



***A HISTORICAL AND POLITICAL REVIEW OF  
SINGAPORE'S POLICY TOWARDS THE MALAYS AND  
THE MUSLIMS***

**TINJAUAN HISTORIS-POLITIK ATAS KEBIJAKAN  
POLITIK SINGAPURA TERHADAP ORANG MELAYU  
DAN MUSLIM**

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## **Abstract**

*When examining the condition of minorities around the world, several factors must be taken into account, such as history, geopolitics, level of community development, patterns of integration, and the ideological style of the state in its policies. This article examines Singapore's political policies towards the Malays and Muslims as minority groups. The research used the historical method where data collection is done using literature review techniques. The data analysis used a political history approach to examine Singapore's political policies in empowering religious communities in the secular state. The results show that Singapore has a vigilant and pragmatic attitude in making state policies in relation to Malays and Islam. This is due to its diverse demographics, its geopolitics flanked by Malaysia and Indonesia, and its past history of inter-ethnic conflict. In its development, the Singapore government has chosen the path of accommodation in making policies related to Muslims and Malays. Islam is realised as a benchmark for Singapore's domestic and foreign policies.*

**Keywords:** *Political Review, Singapore's Policy, Malays, Muslims, Minorities.*

## **Abstrak**

Dalam melihat kondisi minoritas di seluruh dunia, perlu diperhatikan beberapa faktor seperti sejarah, geopolitik, tingkat perkembangan masyarakat, pola integrasi, dan corak ideologi negara dalam kebijakan-kebijakannya. Artikel jurnal ini mengkaji kebijakan politik Singapura terhadap etnis Melayu dan Muslim sebagai kelompok minoritas. Metode penelitian yang digunakan adalah metode penelitian sejarah dimana pengumpulan data dilakukan dengan menggunakan teknik studi pustaka. Analisis data penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan sejarah politik untuk menganalisis kebijakan politik Singapura dalam memberdayakan komunitas agama di negara sekuler. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa Singapura memiliki sikap waspada dan pragmatis dalam membuat kebijakan negara dalam kaitannya dengan Melayu dan Islam. Hal ini disebabkan oleh kondisi demografi yang beragam, geopolitik yang diapit oleh Malaysia dan Indonesia, serta sejarah konflik antar etnis di masa lalu. Dalam perkembangannya, pemerintah Singapura memilih jalur akomodasi dalam membuat kebijakan terkait Muslim dan Melayu. Islam disadari sebagai tolok ukur kebijakan dalam dan luar negeri Singapura.

**Kata kunci:** *Tinjauan Politik, Kebijakan Singapura, Melayu, Muslim, Minoritas.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

The study of minorities in the context of religious groups around the world can be assessed by the form of political policy in which the minorities are located. These conditions can be analysed in terms of their history, cultural and ethnic identity, geopolitical factors, the level of development and modernisation of the society, the pattern of integration adopted, as well as the ideological style of the state and its government policies (Phillips, 2013; Vieyetz, 2016; Erasiah, Pratama, Seskia, Cajuniati, & Ummah, 2023; Pratama & Jupri, 2023). This paper examines how Singapore's policies towards the Malays and Muslims as minority groups. This research will demonstrate a historical-political overview of how Singapore's policies empower the Malay and Muslim communities.

Based on the results of the September 2023 survey, Singapore's population is about 4,1 million (Statista, 2023), of which about 3.07 million (74,87 %) are ethnic Chinese. The other 1.03 million (25,13 %) people are Malay 561,000 (13,68 %), