

Occasional Paper Series
No. 1-2013

Singapore's Muslim Community: A Moral Voice?
Comparative Perspectives on Integration in a Global Age

Ermin Sinanović

This paper is based on the author's presentation on "Muslim Minorities and the Prospect for Integration: Perspectives from North America, Europe, and Southeast Asia". It was an event organized by the Association of Muslim Professionals (AMP) and the Centre for Research on Islam and Malay Affairs (RIMA) held on May 31, 2012.

Centre for Research on Islamic and Malay Affairs (RIMA)
Singapore

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Published by

Centre for Research on Islamic and Malay Affairs Pte Ltd

150 Changi Road

#04-07 Guthrie Building

Singapore 419973

Tel: 6342 5470

Fax: 6346 4972

Email: enquiry@rima.sg

Website: www.rima.sg

Facebook: facebook.com/RIMAsingapore

April 2013

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ISBN 978-981-07-6064-9 (print)

ISBN 978-981-07-6065-6 (digitised)

Singapore's Muslim Community: A Moral Voice? Comparative Perspectives on Integration in a Global Age¹

Ermin Sinanović²

This paper provides an analysis of Singapore's Muslim community in a comparative perspective, with the aim of assessing the contentious issue of Muslim integration in the nation. It begins with some basic background consideration and definitions of the minority concept, with a specific focus on Singapore and the way in which its Muslim community challenges such notions. Then, it offers a brief comparative analysis of Muslim communities in the United States of America, Europe, and Southeast Asia, with a view to better understand the Singapore Muslim community's similarities and differences with these experiences. Finally, the paper turns to the issue of integration, and it examines it from various aspects: Islamic doctrinal, legal, and ethical issues as elucidated in *aqidah*³ and *fiqh*⁴, and the actual efforts at integration by both the Singaporean government and various Muslim associational bodies. Starting from the thesis that Singapore's Muslims are already integrated into the social, political, and cultural fabric of the island state, the paper provides some suggestions as to how to better manage communication between the government and Muslim organizations, and points the way for the Muslim

¹ This paper is based on the talk, "Muslim Minorities and the Prospect for Integration: Perspectives from North America, Europe, and Southeast Asia," which was organized by the Association of Muslim Professionals and the Center for Research on Islam and Malay Affairs, and held on May 31, 2012. The author would like to thank Dr. Syed Muhd Khairudin Aljunied of NUS for the invitation, the AMP and RIMA for organizing and hosting the talk, and to the Center for Middle East and Islamic Studies at the US Naval Academy for providing funds for the research trip to Singapore. Special thanks also go out to RIMA staff – Dr. Mohamad Shamsuri Juhari and Dr. Bernhard Plattdasch as well as Dr. Faizal Yahya of the Institute of Policy Studies –for providing valuable feedback and suggestions for developing the paper. Opinions and views presented in the paper belong to the author only and do not represent official views of the US Naval Academy, US Department of Defense, or RIMA.

² The author is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science at the United States Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland, USA, where he is a faculty affiliate with the Center for Middle East and Islamic Studies. He is also Faculty Associate in the Research at Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University. He teaches courses in Southeast Asian politics, Middle East politics, and Islam and politics.

³ Islamic doctrine or belief, from Arabic '*aqada*, 'to bind.'

⁴ Islamic jurisprudence, from Arabic '*faqih*, 'to understand.'

community to become a moral leader, together with other religious and civic communities, in the age of globalization.

Background – What and who is a minority?

In a rapidly changing world of the 21st century, these questions are not easy to answer since our concept of nation-state is based on centuries-long agreements, first made in Europe and usually traced to the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648. Nation-state affirmed sovereignty over a certain territory, where the people who resided in that land had a shared past, willingness to protect that territory, and usually certain ethnic, cultural, and/or religious affinities. With the Wilsonian principle of self-determination in the 20th century, a world was created which gave every national group the right to self-rule and have its own, distinct nation-state. In spite of that movement, there were and still are many ethnic, religious, and cultural groups that do not have a state of their own, resulting in a presence of many such minorities. The march of constitutional liberalism, starting after the World War II and intensifying in the last several decades, gave to such minority groups – at least in theory, and with some notable exceptions – equal rights of citizenship and protections against the majoritarian impulses. During the last age of globalization, starting with the 1970s, massive numbers of people have moved around the world in the migration processes, in search for better opportunities for themselves and their families. The emergence of new minority groups and enclaves, in previously largely homogeneous nations in Europe, North America (with some exceptions), and even in Asia, created new challenges and questions surrounding minorities and their positions in these societies.

Are Singaporean Muslims a minority?

The question, who is a minority, can then be answered from one of the four perspectives: (1) nation-state perspective, (2) liberal citizenship perspective, (3) globalization perspective and (4) simple numerical perspective. *I would argue that Singaporean Muslims are not a minority from three of these perspectives.*

From nation-state perspective, Singaporean Muslims are not a minority as they represent an indigenous population, which has viewed Singapore as its home for many centuries. Muslims of Singapore have fought in defense of their land against outside intruders, and their forefathers are buried in nation's cemeteries. Muslim community entered into the independent Singaporean state in 1965 as a full-fledged member, and its recognition is enshrined in the constitution via the mechanism of administration of Muslim affairs, as in Article 153. Furthermore, the largest Muslim community in Singapore – the Malays – has been given a special status in Article 152 of the Constitution, while the two main languages in which the vast majority of Muslims continue to communicate – Malay and Tamil – are recognized in Article 153A, with Malay proclaimed as the national language.⁵

Looking from liberal citizenship perspective⁶, every citizen of the Republic of Singapore – Muslim or otherwise – has been granted the same set of basic rights and is expected to abide by the same set of duties. From this perspective, every citizen is basically equal, with no distinction,

⁵ All references to the Constitution are from the Singapore Attorney General's Chambers website, www.agc.gov.sg.

⁶ For Muslim arguments and positions favoring liberal citizenship perspectives see Andrew F. March, *Islam and Liberal Citizenship: The Search for an Overlapping Consensus* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), especially 165-258.

apart from certain constitutional provisions as cited above. Having said this, it is undeniable that there are cases of real and perceived discrimination against Muslims and other ‘minority’ groups in Singapore⁷ – including in the military forces, private sector, civil workforce, or hiring, promotion and tenure at higher institutions of learning – which have only intensified after September 11, at least as far as Muslims are concerned. In all this, Muslims have to realize that they have the constitution on their side. Only by being engaged socially and legally, affirming thus the rule of law and constitutionality as the basis for the Republic’s well-being, and through a two-way frank communication with the government and other elements of civic and associational life, Singapore’s Muslims can hope to actualize full set of civil and political rights as guaranteed in the constitution. Emphasizing liberal citizenship in order to establish full rights – and not only for the Muslim citizens of Singapore – should be one of the ways in which Muslims of Singapore claim equality and minimize the minority status often bestowed upon them by the majority.

In addition to these legal, constitutional, and citizenship considerations, it is worth pointing out that the Muslim community of Singapore – contrary to the charges waged against it on the supposed account of its insulation and separateness⁸ - has long been involved in globalizing processes, integrating during such periods various other communities within a cosmopolitan framework. The emerging research in numerous disciplines across arts, humanities, and social

⁷ See, for instance, Douglas A. Hicks, *Religion and the Workplace: Pluralism, Spirituality, Leadership* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), especially the chapter which involves a study of Singapore, 134-158. Also, James Gomez, “Politics and Ethnicity: Framing Racial Discrimination in Singapore,” *The Copenhagen Journal of Asian Studies* 28.2 (2010): 103-117.

⁸ Based on the frank remarks by the former Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew: “I would say, today, we can integrate all religions and races except Islam.” Cited from “Singapore Muslim body says Islam not barrier to integration.” *BBC Monitoring International Reports* 28 Jan. 2011. *Academic OneFile*. Web. 11 Mar. 2013.

sciences shows the wide extent of such historical experiences.⁹ Asserting that the transnational and cosmopolitan ties among Muslims, in the Southeast Asian region and broader, and between Muslims and non-Muslims, are something new and unprecedented is not supported empirically or historically. Likewise, a statement that Muslims are somehow not willing to integrate or participate in a wider society cannot be supported, based on the living experience of Southeast Asian Muslims in general, and Singaporean Muslims in particular. Furthermore, living in the fifth most globalized country in the world¹⁰, it is only natural that Muslims of Singapore would be benefitting and learning from participating in one of the world's leading economies. It follows, therefore, that Muslim experience in Singapore cannot be called – based on the long and rich history of globalization and Muslim cosmopolitanism in the region – a minority experience.

There is one aspect, however, where Singapore's Muslims can be considered a minority: from a numerical perspective. They constitute 14.7% of Singapore's total population.¹¹ Of that number, about 91% are Malays.¹² The Singaporean Chinese constitute about three quarters of Singapore's population. Yet, just like the Muslim community, the Chinese community is not monolithic. It should be emphasized that the Chinese-Muslim comparison is perhaps not a good one, as a

⁹ A small sample of such works include *Islamic Connections: Muslim Societies in South and Southeast Asia*, eds. R. Michael Feener and Terenjit Sevea (Singapore: ISEAS, 2009); Lily Zubaidah Rahim, *Singapore in the Malay World: building and breaching regional bridges* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009); *Southeast Asia and the Middle East: Islam, Movement, and the Longue Durée*, ed. Eric Tagliacozzo (Singapore: NUS Press, 2009); Joel S. Kahn, *Other Malays: Nationalism and Cosmopolitanism in the Modern Malay World* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006); Azyumardi Azra, *The Origins of Islamic Reformism in Southeast Asia: Networks of Malay-Indonesian and Middle Eastern 'Ulama in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004); Sumit Mandal, "The Significance of the Rediscovery of Arabs in the Malay World," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* 31.2 (2011): 296-311.

¹⁰ According to KOF Index of Globalization 2013, available at http://globalization.kof.ethz.ch/static/pdf/press_release_2013_en.pdf.

¹¹ According to 2010 Singapore Census. See *Census of Population 2010, Statistical Release 1 – Demographic Characteristics, Education, Language and Religion* (Singapore: Department of Statistics, 2011). The report is available at

http://www.singstat.gov.sg/Publications/publications_and_papers/cop2010/census_2010_release1/cop2010sr1.pdf.

¹² Ibid.

Chinese is an ethnicity, whereas a Muslim is a religious affiliation. Yet, oftentimes, Muslim and Malay are equated in public discourse in Singapore. This should be avoided as much as possible, and clarity should be emphasized on this issue. This being said, the majority-minority dynamics are very important from this point of view. As much as there is a demand and an appeal on the part of the government and the Chinese majority to the Muslims to integrate, the Muslims also have the right to ask questions of the majority population, who are also dominant in the government.¹³ Using a common legal and constitutional framework, emphasizing liberal aspects of citizenship, and stressing Singapore's place in a globalized world – all of these can serve as shared aspects of identity, which could help bridge what is sometimes an uneasy relationship between the Chinese majority and the Muslim minority. This uneasiness comes in various forms, as both communities have a sense of belonging that breaches Singapore's borders. Muslims are minority in Singapore, but they are a strong majority in the surrounding countries: Indonesia and Malaysia. On the other hand, the Chinese are majority in Singapore, but a minority in the region. It is only natural that they would sometimes want to reach out beyond the region – to China, the United States, or Israel¹⁴ – in order to feel empowered and secure in their own environment. This 'double minority' phenomenon¹⁵ sometimes serves to weaken the bonds between the Chinese majority and the Muslim/Malay community in Singapore. Paradoxically, this also has a potential to create a new dimension of shared identity between the two communities, and make them realize how much they have in common and that – perhaps – the best source of security is mutual dependence within Singapore's borders, and reaching out to the various kinship communities outside. What is sometimes a source of mistrust or insecurity could be harnessed by both the

¹³ I will expand this later in the paper.

¹⁴ Singapore has been having a strong security cooperation with Israel, in order to build its armed and security forces, since 1965. See Lee Kuan Yew, *From Third World to First – The Singapore Story: 1965-2000* (New York: HarperCollins, 2000), 11-30.

¹⁵ The term was suggested by RIMA staff.

government and Singapore's various communities as a source of strength and an example of common experience. Further, a realization that neither community is an absolute majority or a total minority when seen in a broader context could go a long way in diffusing sometimes unfortunate majority-minority dynamics in the country. This understanding – i.e., that 'double minority' is a shared experience – should be contextualized within a larger, global framework, which should fit well with the rightfully acquired image of Singapore as a global city.

Muslims in the United States¹⁶

In the following sections, the paper will briefly review experiences of Muslim minorities in the United States, Europe, and Southeast Asia. The aim is to indicate some ways in which Singapore's Muslims could learn from the experiences of other Muslim minorities, as well as understand the community's comparative strengths and advantages. A full study of these minorities is, of course, outside the scope of this paper.

The US Census does not ask for religious affiliation, so there are no official data on the exact number of Muslims in the United States. The estimates vary, from 2.5 million to 8 million. According to the Pew Research Center, which is usually considered an accurate source, there were 2.6 million Muslims in the US in 2010, about 0.8% of the total population. The number is expected to increase to 6.2 million in 2030, a projected 1.7% of the estimated US population at

¹⁶ Even though I will provide some data on Canada's Muslims, the analysis here will mostly focus on Muslims in the US.

that time.¹⁷ In Canada, there are about 940 thousand Muslims, which is 2.8% of the population. The Muslim population is projected to be at 2.66 million, or 6.6% of the total population of Canada, in 2030.¹⁸

According to an earlier Pew report, issued in 2007, “Muslim Americans generally mirror the U.S. public in education and income. Compared with the general public, just as many [Muslims] have earned college degrees and attended graduate school.”¹⁹ These two reports are a great source of data on various aspects of Muslim life in America. What could be of special interest to Singapore’s Muslims is the differentiation between native born Muslim Americans and the immigrants. On average, the immigrant Muslims have a better educational achievement and higher income than the native born Muslims. Such immigrant Muslims also have a somewhat higher education and a similar income level, when compared to the US general public. Could there be something in the nature of the immigrant status that makes people to explore as many opportunities as possible? One could also speculate that being a native, or indigenous, makes people complacent. In that case, and looking from an American perspective, maybe opening up more immigration opportunities in Singapore for high-achieving Muslims could be a way of lifting the indigenous Muslim community. But, another explanation could be that the native, indigenous population feels so safe, secure, and content in its natural environment that they don’t feel the need to dedicate all of their time to chasing status and wealth. After all, their ancestors had much less at their disposal but they still made it. These are all hypotheses, of course, which

¹⁷ *The Future of the Global Muslim Population: Projections for 2010-2030* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, 2011), 163. Available at http://www.pewforum.org/uploadedFiles/Topics/Religious_Affiliation/Muslim/FutureGlobalMuslimPopulation-WebPDF-Feb10.pdf.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ *Muslim Americans: Middle Class and Mostly Mainstream* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, 2007), 18. Available at <http://www.pewresearch.org/files/old-assets/pdf/muslim-americans.pdf>.

cry out for more research. At the same time, we need to think outside the box and perhaps rethink the notion which says that every single individual, or a community, has exactly same goals and expectations.

The situation for the Muslim community in America changed after the terrorist attacks of September 11. The community was targeted for its supposed terrorist leanings, sleeper cells, hatred for America, inability to fully integrate, and many similar accusations. In some ways, the securitization of Muslims and the resulting discrimination bear semblance to what happened in Singapore in the last ten years. Popular TV shows, such as *24 Hours*, *Sleeper Cell* (!), and *Homeland*, are a few examples of how the myth of Muslim disloyalty to the United States has entered into prime time. Based on such assumptions, the government enacted a number of laws aimed at fighting terrorism which, while not necessarily targeting Muslims, tended to discriminate against them disproportionately. Meanwhile, the enforcement agencies have also engaged in a widespread surveillance of Muslim places of worship, businesses, restaurants, and social gathering places. Yet, according to a report compiled by the Creating Law Enforcement Accountability & Responsibility (CLEAR) Project at City University of New York School of Law, “in August 2012, the Chief of the NYPD Intelligence Division, Lt. Paul Galati admitted during sworn testimony that in the six years of his tenure, the unit tasked with monitoring American Muslim life had not yielded a single criminal lead(!).”²⁰ The same study has found that “surveillance of Muslims’ quotidian activities has created a pervasive climate of fear and suspicion, encroaching upon every aspect of individual and community life.”²¹ These findings confirm an earlier study conducted by the RAND Corporation, often seen as a center-right think-tank, which concluded, “an American Muslim population ... remains hostile to jihadist ideology

²⁰ “Mapping Muslims: NYPD Spying and Its Impact on American Muslims,” available at <http://www.law.cuny.edu/academics/clinics/immigration/clear/Mapping-Muslims.pdf>.

²¹ Ibid.

and its exhortations to violence. A mistrust of American Muslims by other Americans seems misplaced.”²² A similar conclusion was drawn by a prominent American sociologist, prompting him to ask a question: where are the Muslim terrorists?²³

A recent study by Combating Terrorism Center (CTC) at West Point, the US Military Academy, actually found a strong increase in right wing terrorism in the United States – racist/white supremacist movement, an anti-Federalist movement, and fundamentalist, mainly Christian Identity, movement – during the last several years. The study cites that this phenomenon has been largely unnoticed due, in part, to the emphasis on the ‘jihadi’ threat.²⁴ Going back to the Singaporean example, there is no doubt that what was called the global war on terror – for which the US Department of Defense had a cute acronym, GWOT – and the discovery of a plot against the US service personnel in Sembawang cast a shadow over the Muslim community of Singapore. While the Singaporean approach was probably more balanced than its American counterpart on the whole, could it be that a mistrust was misplaced too? And, would such a misplaced approach result in feelings of alienation, and what is often called lack of integration? Also, by diverting a disproportionate attention to its Muslim community, are the Singaporean authorities perhaps missing other important security developments? These are important

²² Brian Michael Jenkins, “Would-Be Warriors: Incidents of Jihadist Terrorist Radicalization in the United States Since September 11, 2001,” vii, available at

http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/occasional_papers/2010/RAND_OP292.pdf.

²³ Charles Kurzman, *The Missing Martyrs: Why There Are So Few Muslim Terrorists* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011). The author is a professor of sociology at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. For a shorter, and an easier-to-obtain, version see idem, “Why Is It So Hard to Find a Suicide Bomber These Days,” *Foreign Policy*, available at

http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/08/15/why_is_it_so_hard_to_find_a_suicide_bomber_these_days.

²⁴ Arie Perliger, *Challengers from the Sidelines: Understanding America’s Violent Far-Right* (West Point: Combating Terrorism Center, 2012), 11.

questions that the Singaporean policy and opinion makers, both within the Muslim community and the government, need to tackle and address with utmost care.²⁵

One area of interest for the Singaporean Muslims would be the experience of the African-American Muslim community.²⁶ Being a largely indigenous community to the American experience²⁷ and having gone through centuries of discrimination in their status as a minority, African-Americans provide a useful template on how a dispossessed minority which lags behind the majority in terms of education and economic standing can struggle for the realization of its constitutional rights. In fact, the American constitution needed to be amended in order to extend full set of rights to this community. No such action is necessary in Singapore. What is required, however, is the Muslim participation – with other groups – in civic and political associational structures, which will create a mechanism of checks and balances with the aim to registering both perceived and real instances of discrimination, reporting such instances to the government, engaging the judicial system, and making sure to put an advocacy plan to see a real change in the treatment of Muslims.²⁸ African-American experience teaches us that a basic similar pattern is discernible in modern democratic nations. In general, it goes from lesser to greater recognition, and from discrimination to full acceptance. In this, Singapore's Muslims struggle is already three-quarters won. Whatever discrimination or marginalization still persists, it is of a less direct

²⁵ A similar conclusion was drawn by Suzaina Kadir in "Uniquely Singapore: The Management of Islam in a Small Island Republic," *Islam and Civilisational Renewal* 2.1 (October 2010): 156-176.

²⁶ For more on this history see Richard Brent Turner, *Islam in the African-American Experience*, 2nd ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003).

²⁷ Of course, African-Americans are not native to the North American continent. Yet, their presence dates back to the colonial era. As such, they are an integral part of the American experience.

²⁸ For specific examples of the disadvantages and discrimination Muslims are facing in Singapore see Gomez, "Politics and Ethnicity: Framing Racial Discrimination in Singapore"; also, refer to the statement by Mr. Githu Muigai, from the Office of the [UN] High Commissioner for Human Rights, at <http://www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=10002&LangID=E>. For Singapore's government response to Mr. Muigai's statement, see "MFA responds to UN expert on race issues," at <http://www.asiaone.com/News/AsiaOne+News/Singapore/Story/A1Story20100429-213050.html>.

nature. This is so because the constitution grants full rights and recognition to Singapore's Muslims, and elevates the majority group among them – the Malays – to a special position. The one-quarter that is left is the struggle to be constantly vigilant to make other legal and societal provisions in Singapore consistent with these constitutional principles. What else Muslims of Singapore can learn from the African-American Muslim experience is that having paramount personalities who can transcend narrow communitarianism will make them relatable for their compatriots. In other words, Singaporean Muslims need their Malcolm X and Muhammad Ali. Muslims of Singapore should study the African-American Muslim community and learn first-hand about the 'double minority' status of the latter community – both as African-Americans, and as Muslims. Studying the African-American Muslim experience should be both empowering – by realizing how a marginalized community can stand up for itself – and sobering – by understanding how many aspirations still remain unfulfilled, and how continual marginalization can lead to a long-standing social dysfunction.

Muslims in Europe

The European Muslims are very diverse, and have a different trajectory than their American co-religionists. Each European country is a different case study, and it would be impossible to encompass all of these differences here.²⁹ Broadly, the 46 European countries where Muslims live could be divided into two parts: the long-standing European Muslim communities in

²⁹ In order to see a more comprehensive overview, please consult *Yearbook of European Muslims*, published annually by Brill in the Netherlands. The yearbook provides a survey of Muslim population in every European country and examines the status of Muslims therein. In addition, the book contains several analytical essays on various topics of importance to understanding the European Muslim experiences. See, for instance, *Yearbook of Muslims in Europe, Volume 4*, eds. Jørgen S. Nielsen, Ahmet Alibašić, Samim Akgönül and Egdūnas Račius (Leiden: Brill, 2012).

Southeastern Europe which used to be part of the Ottoman world, where Muslims have been living for centuries, and Muslim communities in Western and Central Europe, where Muslims have been immigrating since the 1960s.

According to the Pew Research Center, there were estimated 44.1 million Muslims in Europe in 2010, which is about 6% of the total population of Europe. This number is expected to rise to 58.2 million Muslims in 2030, which will be about 8% of the European population. There are two Muslim majority countries in Europe, Albania and Kosovo, where Muslims constitute about 82% and 92% of population, or 2.6 and 2.1 million, respectively. Other countries where Muslims share a relatively larger percentage of the population are Bosnia and Herzegovina (1.5 million Muslims) and Macedonia (713,000), where Muslims are about 42% and 35%, respectively. The largest Muslim population in a single country is that of Russian Muslims, at 16.4 million in 2010, constituting 11.7% of the Russian population. In Western Europe, the largest Muslims communities are those of France (4.7 million, or 7.5%), Germany (4.1 million, or 5%), and the United Kingdom (2.87 million, or 4.6%).³⁰

The European Muslims do not, in general, have similar levels of achievement in education and income as their American brethren. There are several reasons for that. First, the Muslim immigration in Europe came from the lower strata in terms of education and labor skills. This limited their opportunities and confined them to lower paying jobs in Europe. Many of them came from the backgrounds where education was not easily accessible, and such an attitude was often transmitted to their offspring that was born in Europe. Second, most European countries tended to view these Muslim immigrants as temporary workers who would one day return to

³⁰ All data are from *The Future of the Global Muslims Population*, 161-162.

their homeland. Many Muslim workers saw themselves that way too. As a result, establishing civic, political, cultural, and educational enterprises or programs for Muslims was not seen as a priority, neither by the host countries, nor by many Muslims. This had left many European Muslims lagging behind in terms of civic, social, and political institutionalization. Third, very few European countries had a developed immigration policy in place, beyond granting temporary work visas. Immigrants were always seen as foreign, not European, in terms of their race, skin color, religion, culture, and other markers of identity. As the number of immigrants grew, there developed a strong resistance to further immigration in Europe, creating a tension between the two communities. This is in stark contrast to the United States, which since the 1960s – about the same time Europe started hosting first guest-workers from Muslim countries – opened up its doors for immigration from all parts of the world, in line with a long-standing tradition which views the US as an immigrant nation. In the US, this also coincided with the civil rights movement. The results were the empowerment which many immigrant and minority communities felt, the sense of ownership and belonging, and a widespread acceptance of the immigrants by the long-standing communities in America. All this was, and to a large extent still is, absent in Europe.

After 9/11, the European Muslims – just like their American and Singaporean counterparts – were seen as a threat in Europe³¹, in spite of the evidence which shows that the threat has been overblown. For example, the last four annual EUROPOL³² reports on terrorism show that there were 1,232 failed, foiled, or successful/completed terrorist attacks in territories under its jurisdiction between 2008 and 2011. Only 4 (four) of those were attributed to Islamist terrorism,

³¹ Jocelyne Cesari, “The Securitisation of Islam in Europe,” available at http://www.libertysecurity.org/IMG/pdf_The_Securitisation_of_Islam_in_Europe.pdf.

³² European Police Office.

or .003%.³³ Just like in the United States, the last such report, compiled in 2012, states, “[t]he threat of violent right-wing extremism has reached new levels in Europe and should not be underestimated.”³⁴ Herein lies a lesson for Singapore’s policymakers. While terrorism in its various forms will continue to be a threat, focusing on the Muslim community as somehow more predisposed toward terrorist activities flies in the face of empirical facts, both in the US and Europe. Such a targeting of the Muslim community can only lead to greater alienation and a feeling that Muslims somehow do not belong in their own countries, a sentiment derived from their government’s constant suspicion and surveillance. Cesari, who is currently Director of Islam in the West Program at Harvard University, drew the same conclusion and wrote, based on her research conducted in several European cities and through the discussion with 50 focus groups, “[t]he results show a great discrepancy between the assumption of policy-makers and the political and social reality of Muslims across Europe.”³⁵

As for the established Muslim communities in Southeastern Europe, they had an unfortunate experience of living under communism, which in many ways disrupted or outright destroyed many of the institutions these communities built over the centuries. An example of such a blatant assault on religion can be seen in the 1976 Albanian constitution which stated, “[t]he state recognizes no religion whatever and supports atheist propaganda for the purpose of inculcating the scientific materialist outlook in people.”³⁶ As a result, Albania was proclaimed the first atheist state in the world. Fortunately, the Singaporean Muslims never had to experience

³³ The reports are available at EUROPOL website here, https://www.europol.europa.eu/latest_publications/37.

³⁴ *TE-SAT 2012 – EU Terrorism Situation and Trend Reports* (The Hague: European Police Office, 2012), 6. Available at <https://www.europol.europa.eu/sites/default/files/publications/europoltsat.pdf>.

³⁵ Cesari, “The Securitisation of Islam in Europe.”

³⁶ Article 37 of the 1976 Albanian constitution. English translation available at <http://bjoerna.dk/dokumentation/Albanian-Constitution-1976.htm>.

something similar to this, with the exception – perhaps, and with some differences – during the brutal Japanese occupation. Yet, since we are talking about indigenous populations here, there are quite a few similarities with the Singaporean Muslim experience, which need to be studied in more detail. As an example, the ways in which Muslims of Southeastern Europe encountered modernity have similarities with how the Muslims in the Malay world in general, and in Singapore in particular, reacted to these issues.³⁷ Just like the Muslims of Singapore, Southeastern European Muslims resort to both domestic and transnational inspirations in order to assert their belonging.³⁸ I concur with Merdjanova who, in a different context, wrote something which should be of note for Singapore’s Muslims, “[i]t appears that Islam in the Balkans does not offer readily exportable solutions for Western European Muslims but rather a rich experience to learn from.”³⁹

What can be said in way of conclusion is that there are certain similarities between American and European Muslims, as well as between these two communities and the Singaporean Muslims. These similarities include a long-standing experience of living in majority non-Muslim countries, a sense of apartness and discrimination, an increased securitization after 9/11, and a feeling of being singled out as an undesirable minority. On the other hand, all of these communities show a great desire to participate in social and political life of their countries, contribute to their well-beings, and improve their children’s lives in terms of education and economic standing. The policymakers need to pay attention to the securitization issue, as the evidence suggests very little

³⁷ For a nice overview of the Bosniaks (Bosnian Muslims) and their encounter with modernity in late 19th and early 20th century, see Fikret Karčić, *The Bosniaks and Challenges of Modernity: Late Ottoman and Hapsburg Times* (Sarajevo: El-Kalem, 1999).

³⁸ Ina Merdjanova, *Rediscovering the Umma: Muslims in the Balkans between Nationalism and Transnationalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 125.

in terms of Muslim community being a big threat. The American experience proves that, when given opportunity, Muslims achieve a similar level of education and income as the general public. These are all important lessons which the Singaporean Muslim community, as well as policy and opinion makers, need to consider carefully. Singapore's Muslims would do well to study these experiences, make them a part of civic education in Singapore, introduce courses on these subjects at various levels of education, and establish productive links with American and European Muslim communities in order to improve knowledge-sharing, best practices, positive experiences, and ways of countering discrimination and marginalization.

Muslim minorities in Southeast Asia

Muslims live in every country of Southeast Asia, but they constitute a relatively small minority outside the three majority Muslim nations – Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei. Their situation is rather different than that of Singapore's Muslims. It can be said that Muslims in Singapore perhaps best resemble Muslim minority in the US – with some important differences, and to a lesser extent Muslims in Europe. While the Singaporean Muslims may have closer cultural affinities for and ties with at least some Muslims in Southeast Asia, their legal and political status is more akin to what can be observed in the West. Spectrum of Muslim minority experiences in Southeast Asia range from official representation⁴⁰ with inclusion (Singapore), official representation and recognition with significant exclusion (Thailand), mostly exclusion and marginalization, combined with securitization (the Philippines), persecution (Vietnam and

⁴⁰ These include government appointments such Minister-in-charge of Muslim affairs, the Mufti, and other government-sponsored and government-related institutions and bodies.

