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Friday Sermons in Singapore: The Voice of Authorities toward Building State-Centric Muslim Identity

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Abstract

This article examines to what extent Friday sermons are used by the government of Singapore through its statutory board, *Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura* (MUIS) or Islamic Religious Council of Singapore, to enact government policies and communicate its approved Islamic interpretations. A content analysis methodology was employed to discursively elucidate Friday sermon texts delivered in 2019 in Singapore, which were all taken from MUIS websites. Findings showed that the religious authority modulated religious discourses and utilized the Friday sermons as an avenue of forging state-centric Muslim identity and modulating interpretations of Islam. This content analysis study stresses the importance of how Friday sermons could be used to construct Muslim identity in secular state policies and shape a socio-political harmony between state vision and development and Muslim minorities. This paper implies that the current entanglements of religion and development are closely intertwined in which religion and state-building initiatives led by the government reciprocally interact and mutually benefit.

Keywords: Authority, Friday Sermon, Islam, Muslim Identity, Singapore

Introduction

Historically, Muslims in Singapore who are predominantly Malays were portrayed as a problematic community. Many studies have pointed out that the Malay Muslims had constantly persisted in political and socio-economic marginality since the state's independence in 1965. Particularly, there are fewer educational and economic gaps between Muslim Malays and Chinese populations in such important aspects as university admissions, monthly earnings, and the right to own private residences and flats.¹ Although, as pointed out by Clayton, more recent evidence suggests that the life quality of Malay Muslims has improved throughout the years following the construction of an urban, market-driven, and meritocratic Singaporean society,² Tan observed that Muslim Malays are still left behind in terms of socio-economic and educational achievements compared to other ethnic communities like Chinese.³ Hunter added that Muslim Malays' earnings are 25% lower than the country average, and their participation rate in higher education is lower than other communities, resulting in their low representation rate within expert groups such as elite bureaucracy posts, police, and military forces. Muslim Malays also have much higher life-threatening illnesses such as diabetes, obesity, and hypertension compared to the rest of the Singaporean population.⁴

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¹Lily Zubaidah Rahim, *The Singapore Dilemma: The Political and Educational Marginality of The Malay Community* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 2001); Jason Tan, "Improving Malay Educational Achievement in Singapore: Problems and Policies," *Asia Pacific Journal of Education*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (1997): 41-57.

²T. Clayton, "A Review of the Singapore Dilemma: The Political and Educational Marginality of the Malay Community," *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 60, No. 4 (2001): 1242-1244.

³Charlene Tan, "Narrowing the Gap: The Educational Achievements of the Malay Community in Singapore," *Intercultural Education*, Vol. 18, No.1 (2007): 71-82.

⁴Murray Hunter, "Singapore's Malay Dilemma: They Continue to be Left out of the Island Republic's Prosperity," *Bebas News*, 5 July 2020.

Moreover, the relationship between Muslims and the ruling elite in Singapore has occasionally been tension-fraught. In 2001, the government found a terrorist network linked to the regional Jemaah Islamiyah.⁵ This was considered a direct warning to the state's "multiracialism" *ethos* and its "survival."⁶ Other cases of disagreements between the Singaporean Muslims and the government were the issue dubbed the *tudung* controversy in 2002 and 2013.⁷ The government was also concerned about the increasing number of Muslims who tended to enroll their child in *madrasahs*. Ruling elites such as Lee Kuan Yew argued that the Islamic schools were unable to provide their graduates with the necessary skills to find employment in a rapidly transforming society like Singapore.⁸ These conditions have hindered the state's efforts to modernize Muslims in line with its vision.

As a result, in 2003, the government initiated a program to lead the Muslim community to the "correct" interpretations of Islam that they must embrace. The "Singapore Muslim Identity (SMI)" project was initiated which currently continues to operate until today.⁹ It is managed by MUIS, "a state-sponsored religious bureaucracy with statutory board status that has centralized Muslim affairs."¹⁰ The program aims to regulate or modulate Singaporean Muslims' religious attitudes and practices and build "a Singapore Muslim Community of Excellence." Prior to the SMI project, the government also actively promoted its vision of shared citizenship called "Shared Values"¹¹ to help forge Singaporean identity "by preserving the cultural heritage of the various communities and upholding certain common values that would capture the essence of being a Singaporean."¹² Weekly Friday sermons in all mosques in the country are utilized to deliver the state's vision and the SMI principles.¹³

Until recently, there have been numerous studies on the use of sermons by state and religious leaders for different social, institutional, and political purposes situated in several states. For example, Borthwick's study found that the Middle Eastern government used Islamic sermons to communicate state's political interests and agenda.¹⁴ Wiktorowicz also reported how the Jordanian regime-controlled and harnessed sermons to support its interpretation of Islam.¹⁵ Furthermore, Errihani

⁵Parliament of Singapore, *The Jemaah Islamiyah Arrests and the Threat of Terrorism, White Paper*, Ministry of Home Affairs, 2003.

