truths", first, a total non-communal approach in opinions and actions which will afford the protection needed for the survival of minorities, and second, not to take non-communalism for granted. He cited countries in Africa and Asia where communalism forged during anti-colonial nationalist campaigns had disintegrated after decades of independence, the end result being racial and religious conflicts. Rajaratnam ended his letter by inviting *Majlis Pusat* and Haji Ya'acob Mohamed, Singapore's former ambassador to Egypt, to make known their views on the matter.

In a corresponding open letter published in the *Straits Times*<sup>50</sup>, Ya'acob asserted that he accorded the same interpretation to Rajaratnam's comments as did the Malay Journalists Association. He also accused Rajaratnam of employing the "scare tactics of the McCarthy era in the United States" to stifle constructive criticisms of the Herzog visit.<sup>51</sup>

In comparison, the response from *Majlis Pusat* was more circumspect in tone. The President of the Malay organisation, Zukifli Mohammed, told *Berita Harian*<sup>52</sup> reporters

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<sup>50</sup> *Straits Times*, 13 December 1986

<sup>51</sup> *Straits Times*, 18 December 1986

<sup>52</sup> A Singapore Malay newspaper.

on 14 December that it was pointless to persist in debate on the matter. According to him, it was sufficient that the organisation had taken note of the views expressed by Rajaratnam. Zulkifli also mentioned that *Majlis Pusat* had established its own views in a meeting held on 12 December, although he declined to specify those views.

On 17 December, Rajaratnam indicated to reporters in Singapore that he too had no intention of engaging in a further debate with Ya'acob on the issue, effectively indicating the end of the issue, at least in Singapore.

Across the Causeway in Kuala Trengganu however, matters continued to escalate to disturbing proportions. During a rally organised by PAS to mark "Anti-Jews Day", Haji Mustapha Ali, the leader of PAS Youth, attacked the Asia Foundation in Malaysia. Alleging that the Foundation's support given to Malays to further their education abroad, especially at Harvard University with its apparent active Jewish stance, was a "dirty tactic by the Jews to influence Malaysians to submitting to Zionism." Mustapha also claimed that the Foundation had given support to a certain political party in Sabah<sup>53</sup> during State polls enabling the party, "led by a Christian" to win the elections.

Mustapha also levelled criticisms at Tunku Abdul Rahman for "allowing Singapore to go into foreign hands "even though that country initially belonged to the Muslims."" Declaring it the duty of all Muslims to stop Zionist influence especially in the face of the Jews' bravery to visit a country so close to Malaysia, Mustapha added, "Our determination is to destroy the Jews and also to stop all campaigns that are carried out by non-Jews, who wish to obstruct the expansion of Islam."<sup>54</sup>

During the same rally, the Vice-President of PAS, Haji Abdul Hadi Awang, was quoted by the Malaysian Malay weekly *Watan* as saying that "Singapore has become a centre of Jewish operations in South-east Asia to bring down the Muslims."<sup>55</sup> Malaysian reaction to the Herzog visit gradually eased off in late December that year.

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<sup>53</sup> Although Mustapha refrained from directly naming the political party in question, the charge was apparently aimed at Parti Bersatu Sabah, which won a ruling majority during the 1985 elections.

<sup>54</sup> *Straits Times*, 19 December 1986

<sup>55</sup> *Straits Times*, 20 December 1986

## CONCLUSION

One of the contributing factors to Singapore's vulnerability to outside leverage is its lack of natural resources. Since independence for example, Singapore has had an agreement with Malaysia that allows it to tap water from catchment areas in Johor. This means that if ever there is a altercation between Singapore and Malaysia, there is always the possibility that the latter might cut off water supplies to the island as a form of retribution. Malaysia can exploit this considerable power to manipulate Singapore's domestic concerns which in turn, may affect communal relations in the Republic. In fact, one of the first forms of protest against Herzog's visit to Singapore was the demand by various Malaysian political and social groups for the severing of the water agreement with the island.

Since Singapore's economic well-being is dependent on its continuing trade with other countries, it cannot afford to antagonise any country. It has therefore always been scrupulously neutral in its foreign dealings. This non-aligned foreign policy is also necessary in view of Singapore's population being largely made up of second and third generation immigrants, mainly from Asia. Consequently, the Singapore government cannot be seen as favouring a particular country above the rest, lest it loses the political support of the citizens affected. In this case, if the government had decided to placate the Muslims and refused to allow Herzog and the Pope to visit Singapore, it would have risked alienating the Jews and the Catholics in the country. Moreover, by cancelling the Herzog visit, the Singapore government would in effect be seen as endorsing the PLO over the Israelis, thereby effectively undermining its own non-aligned stance.

Singapore's neutrality in its dealings with other countries is understandable given its geographical location, a small island state surrounded by predominantly Muslim countries. This means that the Singapore government has to be exceptionally prudent when dealing with matters of religion, and because of the potentially volatile element, the way it manages issues related to Malays in the country. Muslims, especially in neighbouring Malaysia, have always been quick to rally behind their Singaporean counterparts on occasions when there has perceived to be a threat, real or imaginary, to Islam and Muslims in the Republic.

Finally, because of the close proximity of the two countries, there is always the possibility that political or social groups in Malaysia may manipulate events in Singapore in an effort to promote their own agenda, or employ Singapore as a 'whipping-boy' for whatever discontent they may feel for their own government. In this case, the Herzog visit to Singapore was a convenient facade for some factions in Malaysia to voice their political grievances against their own government.

Events described in this chapter served to highlight that amicable communal relations in Singapore can be jeopardised, directly or subtly, by extraneous influences. As noted, local Muslim protests against the two 'controversial' visits only came in the wake of their Malaysian counterparts' actions. It is precisely reactions like these which could ultimately prove prejudicial in undermining the existing level of religious harmony in Singapore. This theme is followed through in other chapters dealing with the position of Muslims in Singapore.

## CHAPTER 5

### OF CHURCH AND STATE: THE MARXIST CONSPIRACY

On 21 May 1987, the Singapore Internal Security Department carried out a pre-dawn raid and arrested sixteen people<sup>1</sup> under the Internal Security Act. This was followed by a second arrest of another six people<sup>2</sup> on 20 June. Those arrested were involved in church and student organizations, a dramatic arts group, legal aid and community work centres. Several also had informal links to the Workers' Party, an opposition political party in Singapore.

The day after the first arrest, the Ministry of Home Affairs released a statement to the press alleging that the arrests were made "in connection with investigations into a clandestine communist network"<sup>3</sup>. In another press statement on 27 May 1987, the government claimed that the detainees were involved in a Conspiracy to subvert the current political and social system in an attempt to establish a Marxist state in Singapore<sup>4</sup>. The government accused those arrested of employing Christian groups and student organizations as a front for their subversive activities. Tan Wah Piow<sup>5</sup> was exposed as the mastermind behind the plot while Vincent Cheng<sup>6</sup>, who acted as the link between the various organizations involved, was labeled the "local ringleader".

#### INVOLVEMENT OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

The government alleged that the activists had infiltrated various para-church organizations in Singapore. Societies implicated as fronts for the group's activities included the Justice and Peace Commission, Geylang Catholic Welfare Centre, Catholic students' societies in the National University of Singapore and the Singapore

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<sup>1</sup> The sixteen arrested were Vincent Cheng, William Yap Hon Ngian, Teo Suh Lung, Kenneth Tsang Chi Seng, Wong Souk Yee, Kevin de Souza, Ng Bee Leng, Tang Lay Lee, Teresa Lim Li Kok, Chia Boon Tai, Chung Lai Mei, Low Yit Leng, Tan Tee Seng, Tay Hong Seng, Mah Lee Lin and Jenny Chin Lai Ching. *Government Press Release No 38*, June 1987, 1-0/87/06/03

<sup>2</sup> Chng Suan Tze, Tang Fong Har, Chew Kheng Chuan, Fan Wang Peng; Ronnie Ng Soon Hian and Nur Effendi Sahid. *Government Press Release No 46*, July 1987, 11-0/87/07/19

<sup>3</sup> *Straits Times*, 22 May 1987

<sup>4</sup> *Straits Times*, 27 May 1987

<sup>5</sup> A former law student and now a political exile living in Britain, Tan fled Singapore in 1976 to evade national service.

<sup>6</sup> An active volunteer church worker.

Polytechnic, Student Christian Movement of Singapore and the Young Christian Workers' Movement.<sup>7</sup> Of these, the Geylang Catholic Welfare Centre<sup>8</sup> was singled out as the main organization within the Conspiracy.

The Centre was opened in 1980 with the aim of making the Catholic Church and its teachings accessible to sectors of the population which ordinarily would not have contact with it. In mid-1984, the Centre expanded its functions to include a programme for domestic workers who were either facing problems with their employers and/or immigration problems with the Ministry of Labour. It eventually became a refuge centre for run-away maids, providing shelter facilities, counseling and legal aid to mostly Filipino maids who were working in Singapore.

Cheng was actively involved in the Centre where he co-ordinated volunteers and organized various activities. Three of the detainees, Tan Tee Seng, Ng Bee Leng and Teo Soh Lung were also volunteers at the Centre; Teo was professionally involved in providing legal assistance and representing maids in cases requiring legal action. The government alleged it was during this time that Cheng had preached his Marxist ideals and anti-government propaganda to these other volunteers.

Seminars, workshops and sermons held under the auspices of Catholic organizations were also used as channels for disseminating Marxist propaganda. In September 1986 for example, left-wing activist Father Carlos Abesarius, a Filipino priest, who was invited to address one such gathering exhorted members to champion the freedom of the poor and lauded students as an "influential force" in working towards social changes.<sup>9</sup> On another occasion, Philippine Bishop Julio Labayen, the prime motivator behind the establishment of the Bishops' Institute for Social Action (BISA)<sup>10</sup>, was also invited by Cheng to speak about the role of the Church in social action.

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<sup>7</sup> See Appendix for a description of these organizations.

<sup>8</sup> Now known as the Catholic Centre for Foreign Workers.

<sup>9</sup> *Straits Times*, 27 May 1987

<sup>10</sup> The functions of this organization, the Bishops' Institute for Social Action, is discussed in greater detail elsewhere in the Chapter.

Four Catholic priests, Fathers Patrick Goh, Edgar D' Souza, Joseph Ho and Guillaume Arotcarena, were closely associated with the organizations implicated in the Conspiracy. Father Goh was the national chaplain for the Young Christian Workers' Movement and a member of the Justice and Peace Commission. Father D' Souza was the press liaison officer of the Church and the editor of the *Catholic News*, a bi-monthly publication of the Catholic Church. Father Ho was the chairman of the Justice and Peace Commission and Father Arotcarena was the director of the Geylang Catholic Welfare Centre.

It was later disclosed that Vincent Cheng, Goh, D'Souza, Ho and Arotcarena had attended the General College Seminary in Penang in the late 1960s, a time when the Second Vatican Council's teachings on social activism were being implemented. It was purported that their penchant for using the Church as a channel for social activism was molded during their study at the Seminary, a view given credence by Father D'Souza himself who claimed, "We were shaped by those years. We believed the Church must be a force for change."<sup>11</sup>

In the wake of the arrests, the government revealed that it had previously warned Singapore's Archbishop Gregory Yong that some "radical priests" were using the "cover and authority of the church to engage in anti-government political campaigns"<sup>12</sup>. Religious publications such as *Singapore Highlight*, a monthly publication by the Justice and Peace Commission, *Catholic News* and *Dossier*, newsletters by various Catholic organizations, were believed to have been used to disseminate Marxist ideas and discuss sociopolitical matters in the country. The Minister of Home Affairs, Professor S. Jayakumar, accused Father D'Souza of trying to turn church organizations into political pressure groups by using the *Catholic News* at his disposal to "radicalize" Catholics in Singapore. He also was alleged to have published articles criticizing the government on various government policies, including the Newspapers and Printing Act, amendments to the country's citizenship laws and other secular issues which did not concern the Catholic faith or any other religion.<sup>13</sup> Father D'Souza had also

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<sup>11</sup> *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 2 July 1987, p.65

<sup>12</sup> *Straits Times*, 27 May 1987

<sup>13</sup> Parliamentary Debates, 30 November 1987, 76

conducted a news-writing course in November 1985 for a few people who were associated with the *Hammer*, a publication put out by the Workers' Party, an opposition political party in the country.

On 26 May 1987, Father D'Souza issued a public statement calling for the Singapore government to produce hard evidence to support its detention of the twenty-two people.<sup>14</sup> In an interview with the British Broadcasting Corporation the following day, he questioned the government's claim that the Catholic Church in Singapore had been infiltrated by Marxists.<sup>15</sup> Father D'Souza also held masses in support of the detainees, an act which was deemed by the government as "provocative" given how tense the situation in the country was at the time.

After a meeting on 2 June 1987 between leaders of the Catholic Church led by Archbishop Yong, Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, and other church and government officials, Archbishop Yong informed the press that having examined the evidence presented<sup>16</sup> to him, he was unable to challenge the arrests. He also claimed that he was now assured that the arrests were not directed at the Church:

We are satisfied that the Government of Singapore has nothing against the Catholic Church when it detained 10 of our church workers amongst the 16 who were arrested for possible involvement in a clandestine communist network.<sup>17</sup>

The day after this meeting, Fathers Goh, D'Souza, Ho and Arotcarena tendered their resignations to the Archbishop and were banned from preaching in the country.

Various groups in Malaysia protested against the arrests in Singapore, claiming that it was a ploy to suppress political opponents in the country and demanded that the

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<sup>14</sup> *The Star*, 28 May 1987

<sup>15</sup> British Broadcasting Corporation, *World Service Broadcast*, 27 May 1987

<sup>16</sup> These included documents seized by the ISD attesting to the fact that the group was employing the Catholic Church as a base to infiltrate Catholic organizations and other student bodies. *Petir*, June 1987, p.21

<sup>17</sup> *Straits Times*, 3 June 1987

detainees be released unconditionally. Protests were received from the Malaysian National Union of Journalists and the Confederation of Asian Journalists. The Chairman of the human-rights committee of the Malaysian Bar Council noted that “the latest spate of arrests in Singapore under the ISA is yet another sign of the deteriorating state of human rights in the region.”<sup>18</sup> Given that both the Malaysian Prime Minister and Foreign Minister claimed that the arrests were Singapore’s internal security affairs and as such, will not interfere in the matter, the Singapore Foreign Affairs Ministry was not able to lodge a formal complaint against the Malaysian protests.<sup>19</sup>

Those implicated in the Conspiracy claimed that the arrests were the government’s way of stifling religiously motivated dissent and types of social activism which the government fears are potential opposition threats.

#### LIBERATION THEOLOGY – ASIAN STYLE

First expounded by Gustavo Gutierrez, a Peruvian Catholic theologian, Liberation Theology was inspired by Marxist ideals. It advocated the social and political roles of the Church in working towards changing existing social conditions, especially in Third World countries.

An Asian version of this Liberation Theology<sup>20</sup> has slowly been taking root in Asia. This brand of religious theology, fashioned mainly by priests in the Philippines, is not composed of a systematic or uniform set of beliefs, but deals primarily with the role the Church should play in politics. Asian Liberation Theology was formulated during the Marcos years in the Philippines, where the Church played a strong role in politics. Many clergy and church activists were forcefully opposed to Ferdinand Marcos and his style of politics, and the Catholic Church was one of the prime movers in ousting Marcos from the Philippines in February 1986. The tenets of the Asian-style Liberation Theology were spread via an informal network of people, publications and

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<sup>18</sup> *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 28 April 1988, p.16

<sup>19</sup> Parliamentary Debates, 28 July 1987, 1339-40

<sup>20</sup> For a thorough discussion of Liberation Theology, see Robertson, Roland, ‘Latin America and Liberation Theology’ in *Church-State Relations: Tensions and Transitions*, USA (Transaction Books, 1987)

organizations, one of which is the Justice and Peace Commission which formed a link between the various dioceses in the region.

A major conduit for Liberation Theology, the Bishops' Institute for Social Action (BISA) is a foremost proponent of the Catholic Church being the voice of the poor and oppressed in society. BISA was created under the auspices of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conference in 1974<sup>21</sup> and is based in Manila. It has worked towards acquainting Asian bishops with the tenets of Liberation Theology. The organization encourages activism, both political and social, among Catholic priests in Asia. Vincent Cheng and Father Patrick Goh, both implicated in the Marxist Conspiracy, were staff members of BISA and were alleged to have been influenced by the organization's promotion of social activism. These men were accused of having used the local para-church organizations they were involved in to disseminate the tenets of Liberation Theology in Singapore.

The Singapore government made very clear its position with regard to Liberation Theology. S. Rajaratnam, Senior Minister in the Prime Minister's Office, in proffering his views in a speech entitled 'Is God a Liberation Theologian?' claimed:

...Liberation Theology has nothing to do with God but with politicized priests, ambitious bishops and smart communists. There is no need for a Liberation Theology simply because the Gospels avoid politics like the plague and Christ dismissed politics with his only reference to this distasteful subject: "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and render unto God the things that are God's"...<sup>22</sup>

His speech effectively dismissed the conspirators as not being involved in religiously inspired activism but in a political plot to establish a communist state in Singapore.

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<sup>21</sup> *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 2 July 1987, p.64

<sup>22</sup> *Speeches*, 11(4) July-August 1987, p.56

## CONCLUSION

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, there were two contrary brands of Christianity predominant in Singapore<sup>23</sup>. The first is exemplified by a conservative Protestant variety, concerned with evangelizing among the masses, both within and outside their religious community. The second is a socially activist model, often critical of government policies and what they perceive as social injustices.

In his National Day Rally speech on 16 August 1987, Lee Kuan Yew reiterated his government's position on religion. He reassured the public that freedom of religion will always be upheld in the country allowing Singaporeans to follow any religion of their choice, while the government will continue to remain neutral in the practice of religion. Lee also spelt out what he believed is the role of religion in society:

What we [the Singapore government] want our religious and para-religious groups to do is to give relief to the destitute, the disadvantaged, the disabled, to take part in activities which will foster communal fellowship. Emphasis on charity, alms-giving and social and community work.<sup>24</sup>

He issued a stern warning to religious leaders against mixing religion with politics because “no government was going to stand by and not defend itself when religious groups start to venture into its turf”. Religious leaders were also cautioned against participating in politics:

So, I urge that churchmen, lay preachers, priests, monks, Muslim theologians, all those who claim divine sanction or holy insights, take off your clerical robes before you take on anything economic or political. Take it off. Come out as a citizen or join a political party and it is your right to belabour the government. But you use a church

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<sup>23</sup> *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 2 July 1987, p.44

<sup>24</sup> *Straits Times*, 17 August 1987

or a religion and your pulpit for these purposes and there will be serious repercussions.<sup>25</sup>

The Marxist Conspiracy challenged the concept of a secular state because the dividing boundaries between the religious and political realms were breached with the politicizing of certain religious groups. The conspirators were alleged to have employed religious institutions, and the influence of religion to mass public support for their political cause. The manipulation of the Catholic Church and other para-religious organizations as fronts to spread political dissent definitely contravened the government's stated injunction of keeping religion and politics separate. The Conspiracy served to portray the Catholic Church in Singapore as an opposing force *vis-a-vis* the State.

On 10 June 1987, the Singapore Broadcasting Corporation televised a pre-recorded confession by Vincent Cheng in which he admitted his involvement in the alleged Marxist Conspiracy. The interview, conducted by four Singaporean journalists, saw Cheng describe his political and religious views, and where he made the following statement:

I would be creating the conditions towards violence. I would foresee that the building up of pressure groups would develop to a stage where they would come into open confrontation with the government. This confrontation with the government would start off with peaceful protests, public mass petitions which could lead further into more mass events like mass rallies, mass demonstrations, strikes when more people are mobilized and leading to public disorder and maybe even rioting, bloodshed and violence.<sup>26</sup>

The religious leaders involved in the Conspiracy also deviated from their apolitical role when they made public statements against the government's actions in the matter. They used their influence as religious leaders to criticize government policies. Given their

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<sup>25</sup> *Straits Times*, 17 August 1987

<sup>26</sup> Interview broadcast over Singapore Broadcasting Corporation (SBC) 5, 9 June 1987

affiliation to a religious institution, their political comments could have been wrongly identified as being religiously sanctioned given the extensive persuasive power the Church wields over its followers.

The Catholic Church in Singapore has the dubious distinction of being labeled by the Singapore government as “a significant hotbed for social activism”<sup>27</sup> In the name of bringing about social change, religious activists have sometimes overstepped the officially defined boundaries of religion in the country. The danger lies when activists are unable (or unwilling) to draw a distinction between social activism and political dissent, and agitation for social reform is perceived by the government as an attack on its policies, as noted by Bishop Claver, a main proponent of Liberation Theology:

Governments, landlords, anyone in a position of power that feels threatened by talk about justice immediately throws out the communist accusation.... There is a radical impulse in liberation theology because it demands that Catholics speak out against injustice and side with the poor. But to label anyone pushing for social change a communist or even a Marxist is absurd.<sup>28</sup>

Another problem with the Marxist Conspiracy was the government’s fear that the groundwork was being laid for the establishment of a communist state. This fear may not be totally unfounded given that a country is always vulnerable to the seeds of communism taking root, as noted in an article in the *Washington Times*:

Communists in Asian and Pacific nations are increasingly using Christian charities and humanitarian agencies to fund insurgencies and further their revolutionary aims. They are being helped in the strategy by radicals in third world churches and Christian aid bodies in Australia and New Zealand who are able to manipulate religious funding organizations. Unwitting church support for radical causes

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<sup>27</sup> *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 4 June 1987

<sup>28</sup> *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 2 July 1987, p.65

has gone not only to the Philippines and Singapore but also to Indonesia, East Timor, Sri Lanka and the Pacific islands.<sup>29</sup>

Communism has always been a perceivable threat in Singapore which experienced three phases of communist subversion during its recent history. In the 1950s and 1960s, communists mobilized students and workers in their struggle against the Colonial government and the PAP. In May 1976, the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM) was alleged by the ISD to have attempted to recruit Singaporeans in an attempt to overthrow the PAP government by force. The recent Conspiracy was seen as a plot to revive communism in the country, as noted by Rajaratnam, “the Marxist plot just covered is the first of many that will be launched not only against Singapore but against many other East and Southeast Asian countries.”<sup>30</sup>

In the wake of the Marxist Conspiracy, Lee noted:

Singapore now has to contend with new hybrid pro-communist types who draw their ideological inspiration not only from Maoism and Marxism-Leninism, but also from the ideas of contemporary militant leftists in the West. They augment traditional CPM tactics with new techniques and methods, using the Catholic church and religious organizations. This marks a new phase in the unceasing communist efforts to subvert the existing system of government and seize power in Singapore.<sup>31</sup>

The government is adamant against allowing the tenets of communism from being disseminated because “it ferments and fosters violence and bloodshed, advocates class struggles”<sup>32</sup> and this will impede economic and social development in the country. It also stands to reason that any ideology such as communism which emphasizes and encourages class struggles, is potentially divisive in a plural society.

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<sup>29</sup> *Washington Times*, 7 July 1987

<sup>30</sup> *Asiaweek*, 13 September 1987

<sup>31</sup> *Straits Times*, 27 May 1987

<sup>32</sup> *Government Press Release No 53*, September 1987, 11-3/87/09/27

The Marxist Conspiracy was perceived by the government to have violated the established secularity of the state. Religion or its institutions should never be employed as cover or front for subversive activities and/or political activism. To maintain the stability in a multi-ethnic and multi-religious country, religion should only function within officially approved boundaries lest its activities incite communal strife and tension in society.