Cambodia), and to outright lack of recognition and brutal drive toward extermination (Burma/Myanmar) on the other end of that spectrum.

Table 1. Muslim population in Southeast Asia

Country	Muslim population (in millions) ⁴¹	Total population (in millions) ⁴²	% of Muslims
Brunei	0.21 – 0.27	0.408	52 – 66
Burma (Myanmar)	1.9 – 2.18	54.5	~4
Cambodia	0.24 – 0.31	14.95	1.6 – 2
Indonesia	204.8 – 214.08	248.65	82.3 – 86.1
Laos	0.001	6.58	<0.1
Malaysia	17.14 – 17.62	29.18	58.7 – 60.4
Philippines	4.74 – 5.19	103.78	4.6 – 5
Singapore	0.72 – 0.79	3.77 – 5.35 ⁴³	14.7 – 14.9 ⁴⁴
Thailand	3.08 – 3.95	67.09	4.6 – 5.9
Timor-Leste (East Timor)	0.001 – 0.01	1.15	0.1 – 1
Vietnam	0.09 – 0.16	91.52	<0.1
TOTAL FOR SOUTHEAST ASIA	232.92 – 244.56	621.58	37.4 – 39.3
TOTAL FOR MINORITY NATIONS	10.77 – 12.28	343.34	3.1 – 3.57

Sources: *The Future of the Global Muslim Population* (Pew Research Center),
Singapore Census 2010 and CIA Factbook

The Thai Muslims, just like those of Singapore, have an official body, recognized by the state, representing Muslim interests and facilitating religious affairs, practices, and rituals. This recognition started in the post-World War II period, after several decades of persecution against Muslims in Thailand and their leaders, which sowed the seeds of current insurgency in Southern

⁴¹ The lower estimate is based on the Pew report from 2010. The higher estimate is based on CIA Factbook which is current.

⁴² Based on CIA Factbook, except the lower figure for Singapore, which is based on Singapore Census. See the next footnote.

⁴³ The wide estimate is due to discrepancy between Singapore Census 2010 (3.77 million), which counts only residents, and CIA Factbook (5.35 million), which gives a total population.

⁴⁴ These estimates are based on Singapore Census and the Pew Report.

Thailand.⁴⁵ From a legal point of view, the King of Thailand is the patron of Islam, while the community is represented by *Chularaj(a)montri*, the Grand Mufti or *Shaykh al-Islam*, who is appointed by the King as his representative. *Chularaj(a)montri*'s legitimacy is often questioned in the Malay south.⁴⁶ On the positive note, Muslims receive recognition of their holidays, women are allowed to wear headscarves, the government facilitates *Hajj* travel for Thai Muslims, and there is a national *halal* food certification body. There is, however, a history of mistrust between the government and the Muslim minority, especially in the Malay south, which has often led to persecution and insurgency.

The situation in the Philippines is comparatively worse than in Thailand. There, Muslims suffer not only exclusion and marginalization, but also a persecution and non-recognition of their ethnic and regional status. This marginalization only serves to fuel separatism and insurgency in the Mindanao area. In Jan Stark's assessment, "[a]s long as the separate cultural identity of the Muslims is not acknowledged by the government in the consideration of the Muslim demand for autonomy, the present conflict will persist."⁴⁷ The government used 'Global War on Terror' as an excuse to intensify its military operations against the Muslims in the South, trying hard to link the insurgency to al-Qa'ida.⁴⁸ This strategy was adopted by other governments in the region, knowing that they stood to benefit from the US patronage if they could prove the existence of al-

⁴⁵ For more on the history of interactions between the Thai state and its Muslim minority see Syed Sirajul Islam, "The Islamic Independence Movement in Patani of Thailand and Mindanao of the Philippines," *Asian Survey* 38.5 (May 1998): 441-456; Imtiyaz Yusuf, "The Southern Thailand Conflict and the Muslim World," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 27.2 (August 2007): 319-339; and Imtiyaz Yusuf, "The Thai Muslims and Participation in the Democratic Process: The Case of 2007 Elections," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 29.3 (September 2009): 325-336.

⁴⁶ Christopher M. Joll, "Religion and Conflict in Southern Thailand: Beyond Rounding Up the Usual Suspects," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 32.2 (2010): 258-279.

⁴⁷ Jan Stark, "Muslims in the Philippines," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 23.1 (April 2003): 195-209, the quote is from 208.

⁴⁸ See Jim Glassman, "The 'War on Terrorism' Comes to Southeast Asia," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 35.1 (2005): 3-28.

Qa'ida – related entities in their territories.⁴⁹ Recently, there have been encouraging signs as the government and the Moro insurgents signed a peace agreement in October of 2012.

Muslims of Cambodia and Vietnam suffer from a long-standing ethno-religious exclusion, in addition to political persecution under socialist and communist regimes.⁵⁰ According to some estimates, about 90,000 Muslims – almost 40% of all Muslims at the time – were executed in the Killing Fields of Cambodia.⁵¹ Finally, Muslims in Burma/Myanmar, who are mostly of the Rohingya background, suffer outright persecution and ethnic cleansing. They are considered stateless, as the Burmese regime refuses to grant them the right of citizenship. Currently, there are more than 1.1 million stateless people in Burma. Even a supposed champion of human rights, Aung San Suu Kyi, refused to recognize the Rohingya's status, making her more of an ethno-nationalist, than a supporter of universal human rights – something the Nobel Prize Committee, regrettably, failed to recognize.⁵² She finally broke silence in November of 2012, during her visit to India, but stated that she did not want to take sides, putting thus politics before ethics.⁵³

⁴⁹ For an example of how the Burmese junta appropriated the war on terror in the fight against its Muslim minority see Andrew Selth, "Burma's Muslims and the War on Terror," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 27.2 (2004): 107-126.

⁵⁰ For an excellent brief overview of the Cham Muslim community in Vietnam and Cambodia see Mohamed Effendy bin Abdul Hamid, "Understanding the Cham Identity in Mainland Southeast Asia: Contending Views," *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 21.2 (2006): 230-253. For a longer account please consult Philip Taylor, *Cham Muslims of the Mekong Delta: place and mobility in the cosmopolitan periphery* (Canberra and Honolulu: Asian Studies Association of Australia and the University of Hawai'i Press, 2007).

⁵¹ According to most accurate estimates, about 1.7 million people – or 21% of the country's population – were killed during the 1975-1979 Pol Pot regime. Yale University has an excellent collection of documents and reports at its Cambodian Genocide Project website, <http://www.yale.edu/cgp/index.html>.

⁵² See Francis Wade, "Aung San Suu Kyi's shaky high moral ground," AlJazeera English, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2012/08/20128288459877109.html>.

⁵³ "Aung San Suu Kyi Explains Silence on Rohingyas," Voice of America, <http://www.voanews.com/content/aung-san-suu-kyi-explains-silence-on-rohingyas/1546809.html>.