⁶Chan Heng Chee, *Singapore: The Politics of Survival 1965-1967* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1971).

⁷Kam Yee Law, "The Myth of Multiracialism In Post-9/11 Singapore: The *Tudung* Incident", *New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (2003): 51-71; Lily Zubaidah Rahim, "Governing Muslims in Singapore's Secular State", *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 66, No. 2 (2012): 169-185.

⁸Hussin Mutalib, "Singapore Muslims: The Quest for Identity in a Modern City-State," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (2005): 53-72.

⁹Rizwana Abdul Azeez, "Creating a Modern Singapore Muslim Community: A Tale of Language Dissonances," *ISEAS Working Papers*, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies Singapore, No. 2 (2014).

¹⁰Lily Zubaidah Rahim, "Governing Muslims in Singapore's Secular State," 169-185.

¹¹Stephan Ortmann, "Singapore: The Politics of Inventing National Identity", *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, Vol. 28, No. 4 (2009): 23-46.

¹²Parliament of Singapore, *Shared Values, White Paper*, Singapore: Prime Minister's Office, 1991.

¹³Rizwana Abdul Azeez, "Creating a Modern," 3.

¹⁴Bruce M. Borthwick, "The Islamic Sermon as a Channel of Political Communication," *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (1967): 299-313.

¹⁵Quintan Wiktorowicz, "State Power and the Regulation of Islam in Jordan," *Journal of Church and State*, Vol. 41, No. 4 (1999): 1-20.

showed the Moroccan government's effort to manage the content of Friday sermons to curb extremism and spread its religious tolerance and moderation vision.¹⁶ While Samuri looked into the use of Friday sermon in Malaysia to canalize state policies,¹⁷ Musahadi looked at the role of Friday sermons in Indonesia in promoting or trigger socio-economic development.¹⁸ Moreover, Torstrick and Faier elucidated how the Arab Gulf States employed Islamic sermons to maintain their traditional culture while adjusting it to modern life.¹⁹ Another study investigated "the acceptability of Friday sermons as a tool for health promotion and education."²⁰

In this paper, I have further examined the extent to which the Friday sermons are used by the Singaporean government, a secular, modern, and pluralist state, through its statutory board, MUIS, to enact government policies and communicate its approved Islamic interpretations. This study attempts to see the present amalgamation of Islamic concepts with secular government policies or the existing interactions between religion and state development. This study adds to the growing body of literature on this issue so that it can give fresh insight into Muslim society situated in a secular state. As a prelude to the broader discussion, the article begins with a brief explanation of Friday sermons and religious authority in Singapore. Then, the presentation of this article comprises two parts. In the first section, I have addressed the range and contents of the sermons and how they are enacted to build a state-centric Muslim identity within the social, economic, and political context of Muslims in Singapore. In the second section, I have examined the role of the sermons that serve as a channel of communicating the voice of authority toward building a state-centric Muslim identity.

The research has a limited focus on the extent to which Friday sermons are used by the state authority toward building a state-centric Muslim identity; and also has a methodological limit as it lacks an appropriate instrument to examine to what extent the Friday sermons are effective in building the state-centric Muslim identity in Singapore. This issue may be taken up as the focus of future studies by conducting a survey using questionnaires to collect data.

2. Friday Sermon and Religious Authority in Singapore

Friday sermons, delivered at the Friday congregational prayers, function as weekly reminders about the responsibilities and duties of being a Muslim. This religious event is a powerful channel of communication by which religious leaders address Muslims and can substantively affect how Islam is understood and practiced. It possesses authority in which the congregation must listen silently, and any kind of conversation is prohibited. The communication is preacher-centered which does not allow the congregation to question or challenge the messages they are listening to.²¹ Azodanloo critically states that the image of authority is symbolically and literally shown by the heightened position of the preacher above the rest. If the preacher happens to be a governmental officer, the sermon he presents will often emerge to bring more power.²² As such, the Friday sermon is an excellent

¹⁶Mohammed Errihani, "Managing Religious Discourse in the Mosque: The End of Extremist Rhetoric during the Friday Sermon," *Journal of North African Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (2011): 381-394.

¹⁷Mohd Al Adib Samuri, and Peter Hopkins, "Voices of Islamic Authorities: Friday *Khutba* in Malaysian Mosques," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (2017): 47-67.

¹⁸Musahadi, "The Role of Mosque and *Khutba* in Socio-Economic Development of Indonesia: Lessons from *Kauman* Mosque in Central Java," *GJAT*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (2018): 55-66.

¹⁹Rebecca L. Torstrick, and Elizabeth Faier, *Culture and Customs of the Arab Gulf States* (Westport: Greenwood, 2009).

²⁰Aasim I. Padela, Sana Malik, Nadila Ahmed, "Acceptability of Friday Sermons as a Modality for Health Promotion and Education," *Journal of Immigrant and Minority Health* (2017).

²¹Mohd Al Adib Samuri, and Peter Hopkins, "Voices of Islamic Authorities," 47-67.

²²Heidar G. Azodanloo, "Formalization of Friday Sermons and Consolidation of the Islamic Republic of Iran", *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (1992): 12-24.

rhetorical discourse, as it aims to persuade the congregation to reform and drive them to act on purpose.

Currently, there are two approaches to composing a sermon in Muslim society. The first is for the sermon to be composed freely and solely by the preachers, in which they have the freedom to touch upon various topics related to the congregation while ensuring that the sermon's content is pertinent to religious teachings.²³ Such sermons are generally heard in mosques in secular Muslim countries like Indonesia and European states like French. The second is for the sermons to be structured and composed by religious officials in order to attain defined goals, including political and religious legitimacy²⁴ to restrain the threat of radical ideologies and terrorism²⁵ or to censor religious interpretations that challenge mainstream Muslim faiths and practices. It is due to the religious authorities awareness that sermons have an important role in communicating political interests and even anticipating mass demonstration and revolt.²⁶

In modern Singapore, the texts of Friday sermons delivered in Malay, Tamil, or English in all mosques are composed and prepared by MUIS in collaboration with external Islamic religious teachers (*asatizah*). The sermon is dispatched to preachers who simply recite it to their congregations rather than rely fully on their intellectual competence (*ijtihad*) in interpreting the Qur'an and Hadith in a way that is relevant to the current issues concerning Muslims. Additionally, all *asatizah* and preachers in Singapore must be registered and accredited under "Asatizah Recognition Scheme" (ARS). "Anyone without the 'license' to teach Islam, would not be allowed to teach in Singapore under any settings: in the *madrasahs*, mosques, private institutions, and even at home."²⁷ This aims to monitor and ensure preacher and *asatizah* credibility and qualification in teaching Islamic knowledge. The government, for instance, bans preachers and *asatizah* whose thoughts are subject to intolerance that may create social disharmony in Singapore.²⁸

MUIS is viewed as a religious authority in Singapore that is bureaucratically controlled and lack of autonomy. MUIS was established in 1968 under the Administration of Muslim Law Act (AMLA). It is a state statutory board and the highest official Islamic body responsible for administering and supervising Muslim religious affairs. "MUIS advises the government on the Muslim community's concern and has regulatory authority over Muslim religious matters."²⁹ The primary functions of MUIS are to manage the Muslim affairs administration of the local Muslim community, e.g., pilgrimage affairs, *zakat* (annual obligatory tax), *wakaf* land (endowment), and *halal* certification; mosque building and management; administration of *madrasah* and Islamic education; issuance of religious judgements related to Islamic law, and provision of financial assistance to needy Muslims.³⁰ MUIS is led by a council consisting of the 'President of MUIS,' 'Mufti of Singapore,' the Chief Executive, as well as individuals suggested by the "Minister-in-charge of Muslim Affairs." All MUIS

²³Michel Reeber, "A study of Islamic Preaching in France," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (1991): 275-294.

²⁴Bruce M. Borthwick, "The Islamic Sermon," 299-313.

²⁵Mohammed Errihani, "Managing Religious Discourse," 381-394.

²⁶Rebecca L. Torstrick, and Elizabeth Faier, *Culture and Customs*.

²⁷Firdaus bin Yahya, "Mandatory Asatizah Recognition Scheme," *Newest Article, Pergas* (November 16, 2018).

²⁸Reuters Staff, "Singapore Bans Two Muslim Preachers, Citing Divisive Views," *Reuters*, October 30, 2017.

²⁹Kamaludeen Bin Mohamed Nasir, "The Muslim Power Elites in Singapore: The Burden of Community," (PhD Dissertation, University of Singapore, 2007).

³⁰Suzaina Kadir, "Islam, State and Society in Singapore," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (2004): 357- 371; "Muis: Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura - Home". www.muis.gov.sg. Retrieved August 22, 2022.

council members are designated by the President of Singapore and recognized by the government as state employees. For some observers, the appointment of religious leaders in MUIS by the state considerably curtails their independence.³¹ The strong intervention of the state in managing religious affairs and the close control by the government toward Islamic discourse and activities of Islamic organizations³² has left “very little space for MUIS to assert complete autonomy from state interests in the regulation and decision making in any aspect of religious affairs.”³³ Thus, it is considered an apparatus and agent of the state and has insufficient autonomous religious authority in the policymaking process.³⁴

3. Methodology

This study collected the texts of Friday sermons conveyed from 4 January to 28 December 2019, which were all obtained from those MUIS’s websites (<https://www.muis.gov.sg/officeofthemufti/Khutbah>). Upon various occasions of listening to Friday sermons, I have witnessed that females are allowed to join prayers in the mosque. The sermons were delivered at the weekly Friday prayers in English or Malay in all mosques in Singapore. The contents of the Friday sermons were carefully analyzed using the Content Analysis Method to discover and identify the range of the sermons and reflect them with the desired attributes encompassed in “Singapore Muslim Identity” and Singapore “Shared Values” among its citizens. It is also analyzed in the context of the contemporary socio-cultural, political and economic setting of Singapore.

4. Building State-Centric Muslim Identity

Singapore is a multi-cultural and multi-religious state where Buddhists (43.2%) constitute the majority of the population, followed by Christians (18.8%), atheists (18.5%), Muslims (14%), Hindus (5.0%), and other religious adherents (0.5%).³⁵ Obviously, in a multi-religious and multi-cultural society, maintaining religious and social harmony is crucial for the country.

The importance of addressing the urgent need to maintain national unity among Singapore’s multi-cultural, multiracial, and multi-religious citizens has prompted the state to actively construct and promote its national identity through a deliberate process of nation-building and encouragement of their active roles within society. Nation, like a state, does not exist naturally—it needs to be built. Nation-building is a continuous process; and all states aimed at constructing and sustaining an integrated community based on broadly accepted values and aims. A sense of shared identity assists in resolving parochial divisions that could drive disharmony and conflict.³⁶ It is within this context

³¹Afif Pasuni, “Negotiating Statist Islam: *Fatwa* and State Policy in Singapore,” *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, Vol. 37, No. 1 (2018): 57-88.

³²Suzaina Kadir, “Islam, State and Society in Singapore,” *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, Vol. 5, No.3 (2004): 357- 371; Noor Aisha Abdul Rahman, “The Muslim Religious Elite of Singapore,” in Lai Ah Eng, (Ed.) *Religious Diversity in Singapore, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies*, (2008), 248-274; Kamaludeen Mohamed Nasir, Alexius A. Pereira, and Bryan S. Turner, *Muslims in Singapore: Piety, Politics and Policies* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010).

³³Tuty Raihanah Mostarom, “The Singapore Ulama, Religious Agency in the Context of a Strong State,” *Asian Journal of Social Science*, Vol. 42, No. 5 (2014): 561-583.

³⁴John Funston, “Singapore,” in Greg Fealy and Virginia M. Hooker (eds.) *Voices of Islam in Southeast Asia: A Contemporary Sourcebook* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2006), 71-75.

³⁵Department of Statistics. “Executive Summary,” <https://www.singstat.gov.sg/-/media/files/publications/ghs/ghs2015/executive-summary.pdf>

³⁶Sinclair Dinnen, “The Twin Processes of Nation-Building and State-Building,” *SSGM Briefing Note*, Number 1 (2007).

that Singapore needs to build its national identity, which is known as “Shared Values.”³⁷ “As the name implies, the values are intended to be shared by all Singaporeans, regardless of ethnicity, religion, and other differences”³⁸; “which have helped them to survive and succeed as a nation.”³⁹ “The values intended to promote certain common beliefs and attitudes that capture the essence of being a Singaporean.”⁴⁰ The five Shared Values are: “nation before community and society before self; family as the basic unit of society; community support and respect for the individual; consensus, not conflict; racial and religious harmony.”⁴¹

Within the context of pluralism, Singapore also employs ‘religious pragmatism’ as an approach where the state includes religious values as the main instrument to encourage national identity and preserve national unity.⁴² Therefore, since 2003, the Singapore government has initiated to forge a “Singapore Muslim identity” (SMI) that corresponds to the state vision of the national identity as well as the idea and practice of “hard multiculturalism” in Singapore.⁴³ The SMI is a designated set of required qualities for Muslims, the running of which remains today⁴⁴ and is spearheaded by MUIS. The following ten attributes are noted as the desired qualities of Singaporean Muslims:⁴⁵

An ideal Muslim is one who holds strongly to Islamic principles, yet is adaptable to change; is morally and spiritually strengthened to face challenges; is enlightened about Islamic history and civilization; believes that a good Muslim is also a good citizen; is well adjusted in living as a full member of secular society; is progressive, beyond rituals or form; is enlightened and appreciates the richness of other civilizations; is inclusive and practices pluralism; is a blessing to other communities; and is a model and inspiration for others.⁴⁶

The findings show that Friday sermons in Singapore are becoming an essential channel of communication in forging the Muslim identity based on the state vision of shared citizenship as well as Islamic religious teaching. They have articulated and reinforced such state vision on national identity encompassed in both the “Shared Values” and the “Singapore Muslim Identity.” The range of the sermons can be seen in the following explanation.

4.1 Taking Care of “Family as the Basic Unit of Society”

“Family as the basic unit of society” is the second among the “Shared Values” in Singapore that promotes a cohesive society in which people are considered as members of a family unit rather than as pre-social and atomistic individuals. As White Paper states: The family is the best way human societies have found to provide children a secure and nurturing environment in which to grow up, to

³⁷Michael Hill, and Lian Kwen Fee, *The Politics of Nation Building and Citizenship in Singapore*, London: Routledge, 1995.

³⁸Charlene Tan, “Our Shared Values” in Singapore: A Confucian Perspective,” *Educational Theory*, Vol. 62, No. 4 (2012): 451.

³⁹Parliament of Singapore, *Shared Values...*, 1.

⁴⁰Charlene Tan, “Our Shared Values,” 451.

⁴¹Parliament of Singapore, *Shared Values...*, 10.

⁴²Charlene Tan, “Maximising the Overlapping Area: Multiculturalism and a Muslim Identity for Madrasahs in Singapore,” *Journal of Beliefs and Values: Studies in Religion and Education*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (2009): 41-48.

⁴³Norman Vasu, “Encountering Terrorism: Multiculturalism and Singapore” *Asian Ethnicity*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (2008): 17-32.

⁴⁴Rizwana Abdul Azeez, “Creating a Modern Singapore,” 1.

⁴⁵MUIS, *Risalah for Building a Singapore Muslim Community of Excellence* (2nd ed.), (Singapore: MUIS, 2006).

⁴⁶Charlene Tang, “(Re)imagining the Muslim Identity in Singapore,” *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (2008): 7.

pass on the society's store of wisdom and experience from generation to generation, and to look after the needs of the elderly.⁴⁷

Strengthening Muslim families as the basic units of Singaporean society has been among the main topics of Friday sermons in Singapore. It is compatible with the state vision in forging its national identity that upholds:

The family is the fundamental building block out of which larger social structures can be stably constructed. It is the group within which human beings most naturally express their love for parents, spouse and children, and find happiness and fulfillment. It is the best way human societies have found to provide children a secure and nurturing environment in which to grow up, to pass on the society's store of wisdom and experience from generation to generation, and to look after the needs of the elderly.⁴⁸

Friday sermons in Singapore have demonstrated articulating and reinforcing such state vision and values by emphasizing Islam's insistence on responsibility towards family and dependents. For instance, they have reminded the congregation that being a *Mukmin* (believer) is not merely being persistent in performing acts of worship like prayers, fasting, pilgrimage, and almsgiving, but also being heedful of their family. Their parents are amongst those whom they need to take care of, especially during their most needed time. As children, they must support them not only financially, but also mentally, emotionally, and physically,⁴⁹ and encourage them to bring themselves closer to Allah and to remain active in various activities.⁵⁰ The children and other family members are also persuaded to take a more proactive part in looking after their welfare, especially those suffering from fatal illnesses or mental capacity weakness, like dementia. In fact, one out of every ten persons aged 60 and above has dementia, and the number of dementia patients is expected to rise to 103,000 by 2030 in Singapore.⁵¹ Another sermon has also reminded "the obligation that Allah places upon men to treat their wives honorably."⁵² Given that a married couples life is not without obstacles and challenges, a sermon has also persuaded the men to work mutually with their wives in establishing compassion and love and to direct their attention to the positive aspect of their marriage.⁵³ It has also highlighted the significance of a fathers engagement in their childrens early childhood, in which a positive relationship and interaction will give them emotional stability, help them feel secure, and boost their self-confidence.⁵⁴ Muslim parents should also play their role in protecting their families from harm and any negative elements like drug abuse.⁵⁵ The sermon has also imparted some advice to develop the potential of their youth in striving to build "a strong foundation based on *imān* and '*amal* (faith and deeds) and "keep them involved in communal activities".⁵⁶ Furthermore, it has underlined that their responsibility towards their families is to meet all their primary necessities comprising food, clothing, shelter, and education because these raise a high expense—proper budgetary planning is necessary.⁵⁷ In short, being heedful of their family, as promoted in the "Shared Values," is regarded as the other form of regular worship.

⁴⁷Charlene Tan, "Our Shared Values", 452.

⁴⁸Parliament of Singapore, *Shared Values...*, 3.

⁴⁹MUIS, "Looking after Our Family's Welfare," 20 September 2019.

⁵⁰MUIS, "Barakah in Old Age", 13 September 2019.

⁵¹MUIS, "Responsibility towards Both Parents", 19 April 2019.

⁵²MUIS, "Appreciating Our Wives", 5 April 2019.

⁵³MUIS, "Protecting Your Family from Harm," 26 April 2019.

⁵⁴MUIS, "The Importance of Father's Involvement in Children's Lives," 12 April 2019.

⁵⁵MUIS, "Protecting Your Family from Harm," 26 April 2019.

⁵⁶MUIS, "Developing the Potential of Our Youth," 6 September 2019.