## APPENDIX

### DESCRIPTION OF THE ORGANIZATIONS IMPLICATED IN THE CONSPIRACY

The Archdiocesan Justice and Peace Commission (J&PC) was set up in 1979 under the auspices of the local Bishop's Conference. It is a Vatican-inspired research office which issues reports on social, cultural, economic, educational and moral aspects of human development. It also collaborates with other organizations in the fields of justice and peace, with the aim of providing a link between Catholics in the region and church workers worldwide. It endeavored to put into practice at all levels of society the Church's teachings on social justice by establishing itself as the watch-dog for violations of human rights, denial of justice, poverty and other social injustice. The Commission also conducted seminars with the aim of inspiring more Catholics into social action.

The Catholic Students Society of Singapore Polytechnic claimed its function to be to help students realize their role in society and to be aware and participate in issues and problems facing the people, especially the poor. Kevin De Souza, one of the original detainees, was a full-time volunteer at the time of his arrest.

The Young Christian Workers' Movement, an affiliation of the International Young Christian Workers' Movement, is Catholic lay organization, geared towards young workers between sixteen and thirty five years of age. Its primary aim is to aid the young worker realize his/her full potential as a human being and "child of God". The Young Christian Students' Movement also aspires aid the formation of students into total Christians.

The 'Third Stage', an English language drama group is a legally registered society which stages locally written plays, mainly social commentaries and satires based on Singaporean life and values. One of the allegations brought against this organization was that the group propagated Marxist doctrine through popular theater.

After restrictions were placed on the University of Singapore Students' Union, the Singapore Polytechnic Students' Union remained the only politically active student body in the country.

Created in the 1960s under the leadership of David Marshall, the former Chief Minister of Singapore, the Workers' Party is now one of the few opposition political parties in Singapore. Since 1972, the leadership of the party has been taken over by J.B.Jeyaratnam, lawyer and former District Court judge, who is also the Editor-in-Chief of the party's newsletter, *Hammer*.

## CHAPTER 6

### LEGISLATING AGAINST THE MISUSE OF RELIGION: THE MAINTENANCE OF RELIGIOUS HARMONY ACT

As the events described the previous Chapters illustrate, the religious atmosphere in Singapore has exhibited a marked change over the last few decades. There has been a heightened consciousness of religious differences and an increased fervour in the propagation of religious beliefs. To highlight the volatile nature of religion in Singapore, the Internal Security Department compiled a report, *Religious Trends - A Security Perspective*<sup>1</sup>, listing the various incidents of inter-and intra-religious tensions<sup>2</sup> in the country. To reiterate the point, this section of the Chapter will provide a brief overview of some of the incidents contained in the ISD Report.

The often aggressive and insensitive evangelization practices engaged by certain Christian groups have been the cause of numerous complaints in recent years. In August 1986 for example, some Hindus were disturbed to find posters announcing an upcoming Christian seminar posted at the entrance of their temple. There have also been reports of Christian missionaries distributing pamphlets to devotees going into temples.

Relations between certain Christian organisations and the Muslim community have also been strained as a result of insensitive acts by both groups. In 1986, eleven Christian organizations were warned by the ISD against indulging in evangelical acts among Muslims. Some examples of insensitive proselytisation activities by Christian groups included sending Muslims extracts from a book labeling Islam a “cruel” and “devilish” religion which allegedly advocated the “killing of Christians”<sup>3</sup> To counter such inflammatory remarks about their religion, the Muslims retaliated by focusing sermons and talks in mosques on the danger posed by Christian evangelists. One Muslim organization went to the extent of distributing booklets calling into question the central beliefs of Christianity.

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1 This report is listed as the Appendix to the Internal Security Report which accompanies the White Paper on Religious Harmony. From here on this report will be referred to as the ISD Report.

2 Since details of these incidents were not readily available from other reliable sources, this summary is based completely on the information contained in the *ISD Report*.

In August 1987, Reverend Rick Seaward, the senior pastor of the Calvary Charismatic Centre, preached that “the greatest threat to Christianity...to all mankind today is not communism but Islam”<sup>4</sup>, and called for all Malays to renounce their religion in favour of Christianity. Such insensitive acts by Christian groups were understandably not well received by the local Muslim community.

Religious disturbances in Singapore have also been caused by conflicts between different sub-groups within a religion. During a religious festival in October 1989, the *Shiv Sena*, a Hindu sect, set alight an effigy of *Ravana*, a Hindu mythological king. The group claimed that it was an act to commemorate Lord Ramachandra’s triumph over the demon king *Ravana*. The act deeply affronted the Tamil Hindus in the country who threatened to retaliate by burning an effigy of Lord Ramachandra.

When Protestants distributed literature slandering the Roman Catholic Church and the Pope, the *Catholic News*, a publication by the Singapore Catholic Church, carried articles condemning what it saw as acts by “fundamental Christian groups” to confuse Catholics.

There have also been instances where religion has become involved in politics. For example, several foreign Muslim theologians have made provocative political speeches with the aim of inciting the local Muslim community to rebel against the government. Ahmed Hoosen Deedat, a South African missionary, attempted to stir up ethnic and religious sensitivities when he admonished Muslims for being too complacent in their attempts to convert the Chinese immigrants, who have since usurped power from them. Deedat also attacked Christianity, labeling it a “foolish religion”.

Another Muslim missionary, Mat Saman bin Mohamed, a Malaysian, tried to appeal to the nationalistic feelings among Muslims by highlighting the apparent subservient role of the Malays to the non-Malays in Singapore. He claimed that the influx of foreigners into the island had robbed the Malays of their rightful status as natives of the land and urged them to unite in their stand against the Chinese community.

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<sup>3</sup> *ISD Report*, p.13

<sup>4</sup> *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 2 July 1987, p.62-63

World events have also sometimes had an influence on the religious atmosphere in the country. The Hindu-Sikh riots in India caused by the assassination of Indira Gandhi in 1984<sup>5</sup> contributed to the tension between the Hindu and Sikh communities in Singapore. There were reports of assaults on Sikhs and vandalism of Sikh properties. Against this already tense backdrop, some Hindu temples and organisations planned condolence gatherings for the late Indira Gandhi. Fearing that these would only serve to exacerbate matters between Singapore's Hindu and Sikh communities, the police warned the activists to abandon their plans and reminded both communities that the events in India did not concern Singaporeans.

The storming of the Golden Temple by Indian troops resulted in local Sikh temples conducting prayer vigils in commemoration of the Sikh martyrs who died in the riots. Some of these functions saw Sikh officials condemn the Indian government and exhort local Sikhs to support their counterparts' struggle for an independent Punjab. In fact, a small Singaporean Sikh group has been actively providing funding and logistic support to militant Sikh separatists groups in India and the United Kingdom to aid them in their separatist struggle. In January 1989, two Sikh temples in Singapore held requiems for the Sikhs executed by the Indian government for the assassination of Indira Gandhi. Highly provocative announcements for the requiems were placed in the local newspapers. In order to prevent any outbreak of inter-religious violence, the police warned the Sikhs against importing foreign politics into Singapore.

A clandestine Muslim group *Ikhwan* or the Muslim Brotherhood, was also involved in stirring up religious tension in Singapore. Formed in 1978, the twenty-one member strong group had a long-term plan of turning Singapore into an Islamic state. Most of the members were recruited from religious classes conducted by a Malaysian religious teacher residing in Singapore. By September 1979, the *Ikhwan* had penetrated the Malay language societies of the local polytechnic and technical colleges. When news of the activities became known to the police, five members of the group were arrested while the remaining sixteen were summoned to the Internal Security Department and warned against inciting ethnic and religious disturbances.

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<sup>5</sup> Refer to the section on 'India' in the *Introduction* for a complete discussion of the subject.

These and other events which unfolded in Singapore exhibited a discernible trend towards religious revivalism and a resurgence in religious activity, including increased proselytisation and inter-ethnic conversion activities. There was also a tendency for religious organizations to become involved in political issues, as was demonstrated by the Marxist Conspiracy discussed in Chapter 5. This growing religious fundamentalism and the politicization of religious groups are of grave concern to the government. Many of Singapore's political and religious leaders have acknowledged that the country's changing religious scene may pose a threat to social harmony and religious tolerance, factors which are perceived to be prerequisites for a politically stable State.

The country's leaders also feared that the effects of rapid social changes experienced in Singapore over recent decades would result in a feeling of "rootlessness" among its citizens. This was voiced by Lee Kuan Yew in his Eve of National Day Speech in August 1987:

Religion has helped many Singaporeans to keep their bearings in the midst of rapid changes in their lives. Growth and progress have made life materially much better. But the speed of change has caused disruptions. About 80 percent of Singaporeans have been resettled into new homes in new towns. ... They miss their relatives and old neighbours and friends. They are disorientated. Some feel stress, many feel a sense of loss. a rootlessness, a void in their lives. Over time, new ties of friendship and a new sense of community will be established.

We have now achieved enough of the material basics of life to be able to give more attention to socio-psychological, and spiritual needs. We must match our economic progress with advances in the moral, ethical, and aesthetic dimensions of our lives.<sup>6</sup>

In an attempt to address these concerns, the Ministry of Community Development commissioned a team to research into religious trends in Singapore. The team from the

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<sup>6</sup> *Speeches*, 11(4) 1987, p,26

National University of Singapore comprised Associate Professor Eddie C.Y. Kuo, Head of the Department of Sociology, Associate Professor Jon S.T. Quah, Acting Director of the Institute of Policy Studies and Dr Tong Chee Kiong, lecturer at the Department of Sociology. The year-long study, commenced in August 1987, encompassed a literature review, an analysis of the 1980 census data, case studies in religious conversion and revivalism, and a national survey. The project was undertaken with the following six objectives:

- A. To identify the religious trends in Singapore.
- B. To describe the characteristics of those persons who have been attracted to Christianity, and to find out, among the new converts, the reasons for and the process of their conversion.
- C. To explore and discuss the extent and nature of religious revivalism and the relevance of religious anomie as an explanatory factor for religious revivalism in Singapore.
- D. To analyse the present status of Taoism, Buddhism, and the category of those persons who claim to have No Religion, and to project their future positions in Singapore.
- E. To discuss the social and political implications of the changing religious compositions and the increased religious revivalism in Singapore.
- F. To make recommendations for policy consideration on issues relating to religion in Singapore.<sup>7</sup>

The study dealt primarily with traditional Chinese religion<sup>8</sup> and Christianity, the two religions which have shown the greatest change in terms of their numbers and/or religious activities. The study also did an in-depth research into Singaporeans who profess to follow no religion at all. Hinduism and Islam on the other hand, were given a cursory examination and only tentative conclusions were drawn about both these religions.

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<sup>7</sup> *Religion and Religious Revivalism in Singapore*, p.4

<sup>8</sup> The term 'traditional Chinese religion' is used as a category to refer to a combination of Taoist and Buddhist religious beliefs.

The Ministry of Community Development released six reports based on the team's findings – *Religion and Religious Revivalism in Singapore*, *Religion in Singapore: Report of a National Survey*, *Religion in Singapore: An Analysis of the 1980 Census Data*, *Trends in Traditional Chinese Religions in Singapore*, *Religious Conversion and Revivalism: A Study of Christianity in Singapore*, *Religion and Religious Conversion in Singapore: Literature Review*. The following section is a summary of the major findings of the entire study as contained in these reports.

### RELIGIOUS TRENDS IN SINGAPORE<sup>9</sup>

The report *Religion and Religious Revivalism in Singapore* found that the total number of Hindus converting into other religions was relatively low in comparison to the Chinese community. The team attributed this to the belief that Hinduism is perceived by many as being closely linked with community and family life, an “important element in the ethnic identity and self-concept of the Tamil Indians”.<sup>10</sup> This is in sharp contrast to the Chinese community where religious identity has almost no bearing on Chinese ethnic or self-identity. The team also claimed that because of the more tolerant nature of traditional Chinese religion as compared to Hinduism, there have been more instances of conversion into other religious faiths among the former than there have been among the Hindu community.

There is a new spiritual configuration among the Chinese community in Singapore. In the past, a vast majority of Chinese were adherents of traditional Chinese religious beliefs, either Buddhism, Taoism or an admixture of beliefs, typified by a lack of aggressive proselytisation and conversion activities. The growth of Christianity with converts being drawn mainly from the Chinese community means that the passive nature of religious beliefs among the Chinese is slowly shifting.

Christianity showed a marked increase in its number of followers with 60% of people who claimed to be Christians actually being converts into the religion. While the mainline

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<sup>9</sup> I have employed the findings contained in the Reports released by the Ministry of Community Development given that the study undertaken was one of the most extensive conducted into the area of religion in Singapore.

<sup>10</sup> *Religion and Religious Revivalism in Singapore*, p.7

Christian churches only experienced a gradual growth in their numbers, Charismatic churches in Singapore are expanding the most rapidly.

Islam was found to remain fairly stable in terms of its adherent numbers. It was noted that the Muslim community is not homogeneous in its make-up; 9% of Muslims in Singapore are Indians who differ from the Malays ethnically<sup>11</sup>. Despite its relatively stable position in the country, the Muslim community believes that it is facing a number of threats to its religious identity. One concern is that the fundamentalist Islamic movement evident in many other Muslim countries might spill over into Singapore where at the moment, Muslim fundamentalists form only a minority in the community. An important distinction between Muslim fundamentalists and Islamic radicals is that the former stress a return to orthodox Islamic principles, while Muslim radicals are more politicised<sup>12</sup>. Although Islamic radicalism is not a major threat in Singapore at present, there is the fear that a rise in Islamic fundamentalism may prove to be a divisive factor in the Malay community which in turn could lead to serious political repercussions in the country.

This accelerated expansion of Christianity is another threat to the Muslim community in Singapore given the general Christian penchant for aggressive proselytising activities. The Muslim community also expressed its preference for traditional Chinese religion to be the dominant religion among the Chinese in Singapore because the latter rarely advocates active conversion tactics.

Another religious trend noted was the increasing number of people who classed themselves as “non-religionists”. A distinction was drawn between the two types of non-religionists<sup>13</sup>, the first type being atheists who “deny the existence of god(s) and/or supernatural beings”. The majority of non-religionists however fall into the second category which comprise people who are not anti-religion but are generally disillusioned about traditional Chinese religious beliefs.

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<sup>11</sup> The term ‘Indian Muslims’ is generally used as a descriptive label for this said ethnic group in Singapore and Malaysia.

<sup>12</sup> *Religion and Religious Revivalism in Singapore*, p.43-44

<sup>13</sup> *Religion and Religious Revivalism in Singapore*, p.22

## RELIGIOUS DEMOGRAPHY

The team conducted a demographic profile comparison of people in the main religious categories discussed in the reports. Comparing the Christians and the non-religionists in Singapore, it was found that the Christians were mostly young and English-educated Chinese. The non-religionists on the other hand, were from both English and Mandarin speaking homes and schools. While Christian converts were drawn from basically all ethnic groups except the Malay community, the non-religionists were almost exclusively Chinese. It was also found that when compared to the non-religionists, the Christians were of a higher educational and socio-economic status.

The general conclusion drawn from this demographic comparison of the religious groups was that the political, social and economic influence of Christians in Singapore was not proportional to the numbers they represent in the country. The study highlighted the potential repercussions which might result from a continued surge in the number of Christians in the country. Religion in Singapore, which already crossed ethnic boundaries, when coincided with social and class differences, could result in religious strife being related to class conflict.

## FACTORS INFLUENCING RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION IN SINGAPORE

The team also researched into what influenced the dramatic rise in the number of conversions in Singapore. The term “push factors” was employed to describe the reasons why people turn away from some religions and conversely, the attraction posed by other religions were termed “pull factors”.<sup>14</sup>

It was found that educational level played a significant role in influencing which religion was embraced. Higher educated respondents tended to favour Christianity and Buddhism over Taoism. Compared to Christianity, Taoism is seen as having no proper organisational structure, systematic theology or a centralised institution. Furthermore, there is no active propagation of Taoism as there is for Christianity. Even when compared to Buddhism, Taoism emerges as being an inferior religion. Buddhism is often perceived as a more logical and systematic religion than Taoism because of its structurally organised canonical texts and religious institution of ordained monkhood. The younger generations of the

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<sup>14</sup> *Religion and Religious Revivalism in Singapore*, p.16

local Chinese community are slowly losing their ties to traditional Chinese religious practices and tenets which they see as unsystematic and uninformed. This leads to either an increased secularization or a move towards a more ‘attractive’ religion like Christianity.

To counter the large number of young Singaporeans who are distancing themselves from traditional Chinese religion, there has been a move towards ‘intellectualising’ and revitalising Buddhism. In recent years, there have been intellectuals in Singapore who are in the process of stripping Buddhism of its superstitions in order to isolate what they believe is orthodox Buddhism. The introduction of Buddhism as an option in the Religious Knowledge Programme<sup>15</sup> also helped to propagate the religion. Buddhism, through this ‘intellectualisation’ process of being taught in schools, has become a viable option for many young Chinese Singaporeans who have shunned syncretic Chinese religious beliefs but are not drawn towards Christianity either.

The revitalisation of Buddhism is reflected in the increasing number of talks and meditation classes conducted by Buddhist monks. There are also groups which are actively engaged in promoting Buddhist teachings and practices as well as organising activities regularly to provide fellowship. Rapidly growing Buddhist sects like *Nichiren Soshu* further contribute to the increasing number of Buddhists in Singapore.

Buddhism is now proving to be a major contender against Christianity for converts in Singapore because this ‘updating’ of the religion has seen many people who originally claimed to be non-religionists adopting Buddhism as their professed religion.

The team also researched into what constituted the “pull factors” of Christianity. First, it is the perception held by many that other mainstream religions in Singapore are exclusive while Christianity is believed to be ethnically neutral. For example, Islam is seen as a religion only for Malays while Hinduism is geared specifically for Indians. Another “pull factor” is that when compared to traditional Chinese religion, Christianity is often seen as being rational, modern and well-organised. It is this perception which is the major “pull factor” attracting many young converts into Christianity. The active evangelisation

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<sup>15</sup> See Chapter 7 for further details on the Religious Knowledge Programme in Singapore.

engaged in by Christian church and para-church groups, as well as their promotion of fellowship through various activities, counselling and social service programmes, also contribute to attracting new converts into the religion.

The increase in the number of Christians in the country was also attributed to the introduction of Bible Knowledge in schools as part of the government's Religious Knowledge Programme. It was felt that the teaching of Bible Studies in schools could have inadvertently resulted in the promotion of Christian conversion among school children.

### MARRYING RELIGION AND STATE

The introduction of the Religious Knowledge Programme as part of the country's school curriculum in essence reflected the government's interest in the religious sphere, albeit in an indirect way:

...as long as the state, represented by the Ministry of Education, decides on the specific religions to be taught as options in this program, the decision itself already implies official endorsement of such chosen options.<sup>16</sup>

The Religious Knowledge Programme has had a significant impact on the religious scene in Singapore because basically, the State is perceived as officially according preferential status to some religions above others. Furthermore, the Religious Knowledge Programme has acted as a tool for the propagation of religions such as Christianity and Buddhism among school-going children.<sup>17</sup>

Another problem dealing with the relationship between the State and religion is reflected in the blurring of the demarcation between the religious and the secular spheres in Singapore. This was clearly exemplified by the previously discussed 'Marxist Conspiracy' in which the government alleged that a group of Catholic social workers, part of a clandestine

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<sup>16</sup> *Religion and Religious Revivalism in Singapore*, p.40

<sup>17</sup> These problems are dealt with in greater detail in Chapter 5.

communist network, were employing tenets of Liberation Theology as a means of creating dissent among the people they were counselling.

One of the major findings of the 1987 study was that the boundaries between the different religions in Singapore are ambiguous and constantly shifting. There has also been a rise in evangelical and religious fervour and proselytisation practices<sup>18</sup>, especially among the Christians, the result of which has been the growth of Christianity. Given that the Christians are beginning to form an 'elite' group in the country based on their social and educational status, there is the ever-present danger of religious strife denigrating into a class conflict. There is also the potential problem of Christians adopting "politically-oriented social actions to redress perceived social injustice".<sup>19</sup> This will mean the encroachment of religion upon the political sphere will prove disastrous for a multi-religious country like Singapore.

The team made certain recommendations based on the above conclusions. First, they recommended that an Inter-Religious Council (IRC) be established under the jurisdiction of the Prime Minister's office to promote harmony between the different religious groups in Singapore. They also suggested that the IRC assume the role of arbitrator when friction and misunderstanding arise between the various religious groups in the country.

The team also identified educational institutions in Singapore as having contributed to the changing religious scene in the country. For example, there are numerous schools which are sponsored by religious organisations. Missionary schools sponsored by various churches organisations in particular are an active breeding ground for Christian faith and evangelisation. The reports also recounted recent incidents when other religious groups have started to propagate their respective faiths to students in schools and campuses around Singapore. The team believes that if this trend continues, there is a very strong likelihood that inter-religious contact and/or competition for followers in educational institutions may result in religious conflict in the country. To counter this problem, they recommended that teachers maintain a clear distinction between their teaching role and their religious beliefs.

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<sup>18</sup> The research team noted in their Report that religious revivalism is not only confined to Singapore but is part of a recognized worldwide trend.

<sup>19</sup> *Religion and Religious Revivalism in Singapore*, p.32

The final recommendation made was for a piece of legislation to be designed with the aim of keeping religion and politics separate in Singapore.

The findings contained in these Ministry of Community Development reports provided the impetus for the 1989 drafting of the Maintenance of Religious Harmony (MRH) Bill in Singapore. The terms and conditions of the Bill will be explored fully in the next section.

#### MAINTENANCE OF RELIGIOUS HARMONY ACT

The issue of proselytisation is of grave concern to the government. If any religious group engages in insensitive proselytizing, this might result in dissatisfaction among other religious groups. Religious organizations should also be careful not to increase their number of converts drastically, especially at the expense of other religions in the country. A religion which seeks to establish a dominant or exclusive position for itself will be resisted by the other faiths, leading to religious strife. In exercising its right to freely practise one's religion, religious groups in the country should be guided by the following:

- (a) Acknowledge the multi-racial and multi-religious character of Singapore society, and the religious sensitivities of other communities.
- (b) Emphasize the moral values common to all faiths in the country.
- (c) Respect the right of every individual to freely choose his/her religion.
- (d) To prevent their followers from acting in any manner which may prove disrespectful towards other religions or religious groups in the country.
- (e) Not influencing or inciting their members to hostility towards other groups, religious and non-religious.<sup>20</sup>

In his address at the opening of Parliament on 9 January 1989, President Ong Teng Cheong noted:

Religious harmony is as important to us as racial harmony. Singapore is a secular state, and the supreme source of political authority is the Constitution. The Constitution guarantees freedom of religion. However, in Singapore racial

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<sup>20</sup> *White Paper, Maintenance of Religious Harmony*, 26 December 1989, p.5

distinctions accentuate religious ones. Religious polarization will cause sectarian strife. ...

Religious organizations...must not stray beyond [educational, social and charitable] bounds. Religion must be kept rigorously separate from politics.

Religious groups must not get themselves involved in the political process. Conversely, no group can be allowed to exploit religious issues or manipulate religious organizations, whether to excite disaffection or to win political support. It does not matter if the purpose of these actions is to achieve religious ideals or to promote secular objectives. In a multi-religious society, if one group violates this taboo, others will follow suit, and the outcome will be militancy and conflict.<sup>21</sup>

In giving his support to the claims contained in the Presidential Address, BG Lee spelt out the two vital conditions required to preserve religious harmony in the country. First, followers of the different religions must practice moderation and tolerance in their beliefs, and there must be a clear separation between religion and politics, where the incumbent government must derive its political authority from the Constitution.<sup>22</sup> The danger in mixing religion and politics lies in the possibility that political parties may take to advocating and implementing policies which favours one religion or religious group over the others in an attempt to garner communal votes. This is a definite recipe for disaster in a plural society.

He also warned religious leaders to refrain from inciting their followers to defy or challenge secular policies and to never manipulate their followers or organizations for subversive purposes because “mutual abstention from competitive political influence is an important aspect of religious tolerance.”<sup>23</sup> In Singapore, there is no prevention in place against religious leaders participating in politics, but they must do so as individuals and not as a “religious authority” nor create a “religious government”. This is to ensure against partisan politics.

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<sup>21</sup> Ong Teng Cheong, *White Paper, Maintenance of Religious Harmony*, 26 December 1989

<sup>22</sup> *Petir*, 3 December 1989, p.3

<sup>23</sup> *White Paper*, p.7

This injunction to keep religion and politics separate also extends to political candidates making religious references in their election speeches. In the 1991 general election, a Muslim opposition candidate was officially warned for using the phrases “*Insyallah*” and “*Alhamdulillah*” at rallies during the election run-up. Acknowledging that the two terms were found in the Quran, Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong nonetheless claimed that in using the said phrases, the candidate was:

...clearly making a religious appeal to the Muslims to gain political support. I was concerned that if [the candidate] was not checked, others belonging to other religions would follow his example.<sup>24</sup>

According to Goh, two other Muslim candidates of a Malay-based opposition party, PKMS<sup>25</sup>, were also treading on dangerous ground when they urged Muslim voters to pick Muslim candidates as Islam did not allow its followers to choose a non-Muslim as their leader:

If Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, and Hindus all quote their respective scriptures and invoke their respective religions to achieve incompatible political goals, the consequences must be conflict among the communities.<sup>26</sup>

The government claimed that it could take one of three approaches<sup>27</sup> to combat the increasing trend towards exclusivistic religious beliefs, aggressive conversion practices and the politicization of religion in the country. The first was a non-interventionist approach, with the hope that moderation will check any threat to religious harmony in Singapore. The second was to establish an Inter-Religious Advisory Council as recommended in the Ministry of Community Development Reports. Finally, to legislate against any potential threats in order to nip the problem in the bud. This third approach was deemed the most prudent of the three, and the justification given was that there

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<sup>24</sup> *Business Times*, 15 September 1991

<sup>25</sup> *Persatuan Kebangsaan Melayu Singapura* (PKMS).

<sup>26</sup> *Business Times*, 14 September 1991

<sup>27</sup> *Straits Times*, 1 May 1989

would be no need for legislation if all religious groups in Singapore could act in a manner which will not pose a threat to the religious harmony in the country. The government also claimed that adopting a preventive measure was a more desirable option in the long run:

It is better to act now to pre-empt future difficulties, when the trends are already clear but relations between the religions are still good. It will be much more difficult to secure agreement to act later, after matters have deteriorated and emotions have been aroused.<sup>28</sup>

It was felt that the existing laws in Singapore were inadequate in some way when it came to dealing with such issues. Both the Sedition Act<sup>29</sup> and the Penal Code<sup>30</sup> were too severe to apply to persons or organizations threatening religious harmony in the country. To compound the problem, when either of these laws is invoked, the long judicial proceedings leading up to the judgement may also serve to incite communal passions if the defendant manipulates them into political propaganda.

The Internal Security Act (ISA)<sup>31</sup> was designed to combat subversion and is therefore not appropriate to be employed against any act involving the misuse of religion. The ISA can be used against a person whose “religious” activity is likely to pit one religious group against another, cause riots and bloodshed, or heighten differences and intolerance between different religious communities in the country. It was however not designed to be invoked against the misuse of religion.

Because these existing laws are silent on the issue of religion getting involved in politics, the government perceived the need for legislation that would enable it to take

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<sup>28</sup> *Mirror* 15 April 1990

<sup>29</sup> Under this law, the promotion of “feelings of ill-will and hostility between different races or classes of the population” is viewed as a seditious act.

<sup>30</sup> The section “Offences Relating to Religion” legislates against the following acts – injuring or defiling a place of worship, disturbing a religious assembly, trespassing any place of worship, and uttering words to deliberately wound the religious feelings of any person.

<sup>31</sup> The Internal Security Department (ISD) was established as part of the Singapore Special Branch, established on 23 August 1948. In 1966, the Branch was renamed the ‘Internal Security Department’. It came under the auspices of the Ministry of Interior and Defence and in 1971, under the Ministry of Home Affairs.

prompt and preemptive action to nip potentially harmful problems in the bud before they cause widespread unrest. On 30 November 1989 the Minister of Home Affairs, Professor S. Jayakumar announced in Parliament that the government was going to introduce laws designed specifically to keep religion and politics separate. The government felt that it was necessary for controls to be put in place to consciously maintain a level of religious co-existence which is acceptable in Singapore. The proposed legislation was also to ensure that there is a clear demarcation between religion and politics in Singapore where “the safeguards for political rights and democratic values must be secular, not religious”.<sup>32</sup> In late December 1989, a White Paper on Religious Harmony was issued.

In a series of closed-door meetings with community leaders and heads of the main religious groups in the country, Goh Chok Tong and Lee Kuan Yew discussed the principles involved in the proposed legislation. Goh claimed that given the sensitivity of the issue, it had taken the government three years to draw up the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Bill, a piece of legislation detailing the guidelines for religious activities in Singapore in a bid to maintain religious toleration in the country. The Bill was first introduced in Parliament on 16 January 1990.

The Bill was not designed to be in conflict with the Constitutional right to freedom of religion but to prevent religion from being contrary to “public order, public health or morality”. It is aimed at preventing “irresponsible people from sowing disharmony or dissent through religion”. It was also to curb religious leaders from venturing beyond the boundaries of religious activities, and to stop the manipulation of religious organisations for political ends.

The Bill allows for the establishment of a Presidential Council for Religious Harmony in Singapore. The Council was to be a consultative body, to moderate relations between the various religious groups in Singapore and to advise the government on how to deal with sensitive religious issues in the country. Lay persons will also serve on the Presidential Council to complement the views of the religious leaders on the Council. This is to first, represent Singaporeans who do not profess any particular religious faith,

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<sup>32</sup> *Mirror* 15 April 1990

and second, to avoid confrontation between the leaders of opposing faiths who may pass judgements upon each other's errant followers.

Under this Bill, a restraining order can be placed on a person caught attempting to commit any one of the following acts:

- (1) causing feelings of enmity or hatred between different religious groups;
- (2) using religion as a guise for engaging in political activity or furthering the cause of a political party;
- (3) employing religion as a front for carrying out subversive activity, and finally, exacting disaffection for the President of Singapore or the Government under the guise of propagating religious beliefs.

Before making a prohibition order, the Minister Of Home Affairs must serve fourteen days notice to the person/s concerned and to the head of his/her religious group or institution (if any) to enable them to make written representations. The Minister will also notify the Presidential Council for Religious Harmony which will give its views on the matter within the same time limit. After the notice and considering the submissions received, the Minister may issue the prohibition order. After an order is issued, the Minister must refer it, and the various representations received to the Council. The Council will then express its views and recommend whether the order should be continued, modified or revoked.

The penalty for contravening the prohibition order is a maximum fine of \$10 000, a two-year jail term, or both. For subsequent offences, the fine is doubled and the jail term increased by another year.

A Parliamentary Select Committee was set up to scrutinize the Bill. Feedback was obtained from all sectors of society, including religious and community leaders, and parliamentary committees. After analyzing the representations received, the Committee prepared a report suggesting several amendments to the Bill. Incorporating some of the

eighteen amendments<sup>33</sup> proposed by the Select Committee, the government passed the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Bill on 9 November 1990.

## CONCLUSION

Religion, in essence, is a very private institution, but its effects are public and far-reaching. Religion helps define the way individuals relate to each other, within and outside the group. It also shapes society because the way religious beliefs are interpreted and translated into action can have a profound effect on society at large. The positive aspect of religion is that it provides a moral anchor, a grounding by which the individual can lead a decent life, in the process strengthening the fabric of society. The negative aspect of the social influence of religion is the tendency for religious bigotry. Religion can also have a detrimental effect on society, especially when it is exploited as a political tool. Therefore, religious beliefs and practices should always be tempered with national concerns. The government has to define the limits of religious freedom within the setting of a secular state.

It is important to note that the Singapore government is secular and not atheistic, nor in any way opposed to religion. The government has constantly reiterated that it is not concerned with increasing religious fervour but with its manifestation in a plural society like Singapore. The danger in a religiously diverse society is when one religious group tries to expand its boundaries of influence, which will inevitably encroach onto the space of other religions in the country, leading to conflict.

To this end, the Singapore government has formulated the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act, a law which establishes working rules by which the many faiths can accept fundamental differences between them, and co-exist peacefully in Singapore. Through the Act, the government seeks to combat inter- and intra-religious conflicts, religious extremism and the manipulation of religion as a seditious tool, and to prevent over-zealous religious activities which could undermine religious harmony in the country.

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<sup>33</sup> One of the representations made to the Committee was that the Bill was framed in a language that was too subjective, which could lead to misinterpretations. There were also concerns that too much power was given to the Executive. The modified Bill allows for the elected President to have the final say on matters.

In keeping with its injunction for religious leaders and social activists to remain apolitical, the Christian Conference of Asia<sup>34</sup> was expelled from Singapore when it came to light that the organisation adopted a political profile by subscribing to the tenets of Liberation Theology.<sup>35</sup> By the same token, political and social activists were warned against employing religion or religious institutions to further their political agenda. Tan Wah Piow was seen to have used the Catholic Church to further his communist intentions in the country.

The government has always maintained that it will come down hard on anyone who uses religion as a political tool. The problem with this strict insistence on keeping religion and politics separate is that of defining where religious duty ends and political activism begins.

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<sup>34</sup> An organisation of Christian clergy and lay people.

<sup>35</sup> *Straits Times* 31 December 1987

## CHAPTER 7

### RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN SINGAPORE SCHOOLS

The Singapore government's concern with the issue of moral education in schools has been apparent in the last three decades. There is a general consensus in Singapore with the Durkheimian view that schools, as the guardians of national character, should be employed as instruments to inculcate "common moral sentiments on the basis of a secular rather than a religious inspired morality".<sup>1</sup> The belief that the survival of Singapore as a nation is dependent on the success of values education in schools has prompted the government to implement various programmes with the aim of imparting moral instruction to youth.

The authors of the book *The Revival of Values Education in the East and the West*, draw a distinction between 'values clarification' and 'values instruction':

Proponents of values clarification assume that young people are or should be capable of making their own decisions concerning appropriate values and hence advocate a pedagogy designed to facilitate or stimulate these decisions. Proponents of values instruction believe that the responsibility for identifying appropriate values lies with the schools, the adult community and/or the state, and thus the task of values education is to meaningfully convey the socially approved values to young people.<sup>2</sup>

The authors also claimed that the focus of values education is concentrated primarily on the relationship between the individual and state and polity. In Asia and other developing nations, this emphasis is highlighted in the form of interpersonal or moral values, which is evident in the Singapore system. This Chapter will trace the development of the various moral education programmes in Singapore, focusing

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<sup>1</sup> Gopinathan, S., 'The Revival of Values Education in Asia and the West' in *The Revival of Values Education In Asia and the West*, in Cummings, William K., Gopinathan, S., Tomoda, Yasumasa (eds.), Oxford (Pergamon Press, 1988), p.131

<sup>2</sup> Cummings, William K., Gopinathan, S., Tomoda, Yasumasa, *The Revival of Values Education In Asia and the West*, Oxford (Pergamon Press, 1988), p.5

primarily on the Religious Knowledge syllabus which was instituted in schools in 1982. The Chapter will then investigate the efficacy of this Religious Knowledge programme and conclude with an analysis of the issues surrounding religious education in Singapore schools.

In 1959, the Singapore Ministry of Education released a proposal outlining the teaching of ethics in schools. The syllabus, designed to inculcate ethical values such as politeness, honesty, perseverance and kindness, was aimed at laying a foundation for character development of Singaporeans into self-respecting individuals and good citizens. An 'Ethics' or 'Right Conduct' programme was subsequently implemented in the Singapore school curriculum, and remained in place until 1966 when the Ministry of Education introduced a new moral and civics syllabus. The aim of this new programme was to impart to students the ideals of social and civic responsibility.

By 1967, Civics was taught in both primary and secondary schools in place of the previous Ethics or Right Conduct course. Two years later a new Civics syllabus, which was designated a compulsory but non-examination subject, had been instituted in schools. Patriotism, loyalty and civic consciousness were values which were added to the list to be taught as part of the syllabus.

The Education for Living (EFL) programme was formulated in the wake of the 1973 Ministry of Education review of the primary school civics syllabus. The aim of the EFL programme was to facilitate students' understanding of the purpose and importance of nation-building in Singapore. It was also to help them understand and appreciate the desirable elements of Eastern and Western traditions, and to handle successfully the changing societal and national conditions. EFL was subsequently introduced in primary schools in 1974, replacing the Civics syllabus which had been taught since 1967.

The EFL programme was a combination of both moral and social education, and to facilitate the latter concept, history and geography were taught as part of the programme.

## RELIGIOUS KNOWLEDGE PROGRAMME

The changing social climate in Singapore in the 1970s signalled a discernible shift in the character of moral instruction in schools. M. Hill and K.F. Lian explain this as follows:

By the late 1970s, when most of the basic needs of the population had been fulfilled, there came the time for soul-searching and reflection, and there emerged a new and increased concern over the non-material (social and cultural) dimensions of nation building. Alarmed by increasing (or at least socially more visible) numbers of crime, delinquency, drug-abuse, abortion and divorce (and despite the fact that the rates of such social indicators were comparatively low in Singapore compared to other equally urbanised societies), there emerged a collective sense of moral crisis, calling for collective action.<sup>3</sup>

In 1978, an Education Study Team, led by the then Minister for Education, Dr Goh Keng Swee, was commissioned to investigate problems inherent in policies advocated by the Ministry of Education. The results of the study, published in February 1979 as *The Goh Report on Education*, highlighted the failure of the Ministry's implementation of bilingual education and expressed concern over deculturalisation in Singapore. The Report Overview contained a section on moral education which was introduced with the following observation:

One of the dangers of secular education in a foreign tongue is the risk of losing the traditional values of one's own people and the acquisition of the more spurious fashions of the West.<sup>4</sup>

The Report also promoted the need to inculcate proper values in the Singapore population:

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<sup>3</sup> Hill, Michael, and Lian, Kwen Fee, *The Politics of Nation Building and Citizenship in Singapore*, New York (Routledge, 1995), p.195

<sup>4</sup> Goh Keng Swee [and The Education Study Team], *Report on the Ministry of Education, 1978*, Singapore (Government of Singapore, 1979), p.1-5

A society unguided by moral value can hardly be expected to remain cohesive under stress. It is a commitment to a common set of values that will determine the degree to which the people of recent migrant origin will be willing and able to defend their collective interest. They will not be able to do this unless individuals belonging to the group are able to discern that an enlightened view of their long-term self-interest often conflicts with their desire for immediate gain.<sup>5</sup>

In response to the observation contained in the Report, Lee Kuan Yew addressed a letter<sup>6</sup> to Goh in which he noted that the Report failed to deal with the issues of moral and character-forming aspects of education. In his letter, Lee identified what he believed were the virtues of the ideal Singaporean:

...the litmus test of a good education is whether it nurtures good citizens who can live, work, contend and cooperate in a civilised way. Is he loyal and patriotic? Is he, when the need arises, a good soldier, ready to defend his country, and so protect his wife and children, and his fellow citizens? Is he filial, respectful to elders, law abiding, humane, and responsible? Does he take care of his wife and children, and his parents? Is he a good neighbour and a trustworthy friend? Is he tolerant of Singaporeans of different races and religions? Is he clean, neat, punctual, and well-mannered?<sup>7</sup>

In October 1978, Goh Keng Swee appointed a committee to review the teaching of moral education in schools. This committee led by Ong Teng Cheong comprised parliamentarians who, being “non-professional educationists”<sup>8</sup>, approached the assigned task from the point of view of parents and concerned citizens. The committee’s *Report*

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<sup>5</sup> Goh Report, p.1-5

<sup>6</sup> This letter accompanies the published Report.

<sup>7</sup> Lee Kuan Yew in Goh Keng Swee [and The Education Study Team], Report on the Ministry of Education, 1978, Singapore, (Government of Singapore, 1979).

<sup>8</sup> Report on Moral Education 1979, Singapore (Government of Singapore, 1979), i

*on Moral Education*<sup>9</sup>, submitted in June 1979, claimed that teaching religion is one of the best ways to produce a moral person. This report also noted that because Singapore lacked a firm, well-developed ideology, it needed religion to prevent Singaporeans from fumbling for values and to avoid a drop in moral standards in the country.

The *Ong Report* was essentially a critique of the existing EFL and Civics programmes, labelling them “inadequate and ineffective”. It listed the major shortcoming of the syllabus as its lack of emphasis on moral instruction. The Team also noted that there was insufficient content on imparting moral values and concepts to students, while teaching the geography and history of Singapore were irrelevant to moral education.

The previous description by Lee about the ideal Singaporean, was the basis of the team's recommendation for the introduction of a Moral Education syllabus which would impart Asian values and concepts to students. It was proposed that this new subject should be restricted to providing moral education and disciplinary training of students, thereby producing “...good, useful and loyal citizens through inculcation of the desired moral values and social attitudes.”<sup>10</sup> The *Report* submitted that at primary school level, the new Moral Education programme should focus on the formation of desired habits and qualities which will enable youths to live harmoniously in their immediate social environment, the home and the school. The programme for secondary schools was to be expanded to include the teaching of “...responsibility to society and state, ...the inculcation of the desired Eastern and Asian moral concepts, values and attitudes so as to help in the preservation and strengthening of [Singapore's] cultural heritage.”<sup>11</sup>

The recommendations of the *Ong Report* prompted the government to announce in 1979 its approval of Bible Knowledge and Islamic Religious Knowledge as examination subjects, thereby conceding the value of religious education in schools.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Commonly known as the Ong Report.

<sup>10</sup> Ong Report (1979), p.8

<sup>11</sup> Ong Report (1979), p.9-10

<sup>12</sup> Quah, Jon S.T. In Search of Singapore's National Values, Singapore (Institute of Policy Studies, 1990), p.53

Reverend Dr Robert Balhetchet, a prominent Singaporean Jesuit priest, was assigned the task of developing a moral education programme based on the recommendations contained in the *Ong Report*. In 1981, the resulting *Being and Becoming* Moral Education Programme was pilot tested in Singapore schools. This programme centred on 'Personal Behaviour', 'Social Responsibility', and 'Loyalty to Country'. The *Good Citizen* programme, designed by another team, was also introduced in schools. Unlike the *Being and Becoming* programme, which was available in English and the vernacular, the *Good Citizen* programme was solely in Chinese. Its material was based primarily on the earlier civics syllabus and employed Chinese myths and legends as illustrations.

The *Being and Becoming* moral education programme however did not succeed in schools because of the lack of materials stemming from the slow preparation of instruction materials for the course.

Although the original aim of the moral education programme in Singapore was to provide an ethical rather than religious instruction, there were inherent difficulties with this concept. In mission schools for example, moral instruction was linked with religious elements, while it proved difficult to separate ethics from Islamic precepts when teaching Malay students. Such difficulties resulted in the official move to combine moral and religious education, the former to primary and lower secondary students and the latter to upper secondary students.<sup>13</sup> Gopinathan notes the change in government policy with regard to teaching religion in schools:

A government that has previously restricted religious instruction to non-curriculum time in the aided mission-run schools has now acknowledged the value of such instruction.<sup>14</sup>

In 1982, the government announced its intention to implement a compulsory Religious Knowledge programme in Singapore schools. Goh Keng Swee, the Education Minister

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<sup>13</sup> Wong, J. and Wong, A., 'Confucian Values as a Social Framework for Singapore's Economic Development' in Conference on Confucianism and Economic Development in East Asia (Conference Series No.13), Taipei (Chung-Hua Institution for Ecumenic Research, 1989), p523

<sup>14</sup> Gopinathan, S., p.138-9

who initiated the policy of teaching religion in schools, held that religion was probably “the best and most dependable way of producing honest, upright citizens”<sup>15</sup>. He cited his educational experience in a mission school as evidence for the moral force of religion. Goh noted that Christianity, which was taught in his school, had a positive effect because none of his classmates had “landed up in jail for criminal breach of trust.” His second example involved the business success of his former school-mates:

If you want evidence of business success, do attend an ACS old boys' dinner. You'll never find more Mercedes cars parked outside a school ground than an OBA dinner....Bankers obviously think ACS old boys can be trusted...<sup>16</sup>

Goh linked this economic success with the religious upbringing obtained while in school. Based on this evidence, Goh believed that the study of religion in schools would ensure integrity and honesty in people, thereby “saving Singapore from becoming a nation of thieves”<sup>17</sup>.

The original options in the Religious Knowledge programme were Bible Knowledge, Hindu Studies, Islamic Religious Knowledge, Buddhist Studies, and World Religions. The World Religions option, which was to be made available to students who did not wish to study any of the other religions on offer, was later scrapped because the Ministry of Education claimed that it was too difficult to develop a syllabus for. Sikh Studies was subsequently included in the programme at the request of the Sikh community and Confucian Ethics at the request of Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew. According to Kuo:

Confucianism, as a secular ethical system, could have no place as a part of the religious teachings. It was at the suggestion of the Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, and after spending ‘many of his wakeful hours and several sleepless nights’, that two weeks later in early February 1982, Goh announced that Confucian Ethics was to be

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<sup>15</sup> Straits Times, 17 January 1982

<sup>16</sup> Straits Times, 7 January 1982

<sup>17</sup> Straits Times, 7 January 1982

included as an additional subject for those Chinese who might not be religiously inclined , ‘to give young Singaporeans a cultural ballast against the less desirable aspects of Western culture’.<sup>18</sup>

The government made it clear from the beginning that Religious Knowledge was to be studied as a classroom subject, “like studying Shakespeare”. There were to be “no prayers, meditation, preaching, worship and mass conversion. The aim was to help students appreciate the origins and precepts of the religions which have influenced Singapore’s cultures and thus give an understanding of the moral principles that have shaped society”<sup>19</sup>. Keeping to this, all curriculum material were coordinated by foreign academic specialists and not by theologians. The consultant for the Hindu Studies syllabus was a professor of English and Indian Literature from the Sri Aurobindo International Centre for Education, while Confucian scholars from Taiwan and the United States were consulted on the Confucian segment of the proposed programme.<sup>20</sup>

Gopinathan notes:

This paradox of calling upon expatriate expertise in a curriculum area both heavily cultural and sensitive is seldom noted. Perhaps the explanation for their use lies in the desire to have some non-Singapore reference point as a way of managing internal differences.<sup>21</sup>

The Confucian ethics component of the Religious Knowledge syllabus was accorded a disproportionate amount of the resources allocated to the curriculum because the government perceived Confucian values as vital to promoting social discipline and

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<sup>18</sup> Kuo, Eddie C.Y. *Confucianism as a Political Discourse in Singapore: The Case of an Incomplete Revitalization Movement*, Singapore (National University of Singapore, 1992), p.6

<sup>19</sup> *Straits Times* , 6 and 7 Dec 1983

<sup>20</sup> The noted academic reputations of the Confucian specialists consulted is indicative of the special treatment accorded to that particular segment of the programme: Professors Yu Ying-shih of Yale University; Tu Wei-ming of Harvard; James C. Hsiung from New York University; Te-Kong Tong from City University of New York; Hsu Cho-yun of Pittsburgh; Wu Chen-tsou of National Normal University in Taiwan, and Chin Chen-Oi, a Singaporean. Gopinathan, 1988, p.139-40; Ling, 1989, p701-2

<sup>21</sup> Gopinathan, S. ‘Being and Becoming: Education for Values in Singapore’, p.139

correct work ethic in Singaporeans. It was also believed that Confucianism would ensure order and harmony in the population:

the Confucian emphasis on community is diametrically opposed to individualism as we often understand the term. Confucianism conceives of the self as neither as an isolated atom nor as a single, separate individuality, but as a being in relationship...Each relationship contributes to the development and overall constitution of the self.<sup>22</sup>

The government also utilised Confucian ideals to counter any move towards establishing a social welfare state in Singapore:

In such a society, the old and young, orphans and widows, the lonely and disabled are all looked after and cared for. The old have a proper resting place. The young are brought up to be healthy, fulfilled adults. Every person, man and woman, has a home and work. The people cultivate friendship and trust among themselves.<sup>23</sup>

Despite Lee's confident assertion that the majority of Chinese parents in Singapore would prefer that their children study Confucianism instead of Buddhism<sup>24</sup>, subsequent student numbers proved him wrong. In 1989, 18% of Chinese students chose Confucian Studies as opposed to 44% who chose Buddhist Studies and 21% Bible Knowledge.<sup>25</sup>

This Religious Knowledge programme was reviewed after results of a government-commissioned study into religious trends in Singapore were released in 1989. The sociological study, *Religion and Religious Revivalism in Singapore*<sup>26</sup>, concluded that the

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<sup>22</sup> Ling, Trevor, 'Religion' in *Management of Success: The Moulding of Modern Singapore*, Singapore (Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1989), p.702

<sup>23</sup> Kuah, S., 'Confucian Ideology and Social Engineering in Singapore' in *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 20(3) 1990, p.377

<sup>24</sup> Straits Times, 8 February 1982

<sup>25</sup> Kuo, 1992, p.16-18; Wong and Wong, 1989, p.523

<sup>26</sup> The contents of this study will be explored thoroughly in Chapter 6.

government had not been entirely neutral in its dealings on matters of religion, especially with its implementation of the Religious Knowledge programme. The government was seen as according preferential treatment to the six religions it had made available as syllabus options.

The government's response was to downgrade the programme to an optional subject in 1989. Minister of Education, Dr Tony Tan, explained this change of policy by noting that circumstances had changed since the programme's introduction in 1982. He claimed that there now was:

a heightened consciousness of religious differences and a new fervour in the propagation of religious beliefs. ...The Government cannot ignore this new development. The Government has to take cognizance of it and implement measures to ensure that it does not upset the present climate of religious tolerance in Singapore....To avoid any suspicion of partiality in formulating and implementing the measures, it is essential for the Government to be seen as scrupulously neutral and even-handed in the handling of religious matters in Singapore.<sup>27</sup>

In his article on government and the religious institution in Singapore, Tamney put forward the suggestion that the Religious Knowledge programme was replaced by a new Civics syllabus partly because of the relatively small student numbers opting for Confucian Ethics.<sup>28</sup>

#### ISSUES SURROUNDING MORAL EDUCATION IN SINGAPORE

In its attempt to implement a moral and religious education programme in schools, the Singapore government has encountered numerous difficulties.

The state or political elite of plural societies such as Singapore face a unique challenge when it comes to values education. They have to formulate a set of core values which

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<sup>27</sup> Dr Tony Tan, *Straits Times*, 7 Oct 1989

<sup>28</sup> Tamney, J.B., 'Conservative Government and Support for the Religious Institution in Singapore: An Uneasy Alliance' in *Sociological Analysis* 53(2) 1992, p.34

will unify the different ethnic and religious groups in the country: “The essential societal problem [of] most newly independent societies is not the protection of pluralism but the enhancement of solidarity.”<sup>29</sup>

In the interest of social integration and consensus, this is usually achieved by drawing on the cultural traditions of the main ethnic communities represented in the country.<sup>30</sup> This is not an easy task especially when the selection of core values has to be made from competing cultural traditions. Therefore, in order to avoid dividing a multi-religious population like Singapore, it is necessary for a secular government to formulate core values at a more general level instead of employing religion as a foundation for social values.

The problem of instituting a set of fundamental values is further compounded because of the often strong influence of “Western-oriented modernizing traditions” present in such developing plural societies.

This distinction between Asian and Western values has been a major concern of the government’s since the 1970s. In fact, there have been differing views expressed by top government officials regarding the concept of ‘Asian values’. While Goh Keng Swee noted that Asian values, and in particular, Confucian values<sup>31</sup>, were important as “cultural ballast” in the process of nation-building, S. Rajaratnam claimed that he doubted if:

...such a thing as ‘Asian values’ really exists - or for that matter ‘Asian’ anything - Asian unity, Asian socialism, Asian way of life and so on. It may exist as an image but it has no reality.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Gopinathan, S., *The Revival of Values Education in Asia and the West*, p.7

<sup>30</sup> Gopinathan S., *The Revival of Values Education in Asia and the West*, p.6

<sup>31</sup> It is important to note that prior to 1979, Confucianism was not a topic of discussion in Singapore. (Wong, J. and Wong, A. *Confucian Values as a Social Framework for Singapore's Economic Development in Conference on Confucianism and Economic Development in East Asia (Conference Series No.13)*, Chung-Hua Institution for Ecumenic Research (Taipei, 1989), p.517

<sup>32</sup> Rajaratnam, S., ‘Asian Values and Modernisation’ in *Asian Values and Modernisation*, Seah Chee Meow (ed.), Singapore (Singapore University Press, 1977) p.95

Lee Kuan Yew meanwhile, proposed an amalgamation of Asian and Western values:

The best of the East and of the West must be blended to advantage the Singaporean. Confucianist ethics, Malay traditions, and the Hindu ethos must be combined with sceptical Western methods of scientific inquiry, the open discursive methods in the search for truth. We have to discard obscurantist and superstitious beliefs of the East, as we have to reject the passing fads of the West. Particularly important are intra-family relationships. We must reinforce these traditional family ties found in all Asian societies. But we must excise the nepotism which usually grows out of this extended family net of mutual help.<sup>33</sup>

Lee was basically advocating for Singaporeans to adopt Western technology and knowledge, while discarding Western values which were perceived as being decadent, individualistic and inappropriate to Singapore society.

The Religious Knowledge programme had the unintended effect of emphasising ethnic differences instead of simulating cohesion in society. In keeping with government conviction that traditional cultural values were best transmitted in the mother- or ethnic-tongue<sup>34</sup>, it was stipulated that the programme options be taught in the following languages: Bible Knowledge in English; Islamic Religious Knowledge in Malay and English; both Buddhist Studies and Confucian Ethics in English and Mandarin; Sikh Studies and Hindu Studies in English<sup>35</sup>. The teaching of the different options in the 'mother-tongue' and employing different religions to promote values only served to highlight ethnic differences in the population:

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<sup>33</sup> Goh Report, v.

<sup>34</sup> Gopinathan, S., 'Religious Education in a Secular State: The Singapore Experience' in *Asian Journal of Political Science*, 3(2) 1995, Singapore, p.22

<sup>35</sup> The Singapore Tamil Teachers Association's request that Hindu Studies be taught in Tamil was rejected by the government, which was in direct contrast to the whole basis of its values education and bilingual policy directives.

The Religious Knowledge Programme in schools was recently scrapped in order to ensure that the government was neutral in its treatment of the various religions in Singapore. Instead of exposing students to a course on comparative world religions, they were exposed to six options, each stressing the uniqueness of its own religion. The programme exposed students to particular religions of their choice and had the unintended effect of increasing their religious fervour....

...the policy-makers themselves should always be conscious of the possibility of unintentionally raising the racial consciousness of the population through the implementation of public policies. In a multi-racial society like Singapore, it is quite easy for policies which are directed towards the majority group to be perceived differently by the minorities.<sup>36</sup>

The proposed inclusion of Confucian Ethics in the Religious Knowledge programme precipitated strong debate in Singapore. Goh argued that Confucian ideals were relevant to Singapore's drive for rapid economic growth and therefore should be adopted as a code of conduct for the entire country. Kuo described this attempt of the government's as a "revitalization movement" designed to unify Singaporean Chinese in ethical-cultural terms.<sup>37</sup>

This however, had several unintended effects. Those opposed to the idea of including Confucian Ethics in the programme argued that its teachings subordinated women and encouraged authoritarian attitudes in leaders, and was therefore not relevant to modern-day Singapore.

Second, Confucian ethos was perceived as being exclusive to the majority ethnic community in Singapore. Since the other ethnic minority groups in the country associated Confucianism with the Chinese, the strong government endorsement of

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<sup>36</sup> Quah, Jon S.T., 'Government Policies and Nation-Building' in *In Search of Singapore's National Values*, Jon S.T. Quah (ed.), Singapore (Times Academic Press, 1990), p.61

<sup>37</sup> Gopinathan, S., (1995), p.21

Confucian ethics was perceived as a subtle government attempt at resinicization of the entire Singapore population.

Another difficulty encountered in the implementation of the Religious Knowledge curriculum concerned the teachers appointed to the programme. Although it was decided at official level that Religious Knowledge teachers would be volunteers and not necessarily adherents of the specific religion they taught, in response to public concern of proselytisation in the classroom, the government subsequently announced that teachers who are members of fundamentalist sects with strong conversionist inclinations will not be assigned to the programme.<sup>38</sup> There was also a serious shortage of teachers qualified to teach the options offered. Many Chinese Christian teachers were against having to teach Buddhist Studies or Confucian Ethics, which further compounded the existing problem. Ironically though, because of such complications, the government turned to religious associations like the Singapore Buddhist Federation, Trinity Theological College and *Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura* (MUIS) to provide and train teachers for the programme. This was in contrast to keeping the programme purely academic and secular. It stands to reason that the teachers who were trained by religious associations would have received a more theologically biased training as opposed to teachers trained by a secular organisation like the Ministry of Education.

Tong Chee Kiong, a noted Singaporean sociologist, used the phrase the “rationalization of religion” to describe the government’s attitude towards religion in Singapore. In Hill’s interpretation, the rationalization of religion is symbolised by:

...the gradual filtering out of folk beliefs and practices and the domestication or ‘tidying up’ of less manageable elements in the religious tradition, sometimes as a conscious result of government policy. In the case of the religious curriculum a clear distinction was made between the cognitive component of religion - religious knowledge - on which the curriculum would be based, and what was

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<sup>38</sup> Tamney, J.B., ‘Religion and the State in Singapore’ in *Journal of Church and State*, Vol.30 (1988), p.118

called 'religious instruction', including such practices as prayer, meditation, and worship, which were proscribed.<sup>39</sup>

This attitude was clearly evident in certain aspects of the Religious Knowledge curriculum, for example, the formulation of the Buddhist Studies syllabus. Initially, the task of developing the syllabus was assigned to the Singapore Buddhist Federation which in turn, commissioned a Sinhalese scholar-monk to compile a relevant textbook. The resulting material was deemed to be lacking in practical orientation and failing to emphasise "desirable national values"<sup>40</sup>. The Ministry of Education then handed the task over to the Curriculum Development Institute of Singapore, which established its own team to construct a proper syllabus. This team employed the expertise of foreign academics selected by the Ministry, while the Singapore Buddhist Federation was only consulted over issues dealing with scriptural interpretation. Kuah's description of the material contained in the Buddhist Studies syllabus is a prime example of the way religion is rationalised in Singapore:

The Buddhist teaching is given a practical redefinition to suit the secular context. Indeed, in the textbook the religious references are only used minimally and then only to reinforce the secular values of the programme.

...the Buddhist teachings are translated into values such as self-reliance, tolerance, loving-kindness, and compassion.

The textbook treats ritualism, so vital a part of Buddhist culture, in a negative manner.<sup>41</sup>

The teaching method adopted by the government for the Religious Knowledge programme is another example of how religion is rationalised in the country. Gopinathan distinguishes the government's choice to use the "ecclesiastical" as opposed to the "educational" method to teach religion in schools. The former "is intended to lead

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<sup>39</sup> Hill and Lian, p.200

<sup>40</sup> Kuah, Khun Eng, 'State and Religion: Buddhism and Nation-Building in Singapore' in *Pacific Viewpoint*, 32(1) 1991, p.32

<sup>41</sup> Kuah, (1991), p.34

students to a choice and affirmation to a particular religious faith while the latter treats religion as a social science subject, aimed at promoting understanding of religion as a distinctive way of interpreting experience.”<sup>42</sup>

An editorial in the *Business Times* aptly summed up the problems inherent in the government’s implementation of the Religious Knowledge programme in schools:

Religious instruction is an important channel for the transmission to the young of religious values which are, in the final analysis, social values. The point about such teaching is, however, that these values are predicated on the distinctive theological and moral premises of particular religions; there is little scope for cross-religious understanding. But schooling in a secular society should reflect the diversity of religions in that society and the fact that the state attaches equal importance to all faiths.<sup>43</sup>

#### CONCLUSION:

The emphases and rationales behind Singapore’s moral education programmes have constantly been altered to suit the state’s changing political and social structure and its perceived requirements. According to Hill, the *Ong Report* and Goh’s reaction to it marked the precise point in which religion was employed as an instrument of public policy in Singapore.<sup>44</sup> This 1982 Religious Education policy marked a milestone in the education system in Singapore because it signified a state-mandate for teaching religion in schools.

According to Tamney, there are three repercussions in the government’s use of religion to underpin its concept of shared social values. Firstly, the government decides what constitutes acceptable religion in the country, which was taken a step further and enshrined legally in the late 1980s after a series of events which highlighted the problematic nature of religious commitment in Singapore. These events, which were

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<sup>42</sup> M. Grimmit, What I can do in Religious Education, cited in Gopinathan, S., (1995), p.22

<sup>43</sup> Business Times 24 January 1989

<sup>44</sup> Hill and Lian, p.199

discussed in depth in previous Chapters, included the visit of the Israeli President to the country; the issue of Malays in the Singapore Armed Forces; the detention of four Malays for spreading rumours of impending racial clashes, and the Marxist conspiracy. In the aftermath of these events, the government adopted the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act in 1990, which effectively defines the parameters of religious activity in Singapore. The other result was the government's move to formulate what Hill describes as a “secularised ‘civil religion’”<sup>45</sup> to equip the country with a government-sanctioned set of shared national values. This will be discussed further in a later Chapter.

Next, all religions are forced to conform to state ideology which means “accepting the capitalist basis of the economy, adopting a tolerant stance towards other religions and subscribing to democratic values”<sup>46</sup>.

The final repercussion is that the government homogenises religion, allowing inter-religious differences to surface only if they complement each other.<sup>47</sup>

The introduction of specific curriculum provisions for teaching religion in Singapore schools was a definite anomaly in the relationship between a secular state and a multi-religious society.<sup>48</sup> By instituting compulsory study of religion in the state-dominated school system in Singapore, the government compromised the secularity of the country's educational system. Furthermore, by its very selection of the religions to be taught as part of the programme, the government jeopardised its purported neutrality *vis-à-vis* the various religions represented in the country.

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<sup>45</sup> Hill and Lian, p. 207

<sup>46</sup> Hill and Lian, p.205

<sup>47</sup> Tamney, (1988), p.127

<sup>48</sup> Vivienne Wee, *Secular State, Multi-Religious Society: The Patterning of Religion in Singapore*, Unpublished Conference Paper, p.16

## CHAPTER 8:

### NATION-BUILDING AND ITS CONTRIBUTION TO RELIGIOUS HARMONY

In the process of nation-building, both Indonesia and Malaysia have developed their respective national ideologies, the *Pancasila* in the case of Indonesia, and in Malaysia the *Rukunegara*. Being multi-racial and multi-religious meant that both these countries needed a national ideology to help promote unity among their disparate ethnic and religious communities. Before independence, the various ethnic communities in both Indonesia and Malaysia were kept together by Colonial rule, the Dutch in Indonesia and the British in the latter. Attaining independence signaled the departure of the colonial rulers from these two countries which then made it imperative for these countries to develop some form of national ideology to maintain unity, hence the birth of the *Pancasila* in Indonesia and the *Rukunegara* in Malaysia.

The *Pancasila* or ‘Five Principles’ was first proposed by President Sukarno. It was formulated at the onset of independence with the collapse of the Japanese occupation and before the Dutch could reassert colonial control in the country. From independence on 17 August 1945, the *Pancasila* became entrenched in Indonesia, and was preserved in the 1950 temporary Constitution. When the Constituent Assembly was formed in 1956 to draft a permanent Constitution, the *Pancasila* was enshrined as the country’s national ideology. Of the initial five principles proposed by Sukarno, the only principle to receive much deliberation was that dealing with belief in God<sup>1</sup>.

This principle originally read “Belief in God, with the obligation to carry out the Islamic *shari’ah* for its adherents.” This stipulation was not well received by the non-Muslim communities in the country and Sukarno subsequently agreed to modify the first principle to read “Belief in God”. The final version of the *Pancasila* comprised the following five principles:

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<sup>1</sup> Indonesia requires all its citizens to profess a religion, even if it be nominally. The rationale behind this injunction is the belief that all communists are atheists and to prevent communism from taking root, atheism is prohibited in the country. After the failed communist coup of 30 September 1965, the Indonesian government passed a law requiring all its citizens to profess one of the recognized religions in the country.

1. Belief in God
2. A Just and Civilized Humanity
3. Unity of Indonesia
4. Peoplehood Guided by the Spirit of Wisdom in Deliberation and Representation
5. Social Justice

The *Rukunegara* or “Pillars of the State” was officially introduced in Malaysia in 1969, in the aftermath of the bloody racial riots in the country that year. The *Rukunegara* was drafted by the Malaysian Department of National Unity (DNU) and is essentially concerned with protecting Malay dominance while regulating the way Malaysia is expected to develop religiously and culturally. It was also designed as a guide to ensure smooth inter-ethnic relations in the country. The Declaration (*perishtiharan*) is formulated in two parts, the first of which identifies the ideal Malaysian society - united, democratic, liberal and just. The second part of the Declaration lists five guiding principles to achieve this objective:

1. Belief in God
2. Loyalty to King and Country
3. Upholding the Constitution
4. Rule of Law
5. Good Behaviour and Morality

It is significant that although the *Pancasila* and the *Rukunegara* have ‘Belief in God’ as their first principle, both of these national ideologies do not allude to their respective countries as theocratic or Islamic states; they actually identify Indonesia and Malaysia as theist states. The stipulations are kept neutral though, specifying no god in particular. The term “Tuhan” is used instead of the more specific “Allah”, which would usually mean a reference to the Islamic God.

## NATION-BUILDING IN SINGAPORE

Since it attained power in 1959, the PAP has been determined to build a cohesive nation state out of the various ethnic communities in the country. This concern was motivated by the prevailing belief that Singapore's survival as a nation is dependent primarily on a stable social and political atmosphere in the country which could only be achieved with a cohesive society.

The government believed that one of the best ways to promote nation-building was to formulate a national identity for the country. Upon Separation from Malaysia in 1965, Singapore had no recourse but to forge a new identity for itself in an effort to build a cohesive and viable nation-state.

A few factors had to be taken into account by the government in its attempt to design and implement various policies of national identity. The inhabitants of Singapore are essentially first or second generation immigrants from China, India and Malaya, who had originally come to the island with the idea of making a fortune before eventually returning to their homeland. Singapore was initially perceived to be no more than a temporary location for making money and this transient mentality obviously meant a lack of loyalty to Singapore. These people had no long-standing national or emotional ties to Singapore because "the subjective relevance of ethnicity was embedded in the individual's cultural orientation to a 'homeland' that was not Singapore." Furthermore, the multiracial and multicultural nature of the population means that the people share neither a common language, culture or 'nationality' to identify them as 'Singaporeans', while the country as a whole does not have a long history for the population to draw on. Therefore to cement together such a collection of immigrant individuals by imposing a common set of values certainly posed a problem for the country's leaders. As the government, the PAP had to work quickly to combat the natural effects of the migrant population, that is, the competing loyalties between country of birth and country of migration. Another point which had to be taken into consideration was that the Chinese were numerically predominant in a country where the Malays, as the regional majority, were considered the indigenous people.

In an attempt to promote nation-building the Singapore government has, over the years, put in place various policies aimed at overcoming the chauvinistic pulls of individual ethnic communities. This Chapter will provide a brief description of some of these government policies pertaining to public housing, military, education, the mass-media and national ideology, and analyse their contribution to the nation-building process in terms of promoting religious cohesion in Singapore.

## PUBLIC HOUSING

The Singapore government realised early on that one of the best ways to promote nation-building among the disparate ethnic and religious groups in the population was to encourage commitment to the country. It felt that positive economic development in Singapore would serve to instill political allegiance in the population because the guarantee of a good life will encourage the population to work together, thus ensuring the loyalty of the people to Singapore. For example, the promise of full employment and rise in the standard of living are viable incentives which help promote nation-building because the assurance of material well-being will encourage commitment to the country.

The government also believed that giving the population a stake in the country would further promote allegiance to Singapore, and one of the best ways to achieve this is through an ownership of houses scheme. Since its implementation in 1959, the PAP's public housing policy encouraged the integration of the various groups in Singapore. This is in contrast to the previous colonial policy of racial segregation where for the most part, ethnic communities resided in different parts of the country thereby creating relatively homogenous ethnic enclaves, with racial and social affiliation providing the basis of community structure.

When Sir Stamford Raffles issued his first urban planning edict in 1822, he stated that "separate nationalities and provincial groups should inhabit distinct areas of town"<sup>2</sup>. From then on, the different racial communities in Singapore lived in residentially segregated areas:

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<sup>2</sup> Castells, M., Goh, L. and Kwok, R.Y-W., *The Shek Kip Mei Syndrome: Economic Development and Public Housing in Hong Kong and Singapore*, London (Pion Ltd, 1990), p.211

The immediate west bank of the river was used for government and other civic buildings. The best drained area adjacent to it was reserved for the white community. Beyond the white area was the Malay settlement of indigenous Malays and other Muslims. The area west of the commercial district was allocated to the Chinese. On the northern edge of the Chinese area was the Indian town.<sup>3</sup>

Although minor adjustments were made to these localities, the pattern of racial segregation continued to exist in Singapore well into the 1960s, with the Geylang area being associated with Malays; Chinatown with the Chinese and the Serangoon district with the Indian community. This form of racial segregation meant that by and large, each ethnic community lived in isolation from each other, maintaining only minimum contact outside of the economic sphere.

As illustrated by the following incidents, exclusive racial enclaves are the potential breeding grounds for inter-communal conflict, especially when such racial segregation is compounded with economic divisions.<sup>4</sup> For example, most of the disturbances during the Maria Hertogh riots of 1950 were concentrated in the predominantly Malay/Muslim area of Arab Street where the Sultan mosque, which became a pivotal focal point of the riots, was situated.<sup>5</sup>

The years between 1963-5 when Singapore was part of Malaysia, was a time of heightened racial sensitivities in both countries which made racially segregated housing districts ripe breeding ground for communal conflicts.<sup>6</sup> In 1964, when the Singapore Housing and Development Board (HDB) decided to resettle a Malay housing area, the effected Malay residents insisted on various housing concessions, one of which was for

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<sup>3</sup> Chua, Beng Huat, 'Race Relations and Public Housing Policy in Singapore' in *The Journal of Architectural Planning and Research*, 8(4) 1991, p.345

<sup>4</sup> Chua, (1991), p.345

<sup>5</sup> Refer to Chapter 2 on 'The Maria Hertogh Case' for a comprehensive discussion of the subject.

<sup>6</sup> See Chapter 3.

an exclusive land reservation to be allocated to them. When these demands were declined because of the PAP policy of equal treatment for all communities in Singapore, the Malays perceived this as the government's failure to recognise Malay rights as enshrined in the Constitution. This dissatisfaction spilled over during a religious procession in Singapore to commemorate the anniversary of Prophet Mohammad's birthday when intercommunal rioting broke out between the Malay and Chinese communities, resulting in the death of thirty six people, with five hundred and sixty three others being injured.<sup>7</sup> In the wake of this incident, the Singapore government agreed to make special housing concessions to Malays, but this proposal was quickly dropped after Separation in 1965, when the HDB adopted a policy of racial desegregation in housing estates:

Public housing is playing an important role in the desegregation of these ethnic enclaves. The conditions of obtaining a public housing flat are citizenship, income and family size and not ethnic or racial affiliation. The public housing estates are, thus, desegregated communities where Chinese, Malays, Indians, Pakistanis and Eurasians live side by side, and in many instances, for the first time.<sup>8</sup>

When the PAP came into office in 1959, only 8.8% of the population were living in public housing. One of the government's first acts was to introduce low-cost public housing by establishing the Housing and Development Board (HDB), a statutory body, on 1 February 1960.

The subsequent government introduction of the Home Ownership for the People Scheme allows for eligible Singaporeans from all strata of society to own their own homes. The rationale behind this scheme is the belief that home ownership will further stimulate national loyalty to Singapore:

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<sup>7</sup> *Straits Times*, 4 June 1987

<sup>8</sup> *White Paper on Shared Values*, p 49

The fundamental aim of the present government from the inception of its public housing programme has been the creation of a nation whose people have homes they are proud to call their own. The underlying philosophy is that if one owns an asset in the country, one would stand up to defend it.<sup>9</sup>

Government monopoly of public housing in Singapore enabled it to make a success of its national housing policy; by 1988, the HDB had provided housing for 86% of the population.

Singapore's national housing policy brought with it several negative consequences. Although the national housing scheme is aimed at cultivating loyalty to Singapore by giving Singaporeans a stake in the country, this policy had an unintended effect on another level. It was found that in many instances, an excessively large number of people of one ethnic community preferred to live in some areas as opposed to others. For example, flats in the Bedok/Tampines areas are favoured by Malays while Chinese tend to gravitate towards flats in the Ang Mo Kio/Hougang area. There is also the propensity for families belonging to the same racial group wanting to reside in the same neighbourhood because of the advantages of family support in terms of child care and looking after aged parents. This tendency of purchasing apartments in particular residential areas meant the unintentional creation of ethnic enclaves which further heightened racial consciousness among the masses. This obviously undermined the government's stated efforts of ensuring a balanced ethnic distribution in every housing estate.

Acknowledging this disturbing trend S. Dhanabalan, Minister for National Development, announced on 16 February 1989 that the HDB would start regulating the racial composition in its housing estates in a bid to foster tolerance and harmony among the residents:

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<sup>9</sup> Wong, A.K. and Yeh, S.H.K. *Housing a Nation: 25 Years of Public Housing in Singapore*, Singapore (Maruzen Asia, 1985), p.231

Mixing the various communities in proportions that approximate the general population has given us racial tolerance and harmony for more than 20 years. To allow the races to regroup now would be to go back to the pre-1965 period when there were racial enclaves and racial riots.<sup>10</sup>

Dhanabalan then introduced new measures to restrict the allocation and resale of flats to curb this disturbing trend. From 1 March 1989, limits were set on the racial proportion in every HDB neighbourhood and block to reflect approximately the racial composition of the Singapore population.

Table 3: Racial Composition in Public Housing in Singapore

Race	Racial Composition (%)	
	HDB neighbourhood	Each HDB block
Chinese	84%	87%
Malays	22%	25%
Indians & Others	10%	13%

The strict monitoring of the allocation of new flats and resale of flats however has made it difficult for three-tier families to live together. This in effect, undermines the government's deliberate attempts at fostering filial piety and encouraging closer familial ties in Singapore.

The government had to review its housing policies in the face of the growing number of parents left in old aged homes or abandoned to fend for themselves. In the face of what was perceived as the breakdown of family values and the lack of filial piety, from the late 1970s through to the present, the government's revised housing policies encourage multi-family housing by promoting the extended family concept.

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<sup>10</sup> Quah, Jon S.T., *In Search of Singapore's National Values*, Singapore (Times Academic Press, 1990), p.50

Grassroots neighbourhood organisations within each housing estate such as community centres, Citizens Consultative Committees and Town Councils are also designed to encourage interaction between the different racial and religious groups. These organisations become channels for social integration when Singaporeans of all racial and religious affiliations interact through the collective use of the facilities provided there. The idea of Residents' Committees for example was first proposed in 1978 with the aim of promoting harmony and cohesion among the various communities represented in housing estates. The Residents' Committees also served as a bridge between residents and the government, functioning as a channel for feedback between these two parties.

This rather successful attempt at racial desegregation is felt to have contributed in a large part to the nation-building process in Singapore because now, members of different ethnic and religious groups are able to interact with each on various levels. The government trusts that this will help foster a sense of shared nationality among all communities in the country.

Given this ethnically and religiously diverse make-up of the country's housing areas, Singaporeans are exposed to different religious practices which are evident in the everyday lives of their neighbours and friends. For example, Chinese funerals are usually conducted in the void decks of apartment blocks and therefore, it is common for the Malay and Indian residents of the neighbouring apartments to be exposed to traditional Chinese funeral rituals. Malay weddings are also customarily held in the void decks or in tents near the bride's apartment block, and this provides an excellent opportunity for members of other ethnic and religious communities to observe Muslim wedding rituals. The annual event of Thaipusam, a Hindu festival, is another occasion when non-Hindu Singaporeans are made aware of at least one Hindu religious practice.

#### NATIONAL SERVICE

National service was first introduced in Singapore by the colonial government on 1 March 1954 when the Legislative Council passed the National Service Ordinance. This policy by conscription was aborted a year after implementation for two main reasons:

the strong anti-Colonial feelings prevailing among the Singapore population and the lack of willingness among the Chinese majority for military service.

In 1966 the Ministry for Interior and Defence was formed by the PAP to build up a national defence force to act as a viable deterrent against any potential external threat. A year later in July 1967, National Service was introduced in Singapore to accommodate the defence needs of Singapore and to act as a tool for nation-building. The National Service (Amendment) Act, passed on 16 March 1967, stipulated that all male citizens aged 18 years undergo national service for a period of two years in the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF). This training period was later extended to two and a half years.

According to Dr Goh Keng Swee,

Nothing creates loyalty and national consciousness more speedily and more thoroughly than participation in defence and membership of the armed forces... The nation-building aspect of the armed aspect of defence will be more significant if its participation is spread over all strata of society. This is possible only with some kind of national service.<sup>11</sup>

Although there has been no comprehensive study done to determine the effect of national service on nation-building, government minister Lim Kim San was of the opinion that national service is “a key factor in nation-building” because it binds “potentially-divisive strands” in society by giving Singaporean youths a common objective and experience. During their time in the SAF, these young men are made aware of the threats which have the potential to do serious damage to Singapore, and it is the government’s belief that such ‘education’ will ultimately increase the national consciousness of these men.

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<sup>11</sup> *In Search of Singapore’s National Values*, p.52

Again, because youths from different racial and ethnic communities in Singapore are forced to interact with each other during their time in the SAF, it is hoped that this will contribute to understanding and tolerance between the disparate communities.

## EDUCATION

Acknowledging the important role of education in society, the government felt that the country's education system should be designed to instill values such as commitment and loyalty which it believed are required for nation-building. The Ministry of Education then introduced bilingual education and the Religious Knowledge programme into the school curriculum, two policies which were intended to impact favourably on the nation-building process.

The bilingual policy in schools has been through several revisions over the years. When first implemented in 1959, bilingualism referred to the use of Malay, the national language, and depending on the language stream of the student, either English, Mandarin or Tamil. Since independence in 1965 however, the aim of Singapore's educational policies was to develop a single bilingual system of education so from 1966, English replaced Malay as the compulsory second language in all language streams. This change was in reaction to first, the increasing number of students enrolling in English-language stream schools and second, Singapore's Separation from Malaysia. The bilingual policy is aimed at fostering racial harmony and integration, the rationale being the assumption that a bilingual person will be better able to interact with members of other linguistic communities:

From my observation, the monolinguist is more likely to be a language chauvinist and a bigot. He only sees the world through one eye. ... Bilingualism gives a more balanced and rounded view of the world. ... The bilingualist sees both sides. ... If we are to modernize and industrialize, we must be bilingual. If we are to teach the next generation bilingualism effectively, and minimize, even though we

may never eliminate, language rivalries and prejudices, we must have more teachers who are bilingual.<sup>12</sup>

It has to be noted however that this expressed determination on the part of the government to retain a command of the mother-tongue exceeds its desire to look after the ethnic sensitivities of the various communities. The government feels that the English language is inadequate to transmit the sense of Asian cultural values to the population, which it feels are vital for the survival of the nation:

The Singaporean, whether he is of Chinese, Indian or Malay descent, has his own culture. Over the centuries something distinctive may emerge, something separate from China, India or Indonesia or Britain. However, if in the interim you deculturalise a person, erase his own culture when you have not got something as relevant to put in its place, then you have enervated him.<sup>13</sup>

On 23 November 1979, the “Speak Mandarin” campaign was launched in Singapore. This policy of encouraging the use of Mandarin in place of the various Chinese dialects, was designed at unifying Chinese Singaporeans by eradicating linguistic diversity within the community. The “Speak Mandarin” campaign however had the unintended effect of contributing negatively to racial consciousness between the Chinese and non-Chinese in Singapore because the government’s focus on the campaign resulted in a heightened awareness of Chinese ethnicity among that community. At the same time, the campaign posed a threat to other racial groups which felt an increased sense of insecurity and alienation and in the process, their status as the country’s minority communities became intensified. Such feelings of alienation and insecurity on the part of the non-Chinese communities obviously does not aid the process of nation-building in the country.

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<sup>12</sup>*In Search of Singapore's National Values*, p. 56

<sup>13</sup>‘Conversations with Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew’ in Raj K. Vasil *Governing Singapore*, Singapore (Eastern Universities Press, 1984), p.175

Another aspect of the bilingual policy in Singapore is to construct a national identity as opposed to separate Chinese, Malay or Indian identities. By attempting to form a connection between one race, one language and one culture, the government has inadvertently opened up a whole new range of problems for itself. Marginal groups within each racial community have felt alienated and threatened by what has been perceived as a need to conform to governmental bilingual policies. The identification of Tamil as the language of the Indian community for example, has made other sub-groups within that community, such as the Telugus and the Malayalees, feel marginalised.

So while the government's bilingual policy has the advantage of helping preserve the cultural heritages of the various communities in Singapore, the negative aspect is that in strengthening the use of the mother tongue among the respective racial groups, bilingualism is in fact, contributing to a heightened sense of ethnic consciousness in the country. This can only undermine government efforts at nation-building in Singapore. The Religious Knowledge programme, implemented in schools as part of the education policy, also fared no better at contributing towards nation-building.<sup>14</sup>

In February 1982, Professor S. Jayakumar contended that as long as religious groups function solely within certain clearly defined boundaries, religion had a constructive role to play in promoting nation-building in Singapore. The parameters of religious activity in Singapore were defined as follows: first, religious groups should place their emphasis on persuasion and not level any form of bigotry, ridicule or offence at other religions. Religious groups should also practise tolerance and understanding of other religions and people of different religious persuasions.<sup>15</sup> Following on from this announcement, the Ministry of Education introduced the policy of teaching religion in schools, expecting this to enhance understanding and tolerance, thereby promoting the nation-building process.

One of the major flaws in the Religious Knowledge programme which was implemented in the school curriculum in 1982 was that it did not offer a course in comparative

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<sup>14</sup> For a complete discussion of the subject, refer to Chapter 7 on '*The Religious Knowledge Programme*'.

<sup>15</sup> *In Search of Singapore's National Values*, p. 54

religions which would have enhanced the students' understanding of religious diversity in Singapore. Instead, given the available options, students were more inclined to study the religion of their parents which again had the unintended consequence of highlighting differences instead of bridging the gap between the various religions.

Like the bilingual policy, the Religious Knowledge programme in schools has also seen many changes to its format. Because of these constant revisions to the syllabus, it is difficult to assess the impact of the Religious Knowledge programme on nation-building in Singapore.

#### THE MASS MEDIA

It has been noted that the mass media in Singapore have an important role to play in the process of nation-building because of its wide access to the population and its inherent ability to influence the people. This role is succinctly captured in the mission statement of the Singapore Broadcasting Corporation (SBC):

[To] help foster national unity by promoting awareness of a shared past and consensus as to the goals to be achieved and the challenges to overcome to ensure a lasting legacy for our children.

[To] reflect the diverse heritage of our society and help nurture the growing Singapore identity.

[To] support and explain national policies and goals

[To] promote Singapore abroad through the broadcast and distribution of SBC production overseas.

One of the main roles of the mass media in Singapore is to safeguard the harmonious atmosphere in the country. For example, because it has been frequently highlighted that racial conflict is one of the greatest threats to social cohesion in Singapore, the local mass media always ensure that none of its activities will in any way provoke unrest in the country. They therefore refrain from promoting news which could threaten the security and stability of the nation.

Under the Printing Presses Ordinance based on the 1948 Emergency Regulations, it is an offence to operate a printing press without a valid licence. This printing license has to be renewed annually and can be revoked by the government at any time. Such severe restrictions on the mass media effectively mean a lack of complete freedom of the press in Singapore. These policies are in place to prevent the mass media, both local and foreign, from exploiting potentially volatile issues in the name of “Freedom of the Press” which, in a multi-racial and multi-religious society like Singapore, can prove to be extremely costly.

The following two incidents<sup>16</sup> illustrate clearly the important role of the Singapore Board of Film Censors in protecting the sensitivities of all ethnic and religious communities in the country. The first incident which received extensive publicity in Singapore concerned the Indian film *Bombay*, made in the aftermath of the Ayodhya riots and released in 1995. The story, revolving around the marriage between a Muslim girl and a Hindu man, was scripted to promote the theme of religious harmony. The movie contained a few scenes of rioting which the Board felt were not appropriate to be screened here because of their potential to incite certain groups in the country. The Singapore Muslim community in particular objected to the secular marriage between the Hindu and Muslim characters which was portrayed in the film. They also took exception to the storyline depicting the sons of the couple being raised in an environment where the paternal Muslim grandfather adopted Hindu practices. Certain scenes in the movie were also felt to unintentionally indicate that the Muslims were the main instigators of the riots. Although the Singapore Hindu community voiced no opposition to the screening of the movie, the Board banned it on the basis of local Muslim sensitivities.

*The Last Temptation of Christ*, a conjectural film directed by Martin Scorsese and released in 1988, was based on a book of the same title<sup>17</sup>. This controversial movie was also not screened in Singapore on the advice of the Board which decided to preempt any

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<sup>16</sup> Detailed information about these incidents was obtained via a phone interview with the Secretary of the Board of Film Censors, Mr Tan Chiu Kee, on 25 October 1996.

<sup>17</sup> Kazantzakis, Nikos (1885-1957) *The Last Temptation of Christ*.

unrest by issuing a press release warning film distributors against bringing the film into the country.

The media in Singapore are therefore important tools because by selecting the types of news items to broadcast in the country, the media can contribute positively towards nation-building and the fostering of harmonious ties between the various racial and religious communities in the country.

### NATIONAL IDEOLOGY

The next part of this Chapter will provide a chronological account of the development of the national ideology process in Singapore.

As discussed above, the government has sought, through a series of public policies, to mould a united population from the various communities without sacrificing too much character of the individual racial and religious components. All government policies are designed, at least theoretically, to ensure that each racial community retains and perpetuates its distinctive flavour within the boundaries of national interests which are determined by the government. The basic political aim of these policies is to establish a sound economic foundation for the country, but also tied within this is the desire for these policies to contribute towards the building of nationalism.

On Separation from Malaysia in 1965, Singapore was forced to become an independent state without the benefit of nationalism or a sense of national identity. Unlike other Southeast Asian countries like Indonesia and Malaysia, where nationalism emerged as a political consequence, nationalism in Singapore developed only in the wake of the formation of the state itself which subsequently acted as the first major symbol of national identity. There have also been no great upheavals in Singapore's history to form a platform on which to base the concept of nationalism; Singapore attained its independence from Britain peacefully while its social and economic scenes have remained relatively stable over the years. Given its history therefore, it comes as no surprise that the idea of formulating a national ideology for Singapore was only proposed more than two decades after the country's independence.

In an address to the Youth Wing of the PAP on 28 October 1988, Goh Chok Tong, First Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defence, asserted that the constant exposure to external influences had caused in the values of Singaporeans to be transformed from communitarianism to individualism:

If individualism results in creativity, that is good, but if it translates into a 'me first' attitude, that is bad for social cohesion and for the country. ... The question is how to preserve [the core values] when daily we are exposed to alien influences. My suggestion is: Formalise our values in a national ideology and then teach them in schools, work-places, homes, as our way of life. Then we will have a set of principles to bind our people together and guide them forward.<sup>18</sup>

Goh then proposed formulating a national ideology which will reflect a uniquely Singaporean identity by encompassing the cultural heritages, common values and beliefs of the entire population.

Following this public official allusion to the concept of a national ideology for Singapore, a government committee was set up in late 1988 with the expressed purpose of examining the issue of national values. The committee identified four core values which it believed were relevant to the concept of a national ideology. These values were first publicly articulated by President Wee Kim Wee in his speech at the opening of Parliament on 9 January 1989. He also elaborated on the reasons behind the government's proposal for a Singapore national identity:

If we are not to lose our bearings, we should preserve the cultural heritage of each of our communities, and uphold certain common values which capture the essence of being a Singaporean. These core values include placing society above self, upholding the family as the basic block of society, resolving major issues through consensus

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<sup>18</sup> Goh Chok Tong, 'Our National Ethic' in *Speeches*, 12(5) 1988, p.13-15

instead of contention, and stressing racial and religious tolerance and harmony. We need to enshrine these fundamental ideas in a National Ideology. Such a formal statement will bond us together as Singaporeans, with our own distinct identity and destiny. We need to inculcate this National Ideology in all Singaporeans, especially the young.<sup>19</sup>

Two days later, the Minister for Trade and Industry, Brigadier-General Lee Hsien Loong further expounded on the core values identified in the Presidential address. He noted that these values would help combat inappropriate external influences, especially Westernisation, which may eventually result in a loss of the Singaporean sense of direction:

As we develop economically, will we also naturally evolve into a successful copy of a Western society? If so, we have nothing to worry about. We can just let everything happen by itself, and all will be well.

Or is our fate inevitable and tragic in that as we develop, we become superficially Westernised, cast off our traditional moorings, drift into banks and shoals, and come to grief?

Or will we, through deliberate effort, retain and strengthen our identity, one which is distinct from other societies, and continue to prosper, achieving political stability, freedom from want, human dignity and fulfillment for ourselves?<sup>20</sup>

In his speech, BG Lee also suggested that a “conservative but not unquestioning approach” be adopted when formulating the national ideology, whereby the respective Singaporean heritages were preserved while at the same time, incorporating certain carefully modified ideas from foreign traditions.

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<sup>19</sup> *Straits Times*, 10 January 1989

<sup>20</sup> BG Lee Hsien Loong, “The National Identity - A Direction and Identity for Singapore” in *Speeches*, 13(1) 1989, p.37-38

He noted that the values which will ultimately make up the national ideology should, as far as possible, distinguish Singaporeans from people of other nationalities given that the concept of a national ideology is one which characterises the “ethos and spirit” of a particular people. The core values to be included in it therefore were to be universal and not particularistic in nature, thereby reflecting a uniquely Singaporean flavour.

Finally, he called for the number of values to be incorporated as the national ideology to be kept to a minimum in order to maintain the focus on the “key items”.

George Yeo, another government Minister of the time, identified three contradictions which were inherent in the Singapore society which he felt needed to be reconciled when formulating the national ideology. The first was between nationalism and cosmopolitanism:

We must balance this contradiction between being cosmopolitan and being nationalistic. We cannot be a trading nation, if we are not cosmopolitan. We cannot be a nation, if we are not nationalistic. We must be both at the same time.<sup>21</sup>

The second contradiction existed between democracy and centralisation. Yeo noted that democracy in Singapore must always function within the “framework of centralised decision-making” where the individualising effects of the free market should be moderated by traditional Asian values.

The final contradiction he listed was that between efficiency and humanity where:

Efficiency and competition must, therefore, be tempered by compassion and humanity. ... The solution does not lie in comprehensive state welfare. That way leads to calamity, as we see all too well in other countries. ... Let the Government concentrate on

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<sup>21</sup> Yeo, George, ‘Evolving a National Identity in a Changing World’ in *Speeches* 13(3)1989, p.81

being efficient, but let us, as members of the community, be compassionate in the way we treat our fellow human beings.<sup>22</sup>

In 1989, the Singapore government commissioned the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) to conduct a study to identify the basic values which could function as the building blocks for a united Singaporean society, which will rise above all racial and religious differences. The IPS then formed a five member Study Group on National Values to undertake the task. The team coordinator was Jon S.T. Quah, the Acting Director of IPS and Associate Professor in the Department of Political Science and Vice-Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Social Science at the National University of Singapore. Two other members of the team were also from the National University of Singapore, Dr Chiew Seen Kong, senior lecturer in the Department of Sociology and Dr Leo Suryadinata, senior lecturer in the Department of Political Science. The two remaining members were Zainul Abidin bin Rasheed, the editor of the local Malay newspapers, *Berita Harian* and *Berita Minggu*, and Arun Mahizhnan, the Senior Vice-President of the international public relations firm Hill and Knowlton Asia Limited.

The Study Group took ten months (August 1989-May 1990) to complete their research on the values which they hoped would “counteract the adverse effects of excessive individualism as well as unify *both* the government and citizens of Singapore.”<sup>23</sup> It is worthwhile to note here that in their report, the Study Group indicated their preference for the term national “values” over “ideology” because it felt that the former term did not have a “pejorative connotation”.<sup>24</sup>

The first draft of their report was handed to a governmental Advisory Panel which was set up to oversee the implementation of the National Ideology. The Panel comprised S. Rajaratnam, Professor Wu The Yao, Dr Maurice Baker, Othman Wok and Tan Keong Choon.

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<sup>22</sup> Yeo, George, p.82-3.

<sup>23</sup> *In Search of Singapore's National Values*, p.2

<sup>24</sup> *In Search of Singapore's National Values*, p.2

In addition to the four core values listed in the Presidential address, the Study Group recommended two additional values which it felt should be incorporated into the national ideology. The first recommended value was “Preserving and maintaining the tradition of honest government”. The group claimed that what distinguished Singapore from most other countries was that in the former, corruption “was a fact of life and not a way of life ... incidental but not institutionalized”.<sup>25</sup> The team asserted that the PAP’s anti-corruption policy, implemented in 1959, is the reason behind the low incidents of corruption in the country and therefore, the tradition in Singapore of a clean and honest government should be preserved as a national value.