In addition, she also failed to restrain some of her supporters, including Buddhist monks, who called for expulsion of all Rohingya Muslims.⁵⁴ According to UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency,

[L]ack of citizenship and enjoyment of basic rights, plus restrictive policies and discriminatory practices by local authorities, are the main protection and livelihood problems faced by Muslim residents of Rakhine State. Essential services such as health care, water, sanitation and education are woefully inadequate and in most cases non-existent.⁵⁵

In conclusion, it can safely be said that Singapore's Muslim community – by far – enjoys best status of all Muslim minorities in Southeast Asia. Anti-Muslim discrimination in Singapore seems relatively small compared to the exclusion, marginalization, persecution, or ethnic cleansing aimed at various Muslim minorities in the region. Singapore's Muslims need to showcase their experience and advocate for other Muslim minorities in Singapore by exhibiting their success story, compared to other such minorities in Southeast Asia. They also need to work with the government of Singapore in order to help out Muslim minorities in Southeast Asia, through transfer of education, skills, and by investing in various Muslim communities in the region. All this leads to a further conclusion that Singapore's Muslims need to be seen in a wider comparative perspective. The American and European Muslims have – in many ways – much more in common with the Singaporean Muslim experiences, and need to be studied carefully.

⁵⁴ "Myanmar monks call for Rohingya expulsion," UPI Special Report, http://www.upi.com/Top_News/Special/2012/10/26/Myanmar-monks-call-for-Rohingya-expulsion/UPI-35421351247400/.

⁵⁵ "2013 UNHCR country operations profile – Myanmar," available at <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49e4877d6.html>.

Muslims of Singapore – ways of thinking about integration

In the last sections of the paper, I will turn to an analysis of various issues related to the integration of the Muslim community in Singapore. The objective is to point out ways of thinking about integration – from an outsider point of view – which will hopefully result in a novel contemplation about Singapore's Muslims and their status. A comprehensive overview of Singapore's Muslims is outside the scope of this paper, as it has been done elsewhere, in various studies and reports produced by the government and Muslim governmental and non-governmental institutions.

Based on the earlier claim that Singapore's Muslims are not to be considered a minority from at least three of the four possible perspectives, I would go further and make another claim: Muslims of Singapore are already integrated, making the question of integration redundant. The question, then, is not: are Muslims integrated? Instead, the following questions need to be asked: how to improve the standing of Singaporean Muslims in the society, and how is that to be done? That is the challenge in front of both Singapore's policymakers, as well as its Muslim leaders.

First of all, the Muslims of Singapore need to recognize their weaknesses, and make effort at fixing these, together with the help of other communities and the government. High rates of divorce, school dropouts, teenage pregnancy, and drug abuse are just some of the problems, especially in the Malay Muslim community. Second, the disparity in educational achievement between Malay and non-Malay Muslims on the one hand, and Malays and non-Malays on the other, needs to be recognized. According to Singapore Census 2010, only 5.1% Malays had a

university degree, compared to 22.6% among the Chinese, and 35% among the Indians.⁵⁶ The Malay Muslim community should develop a strategy – in concert with the government and other representative Muslim bodies – whereby at least 25% of currently enrolled Malay children in primary and high schools should obtain university degrees by the year 2030. Third, the intra-Muslim dynamics need to be researched and understood. What is the nature of relationship between Malay majority and non-Malay minority within the Muslim community? Are there instances of maltreatment or discrimination? It would be unfair for the Malays to cry discrimination in wider society while practicing the same within the Muslim community. Fourth, and this may be both sensitive and difficult, Muslim and Malay issues need to be disaggregated. Sometimes, when talking about the Muslim issues in Singapore, it is not clear whether one is talking about the Malays only, or about all Muslims. Conversely, not all problems that are plaguing the Malay society in Singapore are afflicting other Muslims. It is understood that, from the government's point of view, it is often easy to collapse the two, but this could lead to both wrong diagnosis and prescription. Finally, looking at the Malay Muslim community as a single entity creates an impression that all Malays think alike, and have similar predilections or aspirations.⁵⁷ Challenging this approach would require moving beyond the colonial and post-colonial ethnic identity markers.⁵⁸ Put differently, a cookie cutter policy, aimed at the Malays or the Muslims as a whole, may not work. Government's policies need to reflect the fact that we live in the age of customization and that one-size-fits-all does not necessarily work.

⁵⁶ *Census of Population 2010*, 11.

⁵⁷ Marranci criticizes this constructivist approach. See Gabriele Marranci, "Integration, minorities and the rhetoric of civilization: the case of British Pakistani Muslims and Malay Muslims in Singapore," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 34.5 (May 2011): 814-832, especially 818-820.

⁵⁸ Syed Muhd Khairudin Aljunied, "Ethnic resurgence, minority communities, and state policies in a network society: the dynamic of Malay identity formation in post-colonial Singapore," *Identities* 17.2-3 (2010): 304-326.

At the same time, relative strengths of the Muslim community need to be highlighted. The Muslim community of Singapore has – for a long time – been cosmopolitan, open, and multilingual. The 2010 census shows that the Malays have a higher English literacy (86.9%) than an average Singaporean of all races (79.9%) or Chinese (77.4%), and they are just about tied with the Indian Singaporeans, some of whom are Muslims (86.9% vs. 87.1%). In addition, more Malays are literate in two or more languages than any other group (86.3% vs. 66.5% for the Chinese and 82.1% for the Indian Singaporean population). It is probable that Malays end up studying arts and sciences in greater proportion than any other discipline because of their inclination toward languages, arts, aesthetics, and belles lettres. Could it be that the Malay underachievement in education is more of a product of the educational system that values technical, business, and scientific courses over arts and sciences, favoring thus those who are more inclined toward the former? In other words, lack of educational achievement among the Malays could be more due to lack of opportunities – in education and in the job market – in things that Malays are inclined to do, than in their indifference or supposed laziness. The Malay, and Muslim, multilingualism should not only be capitalized on in the market place – i.e., Islamic banking and financing – but also in arts, architecture, diplomacy, public relations, and literature, among others.

Likewise, the transnational and cosmopolitan ties which the Singaporean Muslims have enjoyed for centuries should be seen as an asset, not a threat. For a place that is known for its globalized nature, it is sometimes puzzling to see Singapore's policymakers engaging in an inward and anti-globalizing domiciliation of its Muslims. This is due to a misinterpretation of Muslim transnationalism in Singapore. The links which Singapore's Muslims have with other Muslims

around the world, and especially with Muslims in Malaysia and – to a lesser extent – in Indonesia, should be attributed to the comfort and domesticity they have with the notion of being Singaporean. Seeking cooperation and inspiration in the experience of other Muslims is, therefore, not a threat or antithetical to their being fully and uniquely Singaporean. In the same vein, importation of various Muslim transnational modes of religiosity, dress, architecture, or customs, is not a case of Arabization which threatens the good, ‘indigenous’ Islam, but an example of what is known as ‘cosmopolitan domesticity.’⁵⁹ Mistaking transnationalism and cosmopolitanism for Arabization is a result of an outward evaluation of the Muslim community in Singapore, which stems from lack of access to the domestic life of Singaporean Muslims.⁶⁰ In spite of the appearances, and of the Singapore Muslims’ appropriation of new ways in dressing, religiosity, aesthetics, or customs, the community remains firmly rooted in their Asian, Singaporean, and Indian/Malay experiences.⁶¹ Herein lies the challenge for Singapore’s Malays and Muslims. They need to open their homes’ doors to the non-Muslim neighbors, friends, and co-workers, so that they can see for themselves that the domestic life of Singapore’s Muslims

⁵⁹ In her study of the late 19th and early 20th century domestic consumption in America – especially as it relates to women’s consumption in regard to interior design and household decorations – Kristin Hoganson explains the notion of cosmopolitan domesticity as ‘nationally unbounded,’ and elaborates that this cosmopolitanism “implied an appreciation of other peoples’ ... artistic production and cultural attainments, a valorization of ethnographic and other geographic knowledge, and varying degrees of identification with people outside the United States.” Yet, this identification did not make them any less American. See Kristin Hoganson, “Cosmopolitan Domesticity: Importing the American Dream, 1865-1920,” *The American Historical Review* 107.1 (February 2002): 55-83, the quote is from pg.60.

⁶⁰ Even the former Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew, referenced lack of Muslim integration in Singapore to the Arab influence and Islamic resurgence since the 1970s: “I think we were progressing very nicely until the surge of Islam came, and if you asked me for my observations, the other communities have easier integration -friends, intermarriages and so on, Indians with Chinese, Chinese with Indians -than Muslims. That’s the result of the surge from the Arab states.” See fn.9. In this author’s humble opinion, this is a case of misinterpretation. To elaborate, the Singaporean Chinese community has become more Westernized in its outlook, aesthetics, and culture in the last several decades. Turning tables on the argument above, lack of integration and the distancing among the communities, could be attributed also to the Chinese appropriation of Western lifestyle and customs. This, too, would be a mistaken interpretation. The statement above has an inbuilt assumption that non-Muslim cultures in Singapore did not change and it was Muslims who – by adopting new ways – somehow reduced their degree of integration in the country. This is empirically incorrect, as all cultures change over time.

⁶¹ Perhaps a description of rooted cosmopolitans is in order here. See Sydney Tarrow, *The New Transnational Activism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 35-42.

continues to be Asian and Singaporean, even as it is colored by transnational and cosmopolitan sensibilities. By singling out Muslims as impervious to integration, policymakers risk neglecting the role other communities play in the integration processes – positive or negative.

Communication – an essential ingredient

For Muslims to continue contributing to Singapore, and for the larger society to continue engaging its Muslim individuals and community, it is imperative to have an honest, open, transparent, two-way communication about various issues of importance to the country. The topic of inter-communal harmony is a very complex one and requires a lot of attention and effort. Even the Muslim community approaches the issue of integration one-sidedly. That sentiment can sometimes be heard as, “we are not being integrated because we are excluded and not given opportunities.” The majority opinion – which is often echoed by the government – sometimes says, “Muslims are not integrated because they are not putting effort in integration, they want to live separately.” These are two exclusive claims, based on emotive sentiments. These sentiments sometimes obscure the fact that Muslim integration in Singapore is real, as the paper has been arguing all along. The challenge, however, is to find what Andrew March calls “an overlapping consensus.”⁶² Mutual accusation and charges lead nowhere and do not contribute to a healthy national dialogue. What is needed is an open, two-way discussion on these issues, so that all voices in the debate can be heard. Such a deliberative approach would include various members and institutions – governmental, religious, political, associational, civic, and NGOs.

⁶² See fn.6.

Another aspect of this communication is between various institutions representing the Muslim community on the one hand, and other similar institutions in a wider society on the other. Muslims cannot be reduced to just one institution or a representative body. MUIS, for instance, has done an excellent job advocating for Muslims in Singapore, and taking care of their various needs through the decades. In some aspects, it could serve as a role model for many other Muslim countries and institutions. At the same time, there are some areas of life that MUIS does not cover or that do not come under its responsibilities. It is here where Muslims need to shun exclusivity and join other associational bodies. Simply put, Muslims of Singapore cannot build social capital on their own. They need to become ‘joiners,’⁶³ contributing to all facets of life in Singapore, building thus social capital for their own community and the wider society.

The question of integration is often conceived of, and practiced, as a one-way communication, i.e. here is what Muslims need to do in order to integrate. But Muslims have the right to ask questions of the majority population and the government. Just as the government asks the Muslims to step up and do better, Muslims have the right – as citizens of Singapore – to ask the majority tough questions. Do some governmental decisions result in Muslim alienation and lack of integration? Do cultural traits of the majority exclude Muslims from the decision-making processes? How does the majority understand the Muslim experience in Singapore, and does this (mis)understanding contribute to feeling of alienation – not just by Muslims, but by the majority against Muslims? Admittedly, these are sensitive and difficult questions, but there are no ways around them. In the 21st century, such questions cannot be buried in sand. Again, the key to a respectful conversation is an open communication. This will require considerable cultural

⁶³ Alexis de Tocqueville famously stated that America was a nation of joiners, meaning that Americans participate in civic and associational life at a very high rate. They join various organizations and associations – religious, civic, political, charitable – thus making American democracy very rich.

adjustments across various segments of the Singaporean society, but it should not be hard to achieve in the age of the internet and social media.

What should be the government's role? By constitution and by law, the government is involved in managing Islamic affairs in Singapore. The challenge is to try to avoid micro-managing the Muslim community, and to know when to step in and when to step aside. This would allow the Muslim community to develop intra-communal pluralism, resulting in richness of Muslim life and experiences in Singapore, and diffusing a lot of pressure from both the government and official Muslim bodies.⁶⁴ What is perceived as lack of integration and alienation of Singapore's Muslims could also be a product of the government's micro-managing approach. While the government might believe that such an approach is necessary in order to manage inter-ethnic relations in Singapore, in reality it only creates a situation of social control, which serves to fuel dissatisfaction and alienation.⁶⁵ Research shows that state involvement in religion often leads to several effects: (1) lower levels of religiosity, (2) restriction of religious development, and (3) backlash against formal religion because of government's involvement with it.⁶⁶ So, the very policies developed to integrate and involve Singapore's Muslims could be the source of failure, due to their association with the government. This is why MUIS is sometimes seen as ineffective, and the Malays/Muslims as recalcitrant – in spite of great efforts put forth by both the government and MUIS. An alternative path would be to include various non-governmental Muslim (and non-Muslim) bodies, and develop grassroots-based solutions. The government could play a supportive role in it, but it needs to tread this issue very lightly.

⁶⁴ Suzaina Kadir makes the same point. Kadir, "Uniquely Singapore," 175.

⁶⁵ See Beng Huat Chua, "Multiculturalism in Singapore: an instrument of social control," *Race & Class* 44.3 (2003): 58-77.

⁶⁶ See Jonathan Fox and Ephraim Tabory, "Contemporary Evidence Regarding the Impact of State Regulation of Religion on Religious Participation and Belief," *Sociology of Religion* 69.3 (2008): 245-271.

Developing Islamic thought in Singapore

Muslims of Singapore need to use their comparative advantage of living in one of the most prosperous world's economies and in one of the most globalized places to move from being consumers of Islamic thought and knowledge to being its producers. First step in this direction is creation of social capital necessary to embark on such a project. This could be accomplished in two ways: by graduating top Muslim students and sending them to best universities in the world to study Islamic thought, and by importing top Muslim talent from overseas.⁶⁷ Second, Singapore's Muslims need to establish at least one Islamic studies center at a higher institution of learning. It is puzzling that Singapore does not have a program in Islamic studies and undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Where Muslims are studied in Singaporean institutions of higher learning, they are treated in one of three ways: as a constitutive part of Malay studies (NUS), as an item on regional studies syllabus (ISEAS, NUS, NTU), or as a security issue (NTU). This is where the initiative needs to come from the Muslim community, which needs to put together a strong advocacy plan and back it with sufficient funding. There is no reason why this could not be accomplished, given Singapore's Muslim community financial standing. It should be remembered here that the Muslim community of Singapore has a higher per capita income than any Muslim majority of minority in South or Southeast Asia. It is true that the community is rather small, but it should be able to raise the capital to at least endow a chair of Islamic studies at one of the Singapore's universities, if it is not able to sponsor a full-fledged program. The community needs to think big and bold, and contemplate this project for the sake

⁶⁷ It is encouraging that MUIS has already recognized the second point in its 40th anniversary commemorative issue, *Honouring the Past, Shaping the Future – MUIS Story: 40 Years of Building a Singapore Muslim Community of Excellence* (Singapore: MUIS, n.d.), 133.

of its own population, but also to serve the cause of understanding Islam in the region and beyond.

Among the issues in Islamic thought where the community could excel is *fiqh al-aqalliyyat* (jurisprudence of [Muslim] minorities). This legal approach to Islamic jurisprudence was first introduced in the 1990s by Taha Jabir al-Alwani, an Iraqi-American Muslim jurist with a PhD from al-Azhar University in Cairo, who argued that the needs of Muslim minorities in the West are often different than those in Muslim majority countries. As a consequence, he argued in favor of developing a new discourse in Islamic jurisprudence which he called *fiqh al-aqalliyyat*. Another leading contemporary Muslim scholar, Yusuf al-Qaradawi, adopted this approach and wrote a few books on the topic.⁶⁸ It is interesting that some of the issues these scholars discussed – such as the issue of voting in democratic elections in a non-Muslim polity – were answered affirmatively by Singaporean Muslims decades before. Yet, due to lack of intellectual output and publication of such views, the discourse was developed elsewhere.

Some Muslim scholars have argued that the discourse on Muslim minorities cannot be simply solved by resorting to jurisprudence, which creates a sort of separateness and parallelism in legal system. This criticism does not fully apply to Singapore, as Muslims do have a separate legal system under the Singaporean constitution – hence, the validity of *fiqh al-aqalliyyat* approach in Singapore. What Muslims need, the critics of jurisprudence of minorities argue, is *fiqh* of citizenship – which is based on neutrality, patriotism, and shared commitment to the nation's

⁶⁸ For a good overview of this doctrine in English see Tauseef Ahmad Parry, "The Legal Methodology of 'Fiqh al-Aqalliyyat' and its Critics: An Analytical Study," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 32.1 (March 2012): 88-107. See also Andrew F. March, "Are Secularism and Neutrality Attractive to Religious Minorities? Islamic Discussions of Western Secularism in the 'Jurisprudence of Muslim Minorities' (*Fiqh al-Aqalliyyat*) Discourse," *30 Cardozo Law Review* (2008-2009): 2821–2854.

prosperity. I would argue that Singaporean Muslims already practice *fiqh* of citizenship, but they need to develop both intellectual grounding in Islamic sources and a consistent way in terms of applying such a *fiqh*. Tariq Ramadan and Yusuf al-Qaradawi are among the Muslim scholars promoting this approach on jurisprudence of citizenship (*fiqh al-muwatana*).

Yet another important approach, which should benefit Singapore's Muslims and to which they need to make a contribution, is that of *maqasid al-shari'ah* (higher objectives of Islamic law and ethics). This approach, which leans against the works of classical Muslim scholars – such as al-Juwayni, al-Ghazali, Ibn Taymiyyah, and especially al-Shatibi, looks at the intentions and higher objective of Islamic law and argues for favoring ethical universalism over juridical particularism.⁶⁹ Such an approach opens the door to infusing Muslim life and the decisions they make with an ethical outlook, which should always take priority over legalistic particularisms. This position is best summarized by a famous Muslim scholar, Ibn al-Qayyim al-Jawziyyah, who wrote:

Shari'ah is based on wisdom and achieving people's welfare in this life and the afterlife. Shari'ah is all about justice, mercy, wisdom, and good. Thus, any ruling that replaces justice with injustice, mercy with its opposite, common good with mischief, or wisdom with nonsense, is a ruling that does not belong to the Shari'ah, even if it is claimed to be so according to some interpretations.⁷⁰

Emphasizing Islamic ethics, and abiding by it, should be central to Islamic studies curriculum at every level of education in Singapore. The issues identified above could serve as a starting point for developing Islamic thought and knowledge in the country, starting at institutions of higher

⁶⁹ For a good brief overview on *maqasid al-shari'ah* see Mohammad Hashim Kamali, *Principles of Islamic Jurisprudence*, 2nd rev.ed. (Petaling Jaya: Ilmiah Publishers, 2004), 395-409.

⁷⁰ Quoted from Jasser Auda, *Maqasid al-Shari'ah as Philosophy of Islamic Law: A Systems Approach* (Herndon: The International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2008), xxi-xxii. The book is an excellent introduction to the *maqasid* discourse.

learning, and trickling down to Islamic schools, mosques and *suraus*, wider community, families, and individuals.

Conclusion – Three key words: education, participation, cooperation

This paper has argued all along that Muslims in Singapore are integrated citizens in their own society, and that – from a variety of perspectives – they are not, and should not consider themselves, a minority. Investing in the development of an elevated sense of citizenship – consistent with Islamic thought – which would allow Singapore’s Muslims to fulfill their own potential and contribute to the society at large would be a strong step toward further affirming Muslim citizenship and integration in Singapore. In order to do so, they need to focus on three key areas: education, participation, and cooperation. First, Muslims need to study harder and do better in education – at all levels. This starts at home as the parents need to tell their children that the best way out of feeling of hopelessness and discrimination is to educate themselves. Investment in education should be seen as utmost priority in the community. Muslims believe in Just and Fair God, who has endowed all human beings with everything they need in order to succeed both in this life and in the Hereafter. This rootedness in *‘aqidah* (belief) and *tawhid* (oneness of God) should be based on optimism and world-affirmation.⁷¹ Such an approach should preclude negativity, victimhood, and the feeling of helplessness. Next, Singapore’s Muslims need to increase participation in civic and associational life, at all levels. They should take part in governmental and civic forums, ask questions, provide insights and solutions, and overall infuse social and political discourses with an ethical outlook. They should be a *moral*

⁷¹ See Isma’il Raji al-Faruqi, *Al Tawhid: Its Implication for Thought and Life*, 2nd ed. (Herndon: The International Institute of Islamic Thought, 1992), 46-48, and 82-84.

voice in their own society – together with other religious and civic groups – and a check against unbridled consumerism. Muslims of Singapore also need to use this ethically based discourse to underscore that an overemphasis on economic activities and well-being can often lead to moral downfall. Finally, Muslims need to cooperate – individually and collectively – at every single level of associational life with other faith groups in the society. Such cooperation should not only take place at the elite level, but it needs to engage the grassroots in conversation with temples, churches, and other religious groups. Muslims need to be able to transcend narrow communitarianism – which is often imposed on them – and identify important issues and problems that are common for all Singaporeans. By rising above the communitarian approach, and focusing on national dialogue, involvement, and civic citizenship, Singapore’s Muslims would affirm their already strong integration and would serve as a catalyst for greater national cohesion among all of the Republic’s citizens. It is only through cooperation with their fellow citizens that Muslims in Singapore will be able to put their ethical outlook on life to full application.

About the Author



Ermin Sinanović is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science at the United States Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland (USA), where he is also a faculty affiliate with the Center for Middle East and Islamic Studies. In 2011, he became a Faculty Associate in Research with the Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University. Prof. Sinanović studied for an MA and a PhD in Political Science at the Maxwell School of Syracuse University (USA), where he wrote the doctoral dissertation titled, “The Role of Ideas in Contemporary Islamic Revival: The Case of Malaysia.” He obtained two BAs (one in Qur'an and Sunnah Studies, the other in Political Science) from the International Islamic University Malaysia, and an MA in Islamic Civilization from the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC), also in Malaysia. He is currently working on a book on Political Islam and the Arab Uprisings. His research interests include transnational Islamic revival, Southeast Asian politics, Islamic movements, Middle East politics, and Islamic political thought. At the Naval Academy, Prof. Sinanović teaches courses in Southeast Asian politics, Middle East politics, and Islam and Politics. He speaks Bosnian, English, Arabic, and Malay. He resides in Edgewater, Maryland, USA, with his wife and two daughters.