⁵⁷MUIS, "Planning for the Welfare of Our Families," 17 May 2019.

4.2 Being Physically, Morally, and Spiritually Strong

Being exposed to the modern world's changes and challenges, the Muslim community in Singapore must be physically, morally, and spiritually solid. Fortitude and confidence will contribute to forming a robust Muslim community based on sound *'aqidah* (faith), knowledge, beliefs, morality, work ethics, acceptance of variety and pluralism, and a strong desire to contribute consistently to society and the nation.

To that end, there is also a serious effort to encourage the Friday congregation to be physically, morally, and spiritually robust in the face of modern-day challenges, as the state has encouraged through the SMI project. Singaporean Muslims have much higher fatal illnesses compared to the rest of the Singaporean citizens. One in six of more than 400,000 Singaporeans who suffer from diabetes are Muslims.⁵⁸ Given the fact that the sermon on 7 June 2019 has reminded them to look after their physical health. The sermon has highlighted that a healthy and strong Muslim is more beloved to Allah. Thus, Islamic religion takes physical health seriously, for it is an essential part “in shaping a healthy community—a progressive community that actively contributes to the building of the nation and the advancement of its religion.”⁵⁹

Besides, the sermon has also shown the critical importance of maintaining mental and spiritual health to achieve a holistically peaceful life.⁶⁰ In a fast-changing and competitive society like Singapore, it is realized that there will be challenges, depression, and distress that cannot be simply neglected without any effort to address. The sermon has called for seeking appropriate help from religion to remediate such circumstances through several acts of worship, working together, supporting one another, and relying on Allah.⁶¹ The congregation has also been instructed to learn the immense amount of patience demonstrated by the Messengers in the face of challenges and adversity.⁶² They have also been encouraged to emulate the Prophet Muhammad in developing noble characters and becoming kind people.⁶³

4.3 Being Inclusive and Moderate

Being inclusive, moderate, and practicing pluralism without contradicting Islam are among the ten desired attributes which is required to be the Singaporean Muslims Identity.⁶⁴ For this purpose, the congregation has been persuaded to be “well-adjusted in living as a full member of secular society”; to respect everyone regardless of faith and race, and to appreciate the richness of other civilizations. For instance, the sermon disapproves of the interpretation that a Muslim cannot be friends with non-Muslims. On the contrary, it has highlighted that many verses in the Qur’ān encourage Muslims to have good relationships with those of different religions, to treat them well, and to collaborate with them in the pursuit of kindness as long as it does not threaten their faith and lives.⁶⁵ Another sermon has also noted that “Islam teaches its followers to think well of others in order to maintain good relations and preserve the unity amongst them.”⁶⁶ As mentioned above, Singaporean Muslims are expected to be inclusive as the state desires by instilling Islamic values through the Friday sermons.

Accompanying this stress on preserving social integration, the sermon text has reinterpreted

⁵⁸MUIS, “Living in Moderation,” 14 June 2019.

⁵⁹MUIS, “Looking after Our Physical Health,” 7 June 2019.

⁶⁰MUIS, “Shaping Spiritual Resilience,” 28 June 2019.

⁶¹MUIS, “Maintaining Mental Health and Well-Being,” 21 June 2019.

⁶²MUIS, “Virtues from the Quran As-Sabirin,” 3 May 2019.

⁶³MUIS, “Loving the Prophet through Emulation,” 1 November 2019.

⁶⁴ MUIS, “Risalah for Building a Singapore Muslim Community...”, 70.

⁶⁵MUIS, “Qur’ānic Values, Values That Guide Us to Goodness,” 30 August 2019.

⁶⁶MUIS, “Ethics and Civilization in Relationships,” 11 October 2019.

Islamic religious sources and doctrines to hinder radical Islam by promoting an official discourse encouraging moderate Islamic values. Since the government is deeply concerned that religious feelings would be politicized, endangering the states social, political, and economic stability,⁶⁷ the Muslims have been exhorted to “choose the most appropriate approach to apply Islamic teachings” in their society in Singapore.⁶⁸ This is in line with the government’s effort through MUIS, which undertakes steps to oversee and control the religious courses and how religious scholars are carrying out their job in light of the global situation of extremism and violence linked with Islam and its adherents. Within this context of hindering extremist viewpoint of Islam, the Singapore government and the Muslim scholars are interested in being aligned, as they seek to confront the same enemy together and articulated discursively. This also provides a chance for the state leader to be more engaged in the religious sphere and in expressing discourse concerning Muslims.

4.4 Maintaining Peace and Harmony and Blessing to Other

Racial and religious harmony is also one of the shared values in Singapore that reiterates the primacy of the nation over the community by building social cohesion, peace, and harmony among different (and sometimes competing) ethnic and religious groups.⁶⁹ In relation to the aims, the Friday sermons have also emphasized the importance of preserving social and religious peace and harmony that are desired by every believer. However, it can only be obtained by improving the relationship with God and spreading mercy and peace to others.⁷⁰ Moreover, learning from the horrific act of terrorism that occurred in New Zealand,⁷¹ the sermon has strived to prove that those who value peace and harmony possess the potential to address disharmony and extinguish the flames of anger, hatred, and vengeance.⁷² Another sermon has warned them to guard the tongue against spreading lies and falsehood and inciting hostility;⁷³ to control the anger;⁷⁴ to douse anger with forgiveness;⁷⁵ to accept advice, and be open to correction.⁷⁶

Accompanying this emphasis on maintaining peace and harmony, Muslims have also been called to be sincere and humble, bringing them to the purification of the soul and preserving good relationships with God and human beings.⁷⁷ The sermon has also encouraged them to increase good deeds and compassion for others⁷⁸ and help them fulfill their needs,⁷⁹ “be it productive thinking,

⁶⁷Kerstin Steiner, “Governing Islam: The State, the Administration of Muslim Law Act (AMLA) and Islam in Singapore,” *Australian Journal of Asian Law*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (2015): 1-16.

⁶⁸MUIS, “Living in Moderation”, 14 June 2019.

⁶⁹Charlene Tan, “Our Shared Values”, 452-453.

⁷⁰MUIS, “Appreciating Allah’s Name: As-salam,” 22 February 2019.

⁷¹The terrorist attack which targeted Muslims inside of two mosques during the Friday prayer in the city of Christchurch was the mass murder, 49 Muslims have been killed and 48 others were severely wounded; Fatma Lotfi, “New Zealand mosque attacks: terrorism or act of violence?” *Daily News Egypt*, March 17, 2019. <https://dailynewsegypt.com/2019/03/17/new-zealand-mosque-attacks-terrorism-or-act-of-violence/>

⁷²MUIS, “Valuing the Gift of Harmony,” 22 March 2019.

⁷³MUIS, “The Prophet’s Etiquette of Guarding the Tongue,” 15 November 2019.

⁷⁴MUIS, “Rasulullah s.a.w.’s Way of Dealing with Anger,” 29 November 2019.

⁷⁵MUIS, “The Positive Impact of Forgiveness,” 6 December 2019.

⁷⁶MUIS, “The Virtue of Openness: The Key to Self-Reflection,” 13 December 2019.

⁷⁷MUIS, “The Prophet’s Etiquette of Humility,” 22 November 2019.

⁷⁸MUIS, “Values in the Quran: Positive Interaction within the Household,” 16 August 2019; MUIS, “Understanding ‘Proactive Rahmah,’” 11 January 2019; MUIS, “The Importance of Having A Positive Attitude,” 4 January 2019.

⁷⁹MUIS, “Developing the Lenses of Hope,” 4 October 2019

physical and even financial assistance toward the less fortunate.”⁸⁰

4.5 Being “Religiously Profound and Socially Progressive”

Among the ten attributes required of Singaporean Muslims are holding strongly to Islamic principles (being religiously profound) and being socially progressive. The Muslim community, which is well-equipped with strong values and grounds its religious life on fundamental principles, will be able to prosper in any conditions.⁸¹ Furthermore, a progressive viewpoint would help them realize how Islam can be implemented in everyday life and how it is a part of contemporary life rather than something apart.

Muslims in Singapore who are mostly Malay were depicted as a marginal community in terms of all relevant socio-economic criteria. Therefore, the sermon has persuaded them to continuously strive to improve their quality and competence in various ways. The Muslims have been urged not to be satisfied by understanding and observing Islamic teachings as mere rituals but the spirit or essence of those rituals. This is in line with the view of religious leaders in MUIS that in the journey towards excellence in Muslims socio-religious life, they need to be totally involved in nation-building and to participate as full Singapore citizens. The sermons have made sure that “a Muslim community of excellence is one who “believes that a good Muslim is also a good citizen” as well as one who is “religiously profound and socially progressive.”⁸²

Within this framework, the Friday sermons have presented a conscious demand for various desirable qualities for Singaporean Muslims. For instance, they need to be progressive, economically developed, have positive attitudes, and ensure that their “spirit does not weaken easily.”⁸³ They have also been urged that it is meaningless to wish for success without possessing the resilience to bear challenges. Then, it has been called “to work hard to attain what is beneficial and seek help from Allah.”⁸⁴ Other desirable qualities are such as being just to Allah, one’s self, and others;⁸⁵ becoming “sources of hope”, and being mindful of their actions.⁸⁶

On the contrary, the sermons have argued that it does not befit a Muslim to have unpleasant characteristics such as envy and arrogance⁸⁷ because “when a person is blinded by arrogance and pride, he will lose the sense of wisdom and mercy towards others.”⁸⁸ These behaviors have no place in Islam as they go against moral values and disrupt peace and harmony within any given society.

5. Friday Sermon as a Voice of Authority

Friday sermons can significantly influence Muslims, often strengthening faith, binding persons together into a community, and inspiring and mobilizing activism. The ambiguous influence of the sermons, at once religious, social, and political, causes the government’s fear that religious sentiments might be politicized, threatening the social, political, and economic stability of the state. Thus, the religious institution has been coopted to control the range of the sermons, to compose and harness them for state purposes. Islam, like other religions, can be interpreted in many ways leading to a process of competition and contest over the interpretation of symbols. The Singaporean

⁸⁰MUIS, “Appreciating Allah S.W. T’s Name - Al-Mujib,” 15 February 2019.

⁸¹ MUIS, “Risalah for Building a Singapore Muslim Community...”, 53-54.

⁸²MUIS, “Risalah for Building a Singapore Muslim Community...”

⁸³MUIS, “Optimizing the Gift of Time,” 27 December 2019; MUIS, “Appreciating Allah S.W. T’s Name: Al-khaliq,” 8 February 2019.

⁸⁴MUIS, “Shaping Spiritual Resilience,” 18 June 2019.

⁸⁵MUIS, “The Value of Justice (the Story of Saidina Umar),” 9 August 2019.

⁸⁶MUIS, “Developing the Lenses of Hope,” 4 October 2019.

⁸⁷MUIS, “A Trait of Rasulullah S.A. W’s – Absence of Envy,” 8 November 2019.

⁸⁸MUIS, “The Danger of Arrogance in Knowledge,” 25 October 2019.

government has a vested interest in determining the interpretations of Islam prevailed on religious discourse contention. However, such government control over the Islamic discourse has taken place in numerous Muslim states, including Egypt, Morocco, Turkey, Malaysia, and Brunei, by undertaking the assessment and filtering of the contents of sermons.

As a result, the Friday sermons in Singapore are now an amalgamation of Islamic concepts with government policies where they can function as a communication channel and voices of authority. It is because the sermons have enabled the preachers to become representatives of the state tasked with exhorting the Muslims to uphold Islam as well as with propagating the state vision and policies. Furthermore, the views and advice given throughout the sermon texts are often introduced through or supported by quoting the Qur'ān and Hadīth, the uncontested references on which the Islamic religion is based.

It is not surprising that the sermons have been moderate in tone and content that avoid direct criticism of the government or the state and tend to be less controversial, for it has been often rooted in moderate Islamic discourse more than in radical Islamic discussion or political interest. They have demonstrated adaptability to the state political atmosphere by pragmatically ensuring that preaching contents are not imbued with sensitive political issues that might cause any inter-ethnic or inter-religious tensions and conflicts. Instead, the sermons have focused on Muslim salvation by emphasizing moral conduct and spreading the authority's message of religious tolerance, moderation, and inclusion as well as social progressivism. This amalgamation of Islamic concepts and government policies can reduce the gap and tension between the secular government and the Muslim community and will increase the stability and viability of the Singapore political system. This fact reflects that the current entanglements of religion and development are closely intertwined in which religion and state-building initiatives led by the government reciprocally interact and mutually benefit, as Feener has argued that "religion has been profoundly reconfigured in the age of development."⁸⁹

6. Conclusion

MUIS as a statutory board tasked with the administration of Muslim affairs in Singapore has managed religious discourse and utilized the Friday sermons as a communication channel to affect changes toward state-centric Muslim identity as it can monopolize the interpretation of Islam. Thus, Friday sermons have served as a voice of authority that tends to educate, as well as to unite and bond the Muslim community to live in prosperity, peace, and harmony in the plural society and attain happiness in the hereafter.

The sermons have presented a conscious highlighting of the demand for Muslim characteristics and identity consistent with the state vision and practice of pluralism and multiculturalism in Singapore. Being *Mukmin* is not merely being persistent in worshipping God through prayers, fasting, and almsgiving, but also being a good citizen. Thus, the Muslim identity favored by the state "believes that a good Muslim is a good citizen," is religiously profound and moderate as well as socially inclusive and progressive.

The findings reported in this paper reflect that the current entanglements of religion and development are closely intertwined in which religion and state-building initiatives led by the government reciprocally interact and mutually benefit. Theoretically, in society where Islam is a minority religion, Friday sermon are socio-politically modulated or shaped. It determines how Islamic teachings and values direct Muslims toward governmental policies to deal with problems of state development and any gap and tension between the secular government and the religiously-

⁸⁹R. Michael Feener, and Philip Fountain, "Religion in the Age of Development," *Religions*, Vol. 9, NO. 12 (2018): 1-23.

oriented community; thereby maintaining the stability of a state political system in a diverse religious country. Practically, Friday sermons can be a site for voicing authority's policies and an avenue for promoting a mediated dialog between the government and Muslim society.

Conflict of Interest

Author(s) declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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