The second value proposed by the team was “Compassion for the less fortunate in society”. It was hoped that this value would encourage more fortunate Singaporeans to look out for their less fortunate fellow-citizens. The team emphasised however that by proposing this sixth value, they were not recommending that Singapore become a ‘welfare state’<sup>26</sup>. Although aware of the government’s position that social welfare has the potential to encourage citizens to be dependent on the state which will ultimately hinder economic progress in the country, the team hoped that this value would enable well-off Singaporeans to offer assistance to their less fortunate counterparts “in such a manner that they can help themselves, and without eroding their will to work or undermining their self-respect.”<sup>27</sup> It was felt that a national value encouraging compassion would make Singaporeans more considerate towards others, especially the disabled and the destitute who in turn, would not experience feelings of alienation and neglect.

The government Advisory Panel then invited feedback from various sectors of the population. According to Hill and Lian:

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<sup>25</sup> *In Search of Singapore’s National Values*, p.98

<sup>26</sup> This term was defined as:

...a state that accepts collective responsibility for its citizens and conceivably also for other residents within its territory. It strives to abolish poverty and to give to all concerned reasonable security against falling unwillingly into destitution, which is more or less arbitrarily defined from time to time as a level significantly below average prosperity. Also, the welfare state attempts to create equality of opportunities for advancement.

<sup>27</sup> *In Search of Singapore’s National Values*, p.10

The National Ideology would identify the *personal* set of values needed to bring about the ideals represented by the five stars on the national flag - namely, democracy, equality, peace, progress and justice – as enshrined in the National Pledge.<sup>28</sup>

So after taking into account the recommendations made by the Study Group and the feedback received from the wider community, it was finally agreed that the Singapore National Ideology would consist of the following five shared values set out in the White Paper:

1. Nation before community and society above self
2. Family as the basic unit of society
3. Regard and community support for the individual
4. Consensus instead of contention
5. Racial and religious harmony

#### (1) Nation Before Community

This core value basically promotes the ideal of “society above self” which means placing the interests of the country above the individual and any other sub-group, for example, the Malays, Chinese or Indians. Although each of these communities will be encouraged to develop its own cultural heritage and traditions, the aim of this value is to prevent these different cultural heritages from tearing at the fabric of society. The intention here is to promote racial and religious harmony in the country while at the same time strengthening social cohesion.

This first value is also aimed at seeking a balance between individual and community interests. The prevalent belief among the leaders in Singapore is that Asian countries emphasise community interests while Western countries place their emphasis on the individual. In Singapore therefore, it is felt that group interests are more important than individual concerns because being a free market economy and a meritocratic society

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<sup>28</sup> Hill, Michael and Lian, Kwen Fec, *The Politics of Nation Building and Citizenship in Singapore*, New York (Routledge, 1995), p.213

means that there must be a system in place to ensure that no individual is left behind on the road to success.

In the past, Singaporeans have pulled together to overcome instances of hardship and challenges, for example, during the withdrawal of British troops in the 1970s and the severe economic recession in 1985. These episodes serve to demonstrate that Singaporeans can put aside their individualism and individual expectations to work together for the betterment of the whole society and country. It was hoped that this Shared Value would further encourage such spirit of communitarianism among Singaporeans which will help weather any future threats to the country's survival.

## (2) Family as the Basic Unit of Society

Given that the family is an important aspect of Singapore society, as in most other societies, it was deemed vital to include this value as part of the National Ideology. In proposing this value however, the Study Group was careful to point out the misconceptions which could be easily associated with it.

The Group warned that the government should not be seen as promoting the Confucian model of the family as this would only serve to alienate non-Chinese Singaporeans as well as create tension within the Chinese community itself. Because of the potentially controversial nature of this value, it could end up being a divisive factor instead of unifying the various communities. The feedback received by various organisations on the proposed values only served to reinforce the notion that the family as a basic institution in any society is shared by all the various communities in Singapore. For example, in its "*Communique on National Ideology*", the joint (*Ad Hoc*) Committee of Muslim Organizations (JCMO) stated that a "stable family unit" was necessary for a "sound and stable" society.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> *In Search of Singapore's National Values*, p.94

This sentiment was also shared by the Eurasian Association of Singapore which felt that the family is the “core of any civilised society”<sup>30</sup>, while the Tamil Representative Council (TRC) defined the concept of ‘family’ as:

...the most fundamental social institution of the Tamil society. It occupies a very important position as the intermediate point between the individual and the larger society....The Family is also the bearer of virtues, values and social reputation;...<sup>31</sup>

Therefore, any attempt on the government’s part to impose a strictly Confucian model of the family in Singapore will not be well received by the other ethnic communities because the family as an important unit in society is a concept that is common to all racial and religious groups.

### (3) Regard and Community Support for the Individual

Despite Singapore’s economic affluence, there still exists pockets of less-fortunate Singaporeans and two communities in particular were singled out by the Study Group. According to the *Report of the Advisory Council on the Disabled*, many of the disabled in Singapore are denied employment opportunities because of discrimination. The second group of less-fortunate Singaporeans identified is the destitute, defined as “those families, who because of physical and/or socio-psychological dysfunctions, face hardship in meeting the minimum household requirements for daily living”<sup>32</sup>.

The proposed third core value encourages the wider community to support the less fortunate individual through community work and welfare programmes to be designed and supported by the community and not the government. This will strengthen cohesion and the self-reliance of society and hence the establishment of such community-based organisations like MENDAKI<sup>33</sup>, SINDA<sup>34</sup>, CDAC<sup>35</sup> and KHALSA<sup>36</sup>. It is the belief of

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<sup>30</sup> *In Search of Singapore’s National Values*, p.94

<sup>31</sup> *In Search of Singapore’s National Values*, p.94

<sup>32</sup> *In Search of Singapore’s National Values*, p.101

<sup>33</sup> *Majlis Pembangunan Masyarakat Islam* (Council for the Development of Singapore Muslims)

the Singapore government that such community support for less-fortunate individuals will serve to establish Singapore as a humane society as opposed to government support which can only lead to a dependent mentality. The pitfalls of state-sponsored welfarism have frequently been emphasised by various government officials who usually draw reference from the welfare programmes in place in Australia and New Zealand. It has been highlighted how dependence on governmental welfare programmes has allegedly resulted in these two countries experiencing severe social and economic problems.

#### (4) Consensus Instead of Contention

This value basically advocates that the government resort to dealing with national problems and issues without engaging in conflict and contention. The term “consensus” is defined in the Report as “shared public agreement”. The implication here is that the incumbent government in Singapore adopt a consultative leadership style, where the opinions and views of the population are taken into consideration when formulating major policies.

This value is also extended to include other groups in society such as religious groups which should be discouraged from resorting to violence or imposing their views and beliefs on the wider society.

#### (5) Racial and Religious Toleration

With the inclusion of this value in the National Ideology, it was hoped that it would help minimise the risk of an outbreak of racial or religious conflict in the country. In its Report, the Study Group emphasised that in addition to racial and religious tolerance, understanding was another important aspect of this particular core value. It was felt that promoting understanding between the various racial and religious groups would help avoid conflict between them:

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<sup>34</sup> Singapore Indian Development Association

<sup>35</sup> Chinese Development Assistance Council

<sup>36</sup> Singapore Bengali Association

No plural society like Singapore can be immunized from the threat of racial riots; but such a threat can be minimized if not eliminated when there is also a strong sense of national identity to reinforce the racial harmony that already exists in Singapore.<sup>37</sup>

This value also implies that the government should be fair in its treatment of minority groups in the country in order to minimise racial and religious discrimination in society. This is an important core value because as has been stated before, racial and religious harmony are essential ingredients for the survival of Singapore as a nation.

These Shared Values however received rather limited exposure, largely in schools, and were not widely promoted to the general public.

Here follows a critical analysis of the entire Shared Values project which will also include a brief comparison with the previously discussed *Pancasila* and *Rukunegara*.

The core values originally proposed in the Presidential address were “not a constitutionally mandated political ideology”<sup>38</sup> but were personal and pragmatic, dealing with matters of social conduct and community obligations. Despite the importance of political stability in Singapore and the constant official emphasis on values such as meritocracy and parliamentary democracy, it was decided to discount political values from being part of the Singapore national ideology. The government felt that desirable political values should be inculcated separately among Singaporeans to avoid complicating the original intention of the Shared Values which was to pertain only to the relationship between the individual and society (#50). This was clearly demonstrated when the political value “Honest government” proposed by the Study Group was rejected in the final analysis of the project.

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<sup>37</sup> *In Search of Singapore's National Values*, p.97

<sup>38</sup> Bellows, T.J. ‘Bridging Tradition and Modernization: The Singapore Bureaucracy’ in H.C. Tai (ed.) *Confucianism and Economic Development: An Oriental Alternative?*, Washington (Washington Institute Press, 1989), p.94

Despite official claims to the contrary however, the White Paper is a statist document which then effectively makes it a political statement. It is also statist where it advocates that the state takes precedence over the individual because this clearly is not a value which is shared by all cultures in the country.

An analyst of the Shared Values project, John Clammer interprets the vague status of religion in the White Paper as an indication that the government recognises that religion, by its very nature, poses a threat to “the world view of the secular and materialistic ruling elite”. As previously discussed, the government views religion as a constructive social force as long as it is not used as a subversive tool. Because Singapore is a secular state, the initial suggestion to include “Belief in God” as one of the Shared Values similar to that contained in the *Pancasila* and *Rukunegara*, was declined by the Advisory Panel because a value proposing “Belief in God” would naturally exclude those Singaporeans who do not belong to any particular religion.

To accurately analyse the fifth core value that deals with the issue of religion, it becomes necessary to view it against the backdrop of certain events which prompted its inclusion in the White Paper. These events which unfolded in Singapore served to highlight the disturbing nature of religion in Singapore.

The period between 1986 and 1988 saw an alarming trend in religious activity in Singapore. There were sporadic outbursts of friction between various religious communities in the country, for example the Hindus and the Sikhs. There was also a marked rise in evangelical activities by certain religious organisations which did not win favour with all Singaporeans.<sup>39</sup>

Another major issue concerned the Muslim community in the country. From the early 1970s, it became common for many Malay youths to turn increasingly to Islam as a source of inspiration and help in overcoming their economic backwardness<sup>40</sup>. There was also a similar trend in Malaysia which, coupled with the worldwide resurgence in

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<sup>39</sup> See previous Chapters for a full discussion.

<sup>40</sup> The 1980 census data clearly indicate that the Malay community was lagging behind economically in Singapore in comparison to the other communities in the country.

Islamic revivalism, gave the Singapore government cause for concern about Islamic identity. This surge in Islamic identity in the country is clearly illustrated by the reaction of the Islamic community to two previously discussed incidents in the country, the 1986 visit of Israeli President Chaim Herzog to Singapore and the issue of the status of the Malays in the Singapore Armed Forces.<sup>41</sup>

The next episode which prompted the drafting of the *White Paper* was the Marxist Conspiracy in Singapore which came to light in May 1987. Sixteen people were arrested under the Internal Security Act for allegedly employing Christian social work programmes as a front for disseminating communist propaganda in Singapore.<sup>42</sup>

As with the rest of the core values, there are quite a few contradictions inherent in the national ideology stipulation concerning religion. In the lead up to the Shared Values project, BG Lee Hsien Loong proposed that the core values which would ultimately comprise the national ideology be 'personal' as opposed to political or religious. Yet in the same speech when commenting on the four original core values listed in the Presidential address, BG Lee contradicted his earlier claim when he noted that these values provided an appropriate basis for a national ideology because they were in essence, "compatible with Chinese, Malay, and Indian cultures, and with the values taught by the major religions."<sup>43</sup>

This contradiction pertaining to the issue of secularity is repeated again in the *White Paper* itself. While #48 of the *White Paper* clearly states that the Shared Values is "a secular document and should not include any religious values", #7,8,9, 18 and 19 claim that the Shared Values are adapted from the major religious traditions of the world and are found in all religions.

Again this stipulation is inaccurate because not all the core values are common to every group in Singapore. For example, racial and religious toleration effectively means a

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<sup>41</sup> Discussed in Chapter 3.

<sup>42</sup> This event is discussed in detail in Chapter 7.

<sup>43</sup> BG Lee Hsien Loong, 'The National Identity - A Direction and Identity for Singapore' in *Speeches*, 13(1) January-February 1989, p.31

restriction against proselytising. This is contrary to religions such as Islam and Christianity which exhort their followers to proselytise in order to win more converts.

Second, after alleging that the values selected are not Confucian (#39-44), the document contradicts itself later by claiming that some of them are. This is clearly illustrated by #41:

...the concept of government by honourable men (*Junzi*) who have a duty to do right for the people, and who have the trust and respect of the population, fits us better than the Western idea that a government should be given as limited powers as possible, and should always be treated with suspicion unless proven otherwise...<sup>44</sup>

In general therefore, despite official claims to the contrary, the Shared Values project does in fact recommend an ideology which is Confucianist in nature. Alleging that the Shared Values project actually forms a barrier between one's religion and ethnic/cultural identity, Clammer cites the Confucianists in society as being the exception to this rule as their values are largely captured in the White Paper.

When the concept of Shared Values was first proposed, there was a general fear that the Shared Values project was simply a cover for the government's real intention of attempting to impose Confucian ethics and values on the entire Singapore population. The fear especially prevalent among the minority communities was that the Shared Values project will ultimately lead to Chinese chauvinism in the country. The government was quick to point out that such a fear was unfounded because by its very description, "Shared Values" are essentially values which are common to all communities, as opposed to Confucian ethics, which would be particular to the majority community, i.e. the Chinese. It is safe to say however that most Confucian ethics are relevant to Singapore society, whatever one's ethnic or religious affiliations. For

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<sup>44</sup>White Paper on Shared Values, p 22

example, the Confucian concept of filial piety is common to most, if not all, the various communities in Singapore.

It is important to note that not all Confucian concepts are lauded by the Singapore government as being desirable traits to inculcate in the population. An example of an inappropriate Confucian concept for Singapore is that of placing great value on family ties. This philosophy often led to nepotism, a practice frowned upon in Singapore where the government has gone to great lengths to draw a distinction between public and official duty and the private sphere. The Singapore government highly favors the practice of meritocracy in all its affairs, the Confucian concept of nepotism, by its very nature, is obviously in direct opposition to official policy in Singapore.

Clammer has leveled some strong criticisms at the White Paper, one of which is that the Shared Values project is fundamentally patterned on Chinese principles. Noting that the core values advocate the avoidance of confrontation and debate, he cites this as an example to support his claim. The government believed that by reintroducing these values into society, it would help stem the problem of undesirable social behaviour. According to Clammer, this move by the government reflects a “basically Chinese cultural bias” where the belief is that “good advice sincerely proffered really must change people’s minds.”<sup>45</sup>

Clammer believes that there are two hidden agenda in the government’s proposal for a National Ideology. The first is a political attempt to arrogate and manage social change, directing it in politically appropriate directions. The second is ‘counter-modernisation’, a recognised method of managing changes by the government.

Singapore is in a very paradoxical situation, “in most respects a mature economy co-existing with a very immature society”<sup>46</sup> While being open to international influences through travel, media and other means the population, for the most part, still functions

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<sup>45</sup> *White Paper on Shared Values*, p34

<sup>46</sup> Clammer, John, ‘The Establishment of a National Ideology’ in *Singapore Changes Guard: Social , Political and Economic Directions in the 1990s*, Gary Rodan (ed.), Melbourne (Lonhman Cheshire, 1993), p.36

in a dependent mentality. This is caused in no small extent by the incumbent government, the PAP's style of governing. Its numerous public campaigns (for example, the Speak Mandarin campaign, Courtesy campaign, etc.) compounded with the fluctuations in other government policies like the education, economic and social, only serve to maintain the population in a state of dependence, thereby compounding the immaturity of its citizens.

The fast-changing economic and social scene in the country has resulted in what the government has termed a loss of cultural values in Singaporeans. This is the spurious generalisation that the Asian culture in Singapore has fallen prey to the corrupting influences of Westernisation:

Traditional Asian ideas of morality, duty and society which have sustained and guided us in the past are giving way to more Westernised, individualistic, and self-centred outlook on life."<sup>47</sup>

Although the term 'Westernisation' is used frequently in official circles it has rarely, if ever, been defined. The values selected to form the National Ideology are not particularistic but rather universal in nature. It is therefore rather erroneous for the government to claim that the 'West' lacks such 'Asian' values like community and spirituality because of the former's constant emphasis on decadence, materialism and individualism.

The controversy surrounding the Shared Values was also reflected in Quah's article *In Search of Singapore's National Values* where he makes an unsubstantiated generalisation about the core values shared by Singaporeans. He alleges that the Singaporean values of "hard work, thrift and sacrifice" are shared by the Japanese, Koreans and Taiwanese<sup>48</sup> and makes no mention of these values being prevalent in other cultures in the world. This can be perceived as an insult to the Indians, Malays,

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<sup>47</sup> *White Paper on Shared Values*, p.1

<sup>48</sup> Quah, Jon S.T., 'National Values and Nation-Building: Defining the Problem' in Jon S.T. Quah, *In Search of Singapore's National Values*, p.1

Eurasians and other minority communities in Singapore whose historical roots are outside of the ethnic groups singled out for mention in the article. This is because the implication behind this statement is that these communities have no values worth enshrining as part of Singapore's National Ideology. Such comments are again potentially threatening to the society at large because of their racial undertones.

Clammer alleges that the Singapore National Ideology is paternalistic and intolerant of ideas which are not of advantage to the state, and claims that if consensus is attained through imposition rather than dialogue, then it is not true dialogue but rather, "imposed conformity"<sup>49</sup>.

Clammer also argues that the government is responsible for the erosion of indigenous cultures in Singapore through its various policies affecting housing, media, education and economics. It is the result of capitalism which destroyed the culture, a concept which was and still is, ruthlessly pursued by the government.

Another inherent shortcoming of the White Paper is its ambiguity. For example, definitions of key terms are vague and to further compound the issue, it is unclear from the White Paper if the proposed values are already existing within society or if they were merely recommendations to be instilled.

The Shared Values was basically a project designed to collect the values which are common to all the communities in Singapore and formalize them into an official statement. Given the government's constant reiteration that the core values are common to all communities one may, like Clammer, question the need to encapsulate these values in a government policy if they are already so diffuse in society.

There are marked differences between the Shared Values project and the *Pancasila* and *Rukunegara*. The latter two were formulated in the wake of serious sociopolitical divisions in the country. The Shared Values were not formulated in response to any major socio-political conflict in Singapore but as a natural response to what was

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<sup>49</sup> *White Paper on Shared Values*, p.40

perceived as the erosion of cultural values in the county. The aim of the national values was to provide Singaporeans with a “cultural ballast” against Western materialism and individualism.

The *Pancasila* and *Rukunegara* contain a theistic definition of the state. In both these cases, especially in Indonesia, their national ideologies were to prevent fundamentalist Islamic claims on the country.

## CONCLUSION

In their article *The Making of a New Nation: Cultural Construction and National Identity in Singapore*,<sup>50</sup> Chua and Kuo claim that the birth of the Singaporean culture and national identity can be traced back precisely to the country’s political founding in 1965. Far from being constant objects, the authors argue that the Singaporean ‘culture’ and ‘national identity’ should be viewed as fluid concepts, changing according to circumstances. After 1959 when the country was granted limited self-government, the expressed aim of the PAP was to forge a decidedly ‘Malayaness’ on the population, in readiness for the time Singapore would be made part of Malaysia.

Before Separation in 1965, there was no expressed need for a Singaporean national identity. Since its founding in 1819 by Raffles, the colonialists had stamped their brand of identity on the island’s inhabitants. Moreover, the British followed a plan of ‘divide and rule’ where the people of Singapore were housed along ethnic lines; schools were run and administered by the various ethnic groups, while employment was also roughly along ethnic lines.

The PAP’s policy however was to “unite and rule”, hence its deliberate attempts at nation-building. The government’s attempts at promoting nation-building have been plagued with numerous problems which are the result of the complex make-up of the population. Since attaining Independence, the Singapore government has implemented public policies in the areas of housing, education and defence, which are designed to build

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<sup>50</sup> Chua, Beng Huat and Kuo, Eddie, C.Y., *The Making of a New Nation: Cultural Construction and National Identity in Singapore*, Singapore (National University of Singapore, 1991), p17

nationalism, which has been a problem for the country. The raising of the flag and the daily recitation of the Pledge<sup>51</sup> can be viewed as a pseudo-religious ritual where the citizen is reminded about one's loyalty to the country.

The PAP's latest effort at nation-building was the proposal of formulating a National Ideology to function as the foundation for political and social stability in Singapore.

The government felt that a National Ideology will, by forging a common Singaporean identity, serve to bind all Singaporeans despite the cultural, racial and religious divisions inherent in the Singapore population. By defining and promoting desirable traits in the population, it was hoped that these core values, to be enshrined as the National Ideology, will serve to provide a strong foundation for building a more desirable society. Finally, the government hoped to use the National Ideology to promote values that will enable Singaporeans to cope with the rapid changing social and economic climate in Singapore.

The Shared Values was essentially the basis for the original proposal of a National Ideology for Singapore; the term 'ideology' was eventually dropped from the proposal because of the controversial connotations usually associated with the word. The White Paper on Shared Values was issued in January 1991 and the list of core values was expanded from the original four to five.

It is hoped by the government that these Shared Values will form the basis of a Singaporean identity. The government intended to inculcate these values especially in young Singaporeans through a variety of channels - the home environment, the mass media and in schools. It believed that the teaching of subjects such as moral education, social studies and the mother tongue would help transmit and preserve the desirable

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<sup>51</sup> Composed by S. Rajaratnam, the Singapore Pledge reads as follows:

“We the citizens of Singapore, pledge ourselves as one united people. Regardless of race, language or religion, to build a democratic society based on justice and equality so as achieve happiness, prosperity and progress for our nation.”

values of Singaporeans to ensure the country's prosperity and survival as a nation. Like most public policies in Singapore, there have been some negative effects pertaining to the National Ideology project. For example, the policies designed to instill the Shared Values in the country have inadvertently increased the racial/ethnic consciousness of the population when the distinctions between the various ethnic groups are highlighted instead of eliminated.

Critics of the Shared Values project such as Clammer have accused the government of employing the Shared Values as a means to bring the political further into the personal and religious lives of Singaporeans. He feels that the Shared Values are part of the PAP's attempt to enforce its ideology on the populace under the guise of the project. He also alleges that the Shared Values, far from being common to all communities in Singapore, are in effect biased in favour of the Chinese community. These criticisms and other such concerns discussed elsewhere in the Chapter have never been fully addressed by the government and have therefore remain unresolved.

Despite official fanfare preceding the National Ideology issue in Singapore, the project has remained relatively dormant as evidenced by the fact that the Shared Values did not progress beyond the White Paper stage. This can be blamed on the highly controversial nature of establishing an acceptable common National Ideology in Singapore. Although the core values still receive token promotion in schools and other government sectors, at this stage is safe to assume that the Shared Values project will not attain the national status or recognition in Singapore currently accorded to the *Pancasila* in Indonesia and to a lesser extent, the *Rukunegara* in Malaysia.

## CHAPTER 9

### THE INTER-RELIGIOUS ORGANISATION, SINGAPORE AND ITS CONTRIBUTION TO RELIGIOUS HARMONY

Among the first of many such modern organisations, the Inter-Religious Organisation of Singapore (IRO) is an association of individuals professing different faiths working together to promote peace and harmony among the various religions prevailing in Singapore. This chapter will trace the history of the IRO, and analyse its role in the religious scene in Singapore. The second part of this chapter will assess the contribution made by the IRO to promoting religious harmony in the country.

#### HISTORY OF THE IRO

On 15 January 1949, the Muslim Missionary Society of Singapore invited representatives from Singapore's Buddhist, Hindu, Sikh, Christian and Jewish communities to an informal gathering in honour of Maulana Shah Muhammad Abdul Aleem Siddiqui Al-Qadri<sup>1</sup> who was visiting the country. This meeting was held at the residence of Syed Ibrahim Omar Alsagoff<sup>2</sup> and was attended by about forty people. During the gathering, it was suggested that another meeting be held to investigate the possibility of setting up a fellowship of those present.

A second meeting was held on 4 February during which the Maulana made a formal proposal to "unite into a body ... formed of representatives of all religions which believe in one Supreme Being; [to] think out ways and means to improve [the] moral status and to oppose the forces of evil."<sup>3</sup> A Consultative Committee was subsequently formed to work out a Constitution for the proposed organisation.

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<sup>1</sup> The Maulana (1891-1954) was born in Meerut, Pakistan. He became a well-known exponent of Orthodox Islam (*Ahlu-a-Sunnah*), and travelled around the world, setting up numerous Islamic missionary societies, schools, libraries and mosques in various parts of the Muslim world. In 1932, he founded the All Malaya Muslim Missionary Society, which is now known as the Singapore Muslim Missionary Society.

<sup>2</sup> Alsagoff was a fourth generation Arab in Singapore; in 1959, he was appointed Honorary Consul General for Saudi Arabia and in 1965, he gave up his Singapore citizenship when he was made Ambassador for Saudi Arabia.

<sup>3</sup> Rev Dr H.B. Amstutz, "History of the Organisation" in IRO, *Commemorative Book Celebrating 40 Years of the Inter-Religious Organisation Singapore 1949-1989*, Singapore (Inter-Religious Organisation, 1995), p.1

During a meeting on 12 February, it was decided to name the organisation the 'Inter-Religious Organisation of Singapore and Johore' (IRO)<sup>4</sup>. The pioneers of the IRO were the Rt Hon Malcolm MacDonald; Maulana Abdul Aleem Siddiqui; Dato Syed Ibrahim Omar Alsagoff; Archdeacon Dr D.D. Chelliah; Haji Mohamed Khan; Professor George Gray Thomson; Swami Siddhatmananda Maharaj; Rabbi Jacob Shababo and Venerable Seck Hong Choon.<sup>5</sup>

Those assembled were also presented the report prepared by the Consultative Committee, and with a few amendments, the proposed Constitution was unanimously passed. According to the Constitution<sup>6</sup>, membership of the organisation is open to all clergy and leaders of established religious organisations, and any other person who may be elected by the Council.<sup>7</sup> There is also a provision allowing for the Council to invite distinguished persons who are Singapore citizens to be honorary members and/or patrons of the IRO.

Among the thirteen objectives of the organisation spelt out in the Constitution are:

- (a) To inculcate the spirit of friendship and co-operation among the leaders and followers of different religions....
- (e) To promote mutual respect, assistance and protection among the adherents of different religions....
- g) To promote in every way comity and co-operation among the followers of different religions for the good of mankind....
- k) To intensify efforts in any other respect towards making the Organisation an effective body of friendship and brotherhood

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<sup>4</sup> From 1961, the organisation was known as the 'Inter-Religious Organisation of Singapore'.

<sup>5</sup> The Singapore Roman Catholic clergy did not join the IRO until 1964. Monsignor Olcomendy, then Archbishop of Singapore, held a meeting with Mehervan Singh, an IRO representative, to discuss, among other things, the ecumenical moves made by Pope Paul VI. After this meeting, Monsignor Olcomendy arranged for one of his assistants to join the IRO.

<sup>6</sup> The up-dated Constitution was approved by the Registrar of Societies, effective from 8 September 1990.

<sup>7</sup> Article 4, *1990 Constitution*, p.3

among the adherents of different religions without compromising any of his/her religious value....<sup>8</sup>

On 15 February 1949 members of the newly formed IRO met again, primarily to clarify doubts about the organisation's aims and purposes. It was agreed that the function of the IRO was to "work together for the achievement of peace and goodwill among mankind"<sup>9</sup>. It was also decided that the IRO should hold a Public Meeting to attest to Singaporeans that leaders of various religions in the country could meet together amicably, without capitulating on any of their personal religious convictions.<sup>10</sup>

On 18 March 1949, the First Public Meeting of the IRO was held at the Singapore Victoria Memorial Hall and was attended by about two thousand people. In his opening address the honorary chairman, Malcolm MacDonald, the British Commissioner-General for Southeast Asia,<sup>11</sup> dubbed the IRO as a "bold movement of religious leaders in Singapore and Johor"<sup>12</sup>, while the Maulana noted:

The task of the religious leaders was to let the followers of each and every religion know the teachings of other religions, so that a spirit of fellowship might be created among them and so that they could all work together to spread the accepted moral principles and to fight the common [*sic*] evils.<sup>13</sup>

The theme of this Public Meeting, "The Contribution of Religion to Peace", was addressed by speakers from the Christian, Sikh, Hindu, Buddhist and Muslim

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<sup>8</sup> Article 3, *1990 Constitution*, p.2-3

<sup>9</sup> *Commemorative Book*, p.2

<sup>10</sup> *Commemorative Book*, p.2

<sup>11</sup> His 1946 appointment as British-Commissioner General covered Singapore, Malaya, Brunei, Sarawak and Sabah. During the course of his appointment, MacDonald was responsible for setting up Liaison Committees to bring together members of Malaya's Chinese, Malay and Indian communities. He was also the paramount advocator of the formation of the Federation of Malaya.

<sup>12</sup> Cited in *Commemorative Book*, p.4

<sup>13</sup> Cited in *Commemorative Book*, p.4

communities.<sup>14</sup> Another Public Meeting of the IRO was held at the same venue on 6 December that same year and the theme of this meeting was “The Contribution of Religion to International Unity”.

#### THE STRUCTURE OF THE ORGANISATION

Under its current constitution, the IRO Council comprises representatives from the various religious groups in the following proportion: five members each from Islam and Buddhism; four from Christianity; two from Hinduism; and one each from Judaism, Sikhism and Zoroastrianism. An unwritten understanding within the organisation means that the IRO President is elected annually on a rotational basis from a different religion represented on the Council. Life members only meet once a year at the Annual General Meeting and are not allowed to attend Council meetings.

The IRO holds its Council and annual meetings at various religious premises in Singapore, mosques, temples, synagogues and churches, or at the homes of members. All IRO meetings commence with a silent prayer, with each member being free to say his or her own mode of prayer. In 1974, G. Murugaiyan, the Hindu representative on the Council, proposed that a prayer be said at the end of every IRO meeting.<sup>15</sup> He suggested a non-denominational invocation which he had chanced upon and this was agreed to by the Council. The invocation<sup>16</sup> which is now read at the close of every IRO meeting is as follows:

O Lord, increase in us understanding and knowledge and set us free from the bondage of greed, hatred and ignorance, so that we may awake, arise and advance until the goal is reached, giving our bodies to work and our minds to the Lord. May we work vigorously keeping within spiritual discipline to bring peace in our hearts, peace in our families, peace in our cities, peace on our planetary home, the world. May we learn to master ourselves, sublimate our combative energies

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<sup>14</sup> Rev Dr H.B. Amstutz spoke on behalf of the Christian community; Sri Kartar Singh (Sikh); Swami Wamadevananda (Hindu); Venerable Seck Hong Choon (Buddhist) and Sardon bin Haji Jubir (Muslim). Although represented on the platform, the Jewish community did not speak at the meeting because there was no Rabbi present in Singapore at that time.

<sup>15</sup> Interview with G. Murugaiyan, 4 April 1996.

<sup>16</sup> *Commemorative Book*, p.42

into creative channels, and freely offer ourselves in the service of our fellowmen, and our Lord. Help us, O Lord, to ever strive to keep on these lines to promote peace on earth and goodwill among men. By Thy Grace, may we all prosper.

Out of respect to the religious sensitivities of those present, only vegetarian food is served at the end of these gatherings.

Since its inception, the IRO has been actively involved in providing multi-religious services at various public functions in Singapore. According to Mehervan Singh<sup>17</sup>, these multi-religious prayers serve to reflect “as a mirror the image of multi-religious society of Singapore”.<sup>18</sup>

#### THE PUBLIC ROLE OF THE IRO<sup>19</sup>

In 1952, the Anglican service to commemorate the annual Remembrance Day celebration in Singapore was replaced by inter-religious prayers at the instigation of the IRO. From then on, in keeping with government policy, all public national ceremonies in the country were conducted along multi-religious lines. Since 1966, the IRO has provided an inter-faith service for the Annual Remembrance Day ceremony at the Kranji War Graves, organised by the Ex-Services Association.

The IRO has also conducted inter-religious services at various large construction undertakings, seeking “the blessings of the Lord for the avoidance of accidents”<sup>20</sup>. Prayers were offered at the completion of the Singapore Merdeka Bridge in 1956; before the start of the ground breaking ceremony for the Memorial for the Civilian War Victims on 15 June 1963 and again on its completion on 15 February 1967, and at the commencement of work on Singapore’s public train service, the Mass Rapid Transport System (MRT).

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<sup>17</sup> Mr Mehervan Singh joined as a Sikh representative of the IRO almost immediately after it was established. He served as the organization’s Honorary Secretary from 1964 to 1983.

<sup>18</sup> Mehervan Singh, (A000553/67), Reel 35

<sup>19</sup> The following events are not listed chronologically but according to the category of the event being discussed.

<sup>20</sup> *Commemorative Book*, p.39

The IRO provided an inter-religious service at the Singapore Boy Scouts and Girl Guides commemoration of Lord Baden Powell Week on 26 February 1966. The centenary of the Scouting Movement was also marked with a multi-religious service on 26 February 1967 at the Singapore National Theatre. The twenty-first Anniversary of the United Nations on 24 October 1966 was celebrated by the United Nations Association of Singapore with a multi-religious blessing furnished by the IRO.

The IRO's role of performing inter-religious services at opening ceremonies for hotels and other public and commercial establishments has been called into question, at least on one occasion. Apparently, a Christian Church in Singapore questioned in its magazine<sup>21</sup> the IRO's blessing of hotels, which it termed "places of sin"<sup>22</sup>. In response, the IRO noted that since Singapore had no natural resources, its economy depended on among other things, the tourist industry, and as hotels are part of that industry, the IRO cannot be condemned for blessing such establishments which provide employment for many Singaporeans. The Church in question accepted the IRO's explanation and made no further comment on the issue.<sup>23</sup>

The IRO also participates in various religious celebrations in Singapore. Members of the IRO attend one another's religious festivities, for example, celebrations on the occasions of the birthdays of Buddha; Prophet Mohammed; Swami Vivekananda, Guru Gobind Singh and Guru Nanak. The Consecration of a Local Bishop for the Singapore Anglican Church was attended by IRO members. An inter-religious prayer service for world peace was also organised by the IRO on 14 January 1967 in conjunction with the Ordination Ceremony for Buddhist Monks held at the Phor Kark See Temple.

The IRO Constitution does not provide for the resolution of disputes between religions but for the promotion of harmony<sup>24</sup>, although the IRO has on occasions, acted as mediator in disagreements between religious and ethnic communities in Singapore. The

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<sup>21</sup> In an effort to "Let bygones be bygones", members of the IRO Council requested that I refrain from identifying the Church and magazine involved.

<sup>22</sup> Mehervan Singh, (A000553/67), Reel 35

<sup>23</sup> *Commemorative Book*, p.29

<sup>24</sup> Interview with Dr R.C. Cooper, 15 February 1996. Cooper has been the Zoroastrian representative on the IRO Council since mid-1995.

IRO came into existence just as the Maria Hertogh conflict was unfolding in Singapore in 1949-50<sup>25</sup>. At the height of the trouble, the IRO issued a statement urging restraint on the part of those involved, and this was published in newspapers and broadcast over radio. The IRO was put in a difficult position during the conflict because Karim Ghani, the central figure who instigated the riots, was a member of the IRO:

It was a bit of a problem within IRO that he has been locked up and so on but we were able to keep it low profile. We didn't do anything because inside we were sure that he was wrong. [It did not affect the function of the IRO].<sup>26</sup>

During the 1964 race-riots between the Chinese and Malays in Singapore, the IRO prepared a statement on 2 August 1964 which was then broadcast over Singapore radio and television. The statement basically reminded the population that a racial conflict will in no way help the community but instead, retard the progress of the nation.<sup>27</sup> In September that same year, a few members of the IRO paid consolation visits to victims of the riots. Malay members were sent to visit the Malay casualties and the Chinese members to the Chinese victims. Mehervan Singh who was the Honorary-Secretary of the IRO from 1964 to 1983, claimed that it was precisely this intervention by the IRO which prevented “an epidemic of revenge in which the case the riots will never stop.”<sup>28</sup> This is probably a slight exaggeration because as was discussed in a previous chapter, there were also other factors which contributed in part to quelling the riots.

In 1965, there was a dispute between the Chinese and Malays, and to a lesser extent, the Jews, centring on the remains found in a mass-grave in Singapore. The grave contained the remains of civilian war victims massacred by the Japanese during the War. The contractor who found the grave sought the advice of the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce in disposing the bones. It suggested that the bones be cremated and placed in

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<sup>25</sup> See Chapter 2 for a full discussion of the issue.

<sup>26</sup> Mehervan Singh, (A000553/67), Reel 35

<sup>27</sup> Mehervan Singh, (A000553/67), Reel 35

<sup>28</sup> Mehervan Singh, (A000553/67), Reel 35

an urn so that the victims' living relatives could offer prayers and perform acts of supplication.

A problem developed when it became known that there were Malay and Jewish volunteer officers among those massacred, and Muslims and Jews totally oppose the idea of cremation, which goes against their respective religions. The Muslim community insisted that if the Chinese Chamber of Commerce persisted with the idea of cremation, they would first have to identify the bones of the Muslim and Jewish officers and return them to their respective communities for a separate burial.

When the issue threatened to escalate into a religious conflict, Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew called a meeting between members of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce, the Malay and Jewish communities, the IRO Council and the press. During the meeting, the IRO proposed that in order to avoid conflict, there should be no cremation, a suggestion which was finally accepted by the Chinese Chamber of Commerce. On 19 October 1965, it was agreed by all the communities concerned to re-bury the bones in big urns with due ceremonial rites under a Civilian Memorial to be erected.

Again that year, allegations were made that Roman Catholics in Singapore were actively engaged in attempting to convert Muslims to Christianity.<sup>29</sup> After a meeting with Lee Kuan Yew, Christian Church leaders in Singapore issued a statement assuring the Muslim community that no attempts will be made to convert its members, a statement supported by the IRO:

We fully endorse the view that, while there should be freedom of religious belief and practices, there should be no unfair or unethical methods used in the propagation of any religion.

We will continue to do what we can to ensure that we all live together in peace and harmony so that we can work together for the welfare of the people of Singapore.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> A full account of this incident is discussed in Chapter 6.

<sup>30</sup> *StraitsTimes*, 1 October 1965

At the height of the 1984 Golden Temple incident in India, the IRO had to intervene to prevent Hindu-Sikh tension from spilling over into Singapore. The IRO wrote to the Singapore government informing them that the posters and video tapes being distributed by the Indian High Commission in Singapore were highly inflammatory, and in light of the organisation's complaint, the materials were withdrawn from circulation.<sup>31</sup>

Although a private organisation, the IRO has frequently worked in conjunction with various government ministries in Singapore. In 1959/60, the IRO collaborated with the Ministry of Education to produce six books for the "Right Conduct" moral education course which was scheduled to be introduced in Singapore schools. These books were published in 1960 and used as part of the school curriculum for several years.

In the 1980s, the IRO again cooperated and coordinated efforts with different people for the introduction of the "Religious Knowledge" programme in Singapore schools. In December 1981, a Council member was requested to prepare material for the "World Religions" option of the Religious Knowledge programme. An IRO committee was assigned the task of preparing the textbook for the "World Religions" component of the course but the task was never completed because the IRO member leading the team had to leave Singapore unexpectedly.

In March 1967, the Singapore Minister of Defence announced his intention "to seek guidance from the IRO both on content of moral instructions and the method of implementation"<sup>32</sup> for recruits in the country's security services. With the establishment of the Singapore Armed Forces Training Institute (SAFTI), the IRO was invited to provide inter-religious services at commissioning of defence force officers, at presentation of regimental colours to Defence Forces of Singapore, and at commissioning of Singapore naval ships. It has been noted, however, that it is ironical for the IRO to be present at such occasions because christening ships designed for the purposes of war is definitely against the principle of religion.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Mehervan Singh, (A000553/67), Reel 39

<sup>32</sup> Cited in *Commemorative Book*, p.35

<sup>33</sup> Interview with Jamshed Fozdar, 1 April 1996.

In 1977, the Singapore Anti-Narcotics Association (SANA) requested the assistance of the IRO in helping to combat the rising levels of drug addiction among youth in the country. The IRO obtained the cooperation of different religious groups to produce properly-trained volunteers to offer one-to-one care for ex-addicts of their respective religions.

The IRO also makes representations on issues which are seen to affect a particular religious or ethnic community in the country. In 1966 for example, the IRO made a representation to the Singapore Board of Censors to have the film *Twin Swords* banned in the country because the film's portrayal of Buddhist shrines and monks angered many in the community. Again in 1982, the IRO acted to have another film banned in Singapore. The Hong Kong film, *The Shaolin Temple*, contained a scene depicting Buddhist monks eating dog's meat and drinking wine, both of which are against the Buddhist faith.<sup>34</sup> The IRO also made submissions to the Board of Censors to have the film *The Last Temptation of Christ* banned in Singapore because it was potentially offensive to the Christian community.

Through the efforts of Venerable Siddhatmananda, the then head of the Ramakrishna Mission, the IRO was brought to the notice of the World Conference on Religion and Peace (WCRP)<sup>35</sup>. In 1970, the IRO was invited to attend the first assembly of the WCRP in Kyoto, Japan. IRO representatives also attended all subsequent WCRP assemblies. As a result of coming to the attention of the WCRP, the IRO was asked to host the first Asian Conference on Religion and Peace in Singapore in 1976. This was one of the last major events to be organised in Singapore by the IRO given that the initial effectiveness of the organisation was slowly being eroded by the internal disputes plaguing it as will be discussed in the next section.

#### PROBLEMS FACED BY THE IRO

The original objective behind the formation of the Inter-Religious Organisation was benign enough, a "body of individuals of different faiths who have come together for the

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<sup>34</sup> VAKIL, Behramgore (A000297/22), p.159-162

<sup>35</sup> A worldwide movement which began with a pilot international inter-religious symposium on peace, held in New Delhi, India, in 1968.

purposes of promoting peace and harmony among the major faiths in [the] multi-racial and multi-religious island Republic.”<sup>36</sup> Over the years however, the IRO has been plagued by numerous problems, including conflict and misunderstanding within the organisation itself, which have served to undermine its very effectiveness as a multi-faith body.

One of the main problems inherent in the IRO is the uncertainty of its public profile. Over the years, the IRO has been functioning as an “unobtrusive”<sup>37</sup> body, “to create a climate of religious understanding and cooperation in order that religion should be a source of national unity rather than disunity”<sup>38</sup>. In fact, the IRO has managed to function so unobtrusively that its existence is not well known in Singapore. Only fifteen of more than seventy people interviewed for this thesis<sup>39</sup> had a vague idea about the IRO, and of those, only six knew exactly the purpose and function of the organisation. The people who were well informed about the existence of the IRO were university lecturers and the office bearers of various religious organisations.

Commenting on the IRO’s low profile, Rev Dr Anne Johnson, a Presbyterian Minister and a former Council Member noted in 1987, “Perhaps the IRO has been low-keyed for too long. Maybe it’s time we publicise our activities and spread the idea of religious tolerance and harmony.”<sup>40</sup> It has been nine years since Johnson put forward her suggestion and yet, the IRO has not done anything to increase its profile in the country.

Another problem stemming from the organisation’s low profile is the question of its membership. The average age of existing IRO members is about sixty-five years and yet, the organisation has not been actively engaged in a recruitment drive. This lack of interest can be attributed in part to the basic premise held by most members that since

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<sup>36</sup> Preface, *Commemorative Book*

<sup>37</sup> An adjective frequently employed by IRO members, especially Mehervan Singh when describing the organization’s activities.

<sup>38</sup> Mehervan Singh, *Anomaly Removal*, 17 March 1995, p.2

<sup>39</sup> Those interviewed included lecturers from the Political Science and Sociology Departments of the National University of Singapore; leaders of various religious organizations, and members of the general public.

<sup>40</sup> *Business Times* 16 September 1987

the IRO “is not a federation of different religious institutions... no effort [should be] made to recruit members through established religious institutions.”<sup>41</sup> This however is in contrast to the picture painted by Murugaiyan who pointed out that the IRO Constitution is basically geared towards the clergy while limiting the lay-person to a secondary role. There are therefore no discernible incentives in place to attract the lay person to the organisation.<sup>42</sup> Fozdar echoes similar sentiments when talking about inducing young people to the organisation because he feels that there is nothing worthwhile that the youths can participate in, “If it is a matter of three or four old people going up and saying prayers in front of a battle ship, then [the young people] have better things to do.”<sup>43</sup>

Murugaiyan feels that the IRO has the potential to be a great organisation if there are more young and middle-aged people who want to become members. These people, who should have a genuine interest in promoting religious harmony, can work together to highlight similarities instead of differences between the various religions in Singapore. An application to join the organisation must be approved by the Council before a person can be accepted as a member. Moulavi M H Babu Sahib, a Council member from the early 70s, explained the justification behind the IRO’s careful screening of potential members:

We believe those who wish to become members should be broad-minded, have had some training from their respective religious bodies on inter-religious etiquette, to appreciate what each religion holds up as sacrosanct and what each condemns as profane. This will ensure that we get people who understand inter-religious harmony and can contribute positively to the activities of our association and the religious community, the nation and the world at large.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> *Commemorative Book*, p.33

<sup>42</sup> Interview with G. Murugaiyan, 4 April 1996.

<sup>43</sup> Interview with Fozdar, 1 April 1996

<sup>44</sup> *Business Times* 16 September 1987

This is reasonable enough in theory, but in practice, this policy of screening potential applicants may be open to criticism as allowing some Council members to promote their own agenda. For example, some Muslim representatives within the organisation have until recently prevented Baha'is from becoming members. The Baha'is<sup>45</sup> applied for IRO membership for the first time in 1957 and again in 1976 and on both occasions, their applications were turned down. Muslim representatives on the Council have suggested that since the Baha'i faith is a splinter group of Islam, it does not qualify as a recognised religion whose adherents can be accepted as IRO members.<sup>46</sup>

In July 1995 amidst much controversy, a single Baha'i was accepted as an IRO member, and in protest, two Muslim members resigned, one with a vituperative letter asserting that he refused to mix with Baha'is. The other Muslim member, Said Abdullah, the Honorary Secretary of the organisation, left under suspicion of having doctored minutes of a meeting. It was alleged that Abdullah had written a letter informing a Baha'i that his 1990 membership application was "unanimously" rejected by the Council. This was somewhat disingenuous because given the set-up of the organisation, one Council member would have had to propose the application during the meeting. Abdullah chose not to answer to the allegations brought against him and tendered his resignation.<sup>47</sup> This altercation within the IRO has resulted in the postponement of decisions on other Baha'i applications for membership.

Intra-organisational tension is not only confined to the Muslim and Baha'i communities, but extends to other religious groups as well. The Buddhists within the IRO are against Taoists being allowed to join the organisation.<sup>48</sup> It has been intimated that in a show of alliance, some Buddhist Council members have supported the Muslim move to keep

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<sup>45</sup> Adherents of the Baha'i faith number about two thousand in Singapore, more than the number of Jews and Zoroastrians put together.

<sup>46</sup> Mehervan Singh, *Anomaly Removal*, 17 March 1995, p.3

<sup>47</sup> Interview with Jamshed Fozdar, 1 April 1996.

<sup>48</sup> The IRO is composed of individuals, and not representatives, of different faiths, so the sentiments expressed by the Muslim and Buddhist members on the IRO Council do not necessarily reflect those of the wider Muslim and Buddhist communities in Singapore.

Baha'is from joining the IRO in the hope that Muslim members will in turn cooperate with preventing Taoists from becoming members in the organisation.<sup>49</sup>

This general attitude of the IRO has been appropriately summed up by Mehervan Singh, who asserted that the certain IRO members have not shown much tolerance towards other religions:

...for the past 25 odd years some members of I.R.O. have been noted to pretend to be tolerant. In fact they exercised subtle intolerance towards other religionists.

Large communities in the present time human rights relations are expected to exercise tolerance towards small communities. in actual practice they expect the small communities to tolerate their domineering attitude....

I see no reason for rejecting membership of I.R.O. to Bahais or any one else.<sup>50</sup>

Although the IRO Constitution allows for adherents of all religions recognised by the Singapore government to join the organisation, and the Taoist and Baha'i faiths are recognised as established religions in Singapore, the IRO has been reluctant to accept Taoists<sup>51</sup> and Baha'is as members. Except for the seven religions represented on the IRO Council, no other religion is recognised by the organisation, which means that Jains are also being discriminated against by the organisation.<sup>52</sup>

Another problem is that some religions are over-represented in the Council. It was originally agreed that there will be four Council seats for Muslim representatives from Singapore, and one seat for a Muslim representative from Johor. When the IRO severed its connection with Johor in 1961, the Singapore Muslim Council members insisted that

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<sup>49</sup> Interview with Jamshed Fozdar, 1 April 1996.

<sup>50</sup> Mehervan Singh, *Tolerance*, 18 March 1996

<sup>51</sup> There are still no Taoists in the IRO. According to Fozdar, Taoists have become so disenchanted with being rejected so often for IRO membership that they now even refuse to sign an application form.

<sup>52</sup> Interview with Fozdar, 1 April 1996.

the seat reserved for the Johore representative now be allocated to them instead. There are therefore more Muslim members in the IRO Council than is warranted by their numbers in Singapore. This disproportion of religious representation on the Council means Muslims exercise an unfair leverage, thereby affecting Council decisions on certain matters; for example, the Dalai Lama's goodwill visit to Singapore in July 1982. Claiming the visit had political overtones, the Singapore Buddhist Federation rejected the Singapore Ministry of Foreign Affairs' request that the Dalai Lama, be received as a religious dignitary. Duly influenced, the Buddhist group in the IRO Council also urged the organisation to reject the Ministry's offer. Promising their support to the Muslim members to fight the inclusion of Baha'is into the organisation, the Buddhist Council representatives managed to talk the Muslim members into supporting their interest in opposing the visit. The Muslim over-representation meant that the rejection of the Dalai Lama's visit had undue support within the IRO.

Ten days before the visit, however, the Buddhist Federation reconsidered their opposition to the visit. Mehervan Singh attributes this about-face by the Buddhist Federation to pressure exerted by either Buddhists themselves and/or the Singapore government.<sup>53</sup>

In fact, according to Mehervan Singh, internal tension between IRO members surfaced as early as the 1970s when certain members exhibited "acrimonious attitudes":

...because certain events showed that certain authorities committed atrocities in the name of religion. ...an attempt was made to arouse the feelings of [the Sikh] community [in the IRO].<sup>54</sup>

The issue here centred around a booklet published in 1969 to commemorate the fifth centenary of Guru Nanak's birth. The booklet, written by Mehervan Singh, noted that Guru Nanak was born in India during the Moghul rule, a time of conflict between

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<sup>53</sup> Mehervan Singh, (A000553/67), Reel 36

<sup>54</sup> Mehervan Singh, (A000553/67), Reel 36

Hindus and Muslims in Delhi. Despite being a historical fact, this claim was objected to by a Muslim member<sup>55</sup> of the IRO.

This potential inter-communal fracas was settled satisfactorily by the IRO Council which adopted the suggestion that all unpleasant historical events stemming from religion should not be emphasised for the sake of smooth public relations within the organisation.<sup>56</sup>

The late Professor George Gray Thomson, a founder member of the IRO, appropriately noted that in Singapore, "...we seek and need the tolerance of the informed rather than the tolerance of the indifferent"<sup>57</sup>. Besides offering multi-religious services during public occasions, the IRO has not been doing very much to promote the ideal of religious toleration. Although the members are not averse to organising activities, they do not have sufficient motivation to do so.

#### CURRENT CHALLENGES FACING THE IRO

An ideal place for the organisation to begin to disseminate its ideals of toleration and harmony is obviously in schools in Singapore and yet, it has not organised any activities or seminars for this purpose. There have been two differing views on this issue. On the one hand, Cooper feels that since there have been no evidence of ethnic or religious tension in Singapore, there is no necessity for the IRO to go to schools to promote religious harmony.<sup>58</sup> Fozdar, on the other hand, feels that the IRO cannot organise inter-faith activities in schools because it would be hard-pressed to explain why there are no Baha'i representatives on the Council even though the Baha'i faith is a recognised world religion.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Mehervan Singh was reluctant to name the person in question, except to acknowledge that he was a Muslim of Punjabi stock. Mehervan Singh is a Sikh of Punjabi descent. (Reel 36)

<sup>56</sup> Mehervan Singh, (A000553/67), Reel 36

<sup>57</sup> Professor George Gray Thomson, cited in *Commemorative Book*, p.30

<sup>58</sup> Interview with R.C. Cooper, 15 February 1996.

<sup>59</sup> Interview with Jamshed Fozdar, 1 April 1996.

The annual commemoration of World Religion Day<sup>60</sup> is definitely an appropriate occasion to promote religious understanding in Singapore, and yet the IRO continues to shun all invitations to involve itself in the organisation of the event. Since it was first inaugurated in Singapore in 1995, World Religion Day celebration has been organised by the Singapore Baha'i community<sup>61</sup>. At the 1996 commemoration of the event in the country, the Chairman of the Baha'i organising committee formally requested the IRO to assume responsibility for the arrangement of the 1997 celebration, a request which has yet to be accepted by the Council. According to Murugaiyan, the IRO is against organising World Religion Day because some members claim that since all religions are different, there is no basis for commemorating World Religion Day. He noted:

What [the IRO has] not done for forty years, the Baha'is have done in two. I don't think that this invitation [to organise World Religion Day] will be accepted by the IRO and since it came from the Baha'is, all the more they will not accept it.<sup>62</sup>

Given the IRO's stated objective to promote tolerance between the various religions in Singapore, it seems ironical that the organisation is displaying such reluctance to organise an event which can only contribute to understanding and harmony in the multi-religious population of Singapore.

The IRO has recently set up a Constitution Revision Committee to look into rewriting the Constitution. This was in response to demands from some religious representatives who are not Council members to amend the Constitution to provide for all religions in Singapore, and not simply those listed in the previous Constitution.<sup>63</sup> It has also been suggested to the Committee that a specific religion be represented on the Council based

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<sup>60</sup> Inaugurated in 1945 by the World Centre of the Baha'i faith, World Religion Day is now regularly observed in about seventy countries on the third Sunday of January. The purpose of this occasion is to foster inter-faith understanding and harmony by emphasizing the common themes inherent in all religions.

<sup>61</sup> The Baha'i community in Singapore has been constantly working on organizing inter-faith events in the country. Its aim during World Religion Day is to bring together on a common platform all nine major religions represented in Singapore.

<sup>62</sup> Interview with G. Murugaiyan, 4 April 1996.

<sup>63</sup> Interview with R.C. Cooper, 15 February 1996.

on the number of followers it has in Singapore.<sup>64</sup> It is not known whether this suggestion has been accepted by the Committee which has yet to submit its report to the Council. To compound the problem, the Committee is against a deadline being imposed on its deliberations.

The idea to amend the Constitution has not been welcomed by all concerned. Murugaiyan feels that there was no necessity to revise the Constitution, because all that was needed was for a decision to be made as to how many members should represent the Council.<sup>65</sup> Fozdar, on the other hand, sees the recent attempt to rewrite the Constitution as a “gimmick” designed to make the rejection of membership application easier. He believes the new Constitution will provide for a single veto being sufficient for turning down a membership application,<sup>66</sup> when before, a majority veto was needed for an application to be rejected.

Because of its low-profile, the IRO has been, in a sense, overlooked by the Singapore government which has established the Presidential Council for Religious Harmony to oversee the smooth relations between various religions in the country. This role could have easily been assumed by the IRO only if it had marketed itself as a viable and competent multi-faith body in the country. In its recommendation for the establishment of an “Inter-Religious Council” to oversee the smooth co-existence of the various religious groups, the Study Team<sup>67</sup> commissioned to investigate the religious trends in Singapore noted in its Report:

The [existing] IRO does not have an official statutory status and has not been very active or visible since its inception in 1949. It can only serve limited functions under the present circumstances when

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<sup>64</sup> Interview with R.C. Cooper, 15 April 1996.

<sup>65</sup> Interview with G. Murugaiyan, 4 April 1996.

<sup>66</sup> Interview with Fozdar, 1 April 1996.

<sup>67</sup> See Chapter 6 for a more detailed account of the Ministry of Community Development Report on *Religion and Religious Revivalism in Singapore*.

religious issues have become more complicated and tended to involve larger social and political considerations.<sup>68</sup>

The Jewish representative on the IRO Council, Rabbi Mordechai Abergel, is of the opinion that in order to inject new life into the organisation, the IRO should first be buried and then resurrected.<sup>69</sup> It is a common belief among those interviewed that the IRO could probably continue to exist in a moribund state, but it will not make a vibrant contribution to influencing the lives of Singaporeans. Since being appointed to the Council, Cooper has suggested that the number of general body members be increased to include adherents of all religions, and to organise more inter-faith events. So far, none of these suggestions have been implemented, confirming that members have not been very active to date, showing no real enthusiasm to reactivate the organisation.<sup>70</sup> According to Fozdar, the Baha'is in Singapore are keen to resuscitate the IRO but apparently, all their overtures have been declined because as an organisation, the IRO does not recognise the Baha'i faith as a legitimate religion.

The organisation has settled into a comfortable state of dormancy, concerned only with maintaining its status quo, and this is essentially the crux of its problem:

The IRO has been around for forty odd years and has not done any major inter-faith events but concentrated upon saying prayers at the Cenotaph...So it's been a moribund body, doing these little things but at the same time, jealously guarding...its position as some kind of inter-faith body.<sup>71</sup>

It has been suggested that many current IRO members are contemplating forming an alternate religious organisation to do what the IRO was originally formed for.<sup>72</sup> Only

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<sup>68</sup> *Ministry Of Community Development Report*, p.5

<sup>69</sup> Interview with Fozdar, 1 April 1996.

<sup>70</sup> Interview with R.C. Cooper, 15 February 1996

<sup>71</sup> Interview with Fozdar, 1 April 1996.

<sup>72</sup> Interview with Fozdar, 1 April 1996.

time will show if this will be acted upon and if so, the efficacy of the revamped organisation.

The Inter-Religious Organisation of Singapore, can be seen as being a microcosm of the wider Singapore population. The fact that a group of people who have voluntarily come together to promote inter-faith understanding cannot get along with each other has undermined the very effectiveness of the organisation itself. This in turn, does not augur well for the harmonious religious scene in Singapore.

## POSTSCRIPT

The Annual General Meeting of the IRO held on 8 July 1996 saw Dr R.C. Cooper explain the need to amend Clause 8 of the Constitution dealing with the number of religions represented on the Council. Jamshed Fozdar then proposed that the amendment to increase the number of seats on the Council be put to the vote; 35 members voted in favour of the amendment while 3 abstained.

This constitutional amendment, effective from 26 July 1996, means that the IRO Constitution now allows for a Baha'i and a Taoist representative to sit on the Council. The religious representation of the Council now stands as follows:

Table 4: Religious Representation of the IRO

RELIGIONS	NO. OF REPRESENTATIVES
Muslims	5
Buddhists	5
Christians	4
Hindus	3
Jews	2
Sikhs	1
Zoroastrians	1
Baha'is	1
Taoists	1
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>21</b>

During the AGM, Dr Mehervan Singh also proposed that various sub-committees be set-up in an effort to revitalise the organisation by first, increasing the profile of the organisation and second, enabling members to play a more active role. The following sub-committees have currently been established:

*Membership Committee*

Its main concern being the recruitment of new members to the organisation.

*Youth Activities Committee*

This committee is in charge of organising activities for youths in an attempt to attract younger members of the public to the IRO.

*Public Relations Committee*

Concerned with raising the public profile of the organisation through the use of the media and other public functions.

Given that the aims of the above sub-committees over-lap to a large degree, it was proposed that they liaise with each other in order to maximise their efforts at recruiting new members to the organisation.

*Inter-Faith Committee*

Concerned with liasing with the various religious groups in the country, one of its main aims is to organise activities such as inter-faith seminars in an attempt to promote inter-faith understanding.

*Prayers and Blessings Committee*

This committee was set up to deal with the arrangements for when the IRO is invited to attend any public functions to offer prayers, invocations, etc.

*Library and Archives Committee*

Concerned with compiling all existing archival material regarding the organisation into some semblance of order. Historical materials such as books and newspaper articles about the IRO are currently stacked in boxes and left at the Ramakrishna Mission, making access to such materials difficult.

### *New Premises Committee*

As its name suggests, the primary aim of this committee is to find a permanent place where the IRO can conduct its monthly meetings as well as house the organisation's archival material and library sources.

The IRO has also accepted the responsibility of organising the World Religion Day celebrations in Singapore. The 1997 observance of the event was jointly organised by the IRO and the Baha'i community and the occasion was heralded a "commendable success" by Fozdar<sup>73</sup>. It however remains to be seen how effective these changes will be in terms of making the IRO a more vibrant and visible inter-faith organisation in Singapore, and if this renewed sense of vigour and vitality within the IRO will continue or reach a point of stagnation over time.

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<sup>73</sup> Interview with Fozdar, 15 June 1997.

## CONCLUSION

It is my contention that two primary factors contribute to the level of religious toleration existent in Singapore. They are first, the exposure of the population to the diverse religious traditions in the country and second, the existence of government laws curtailing insensitive religious practices. Each of these factors has been dealt with in previous chapters.

Exposure by no means leads to complete understanding and acceptance, but it does contribute to educating Singaporeans about the religious diversity present in the country. It is this very exposure to the diversity of religious beliefs and practices which helps foster religious toleration among the majority of Singaporeans.

Exposure to the different religious traditions which abound in Singapore and the existence of state laws help ensure that the mainstream Singaporean society is broadly tolerant in matters concerning religion. However there is still a small segment of the population which does not exercise moderation in its religious practices. This has inevitably given rise to numerous inter-religious and intra-religious tensions in the country over the last few decades.

There are basically two ways in which the government acts to prevent religious tension from taking root in Singapore. First, the government acts quickly to prevent any potential problems from escalating and second, it adopts a pragmatic and fair approach to multi-religious causes. In its public housing scheme for example, there is an even distribution of population ensuring no religious enclaves are set up. In the civil service industry and education, it is the concept of meritocracy which underlies the civil service and education industries where no policies are based on race or religion. The government has also worked hard to eliminate racial policies. It has also adopted the Group Representation Concept which involves the political involvement of all minority communities in the country because of the fear that minority discontent may threaten religious unity in the country:

Religious harmony is fundamental to the long-term stability of Singapore. It is vital to religious groups and their members,

especially the smaller groups and denominations whose very survival depends on a climate of religious tolerance.<sup>1</sup>

The preceding chapters have shown that matters concerning religion and its administration in Singapore are very much under the sufferance of the government. The Singapore government views religion as a positive tool which helps maintain political and social stability in the country. It takes an active interest in religion because it recognises the important role of religion in the socio-economic development of the multi-religious population of the island. Religion is also perceived as a necessary tool to combat undesirable elements and in building a civic society. It is the government's underlying belief that by preserving and strengthening the family unit, religion helps to nurture and protect the family and by extension, the society at large. Religion is seen as a cushion against the less desirable effects of materialism, rapid modernisation and influences from the West, as noted by a prominent government minister:

Problems like hippism and drug-addiction are symptomatic of social malaise, pressures and thought habit of foreign sub-cultures creeping into our society, and these are fraught with serious consequences. Religious bodies can make significant contribution towards combating such sub-cultures, creeds and credos which impede our social progress and economic advancement.<sup>2</sup>

At the same time however, the government acknowledges that religion, when misused and manipulated, has the potential to create strife in society. To support this claim, it has always been quick to point out the various instances of religious conflict, both globally and within Singapore - the Hindu-Muslim tension in Ayodhya, ethnic and religious conflicts which are raging in Sri Lanka and Bosnia. These examples are often quoted to highlight the fragility of peace in a multi-ethnic society and how the misuse of religion can tear at the fabric of a society. The Singapore government therefore imposes strong state control over religious groups and their activities in order to contain their influence in the country.

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<sup>1</sup> White Paper on Religious Harmony, p.11

<sup>2</sup> Straits Times, 13 Sept 1976

The government is also fearful that religious principles and precepts could be misinterpreted, thus obstructing national progress. Hence its active promotion of secular politics:

Taking the nation as a whole there must be development, and so secularism can help in such development. For one thing it places no impediments as it does in some societies where development is sometimes dictated by religious beliefs which if carried to the extreme can lead to stagnation.

...while a secular state allows the individual religious enlightenment it also allows for national development without religious hindrance.<sup>3</sup>

In keeping with this theme, the government constantly advises religious leaders to provide proper leadership and guidance in matters of religion, thus ensuring that religion does not become a handicap in Singapore's drive for economic progress.

Contrary to its stated position, the government is not completely neutral in matters pertaining to religious organisations. The government's approach to Islam is a prime indicator of its lack of complete neutrality in its dealings with the various religious groups in Singapore. It is bound by the Constitution to "recognise the special position of the Malays, who are the indigenous people of Singapore" and to safeguard and promote Malay special interests<sup>4</sup>. Based on this, Islam in Singapore is accorded certain privileges which are not made available to other religious groups in the country. The government has also been actively influencing the development of Islam in Singapore in an effort to prevent the establishment and politicised brand of Islam from taking root because it recognises that the Muslim community does pose a challenge in terms of its loyalty to the state, as has been discussed in Chapters 3 and 4.

Religion and religious institutions in Singapore are managed by the government to some extent. There are organisations set up by the government to regulate the administration of religious affairs in the country. For example, the *Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura*

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<sup>3</sup> Straits Times, 28 June 1970

<sup>4</sup> Article 152 (2)

(MUIS) is the Islamic authority in Singapore. It can be perceived as being incongruous for a secular state to establish a Muslim Religious Council as a statutory board. But as an observer noted:

Apparently the Government is not willing to give Islamic leaders a free rein because in the past, Muslim leaders had exploited religious issues and created trouble in Singapore.<sup>5</sup>

The other two minority groups in Singapore, the Hindus and the Sikhs, also have their own respective Advisory Boards. These organisations are staffed by government appointed officials, making it plain that the administration of these religions is of concern to the government. This involvement by the government in the day to day running of various religions in Singapore can be seen to be a direct contravention of the Constitution which allows every religious group “the right to manage its own religious affairs; to establish and maintain institutions for religious or charitable purposes; and to acquire and own property and hold and administer it in accordance with law”<sup>6</sup>.

The Singapore government has always claimed to be secular, and it equates its brand of secularism with a neutrality equidistant from all religions represented in the country. It has clearly defined the bounds religious activity as “educational, social and charitable work”, to be kept out of the political sphere. The reason given by the government for its demarcation between the religious from the temporal is that it is “easier to maintain religious harmony by separating religion from the State, by separating religion from politics.”<sup>7</sup>

The government also reserves the right to ban a religion whose religious content is deemed incompatible with the state’s policies. Given the organisation’s opposition the National Service, the Jehovah’s Witnesses were deregistered in 1972 on the basis that “its continued existence is prejudicial to public welfare and good order in Singapore.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Kho Ee Moi, Religion and State in Singapore 1959-1978, Academic Exercise, Singapore (Department of History, 1980) p.41-42

<sup>6</sup> Article 15 (3)

<sup>7</sup> BG (Res) George Yeo, Minister of State for Finance and Foreign Affairs, in Straits Times 8 October 1989

<sup>8</sup> Straits Times, 15 January 1972

Religious groups that encourage dissent are also banned in the country. The Unification Church in Singapore was dissolved in 1982 by the Minister of Home Affairs. The official statement claimed that although the group had done nothing wrong, it was feared that there was a possibility that the movement might grow into a cult and pose a threat to the country's social security. The ban was labelled a "preventive measure" designed to stop the cult from extending its activities in Singapore.<sup>9</sup> Other religious sects banned in Singapore include the Divine Light Mission<sup>10</sup>, the Bible Assembly and the Children of God. These few examples serve to illustrate that the existence of various religious organisations in the country is only made possible on the sufferance of the government, which has reserved the right to ban a religious organisation based solely on its content and not necessarily on its religious activities.

As demonstrated, the Singapore government is definitely not neutral or non-interventionist in its approach to religion. It actively prevents religious extremism and with its adoption of the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act, it officially promotes and guarantees religious toleration in the country. Therefore, despite claims to the contrary, the Singapore government does adopt a 'hands-on' approach to religion, which definitely belies its official stated position of secularism where religion is concerned.

The religious harmony evident in the country should not be taken for granted. As previously demonstrated, there are strong religious and ethnic undercurrents within Singapore which, if not guarded against, are easily inflamed and will lead to disastrous consequences. The Singapore government has taken steps to ensure that religious sensitivities do not serve to ignite religious strife in the country. The underlying factor is that any instance of religious conflict in Singapore will inevitably disrupt the nation's economy and affect the well being of its citizens. It is therefore in the country's interest that religious harmony be maintained, even if it requires government laws to legislate

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<sup>9</sup> Straits Times, 22 July 1982

<sup>10</sup> Members of the Divine Light Mission follow the controversial teachings of their leader, Guru Maharaj Ji. The organization's application for registration was rejected by the government in 1980.

for religious toleration. Prime Minister Goh captures the essence of his government's "watch-dog" approach to religion in Singapore:

I consider racial and religious harmony as the most important bedrock of our society. If there is no harmony, there will be no peaceful, prosperous Singapore – as simple as that.<sup>11</sup>

The fundamental creed of the government is that harmony must always take precedence over absolute religious freedom in Singapore. It is this very sentiment which allows the government to regulate what is acceptable religion and to determine the boundaries within which these religions are allowed to function. This lack of complete religious freedom is definitely a small price to pay for living in a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society where religious harmony thrives.

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<sup>11</sup> Goh Chok Tong, First Deputy Prime Minister, cited in *Mirror* 15 April 1990, p.1

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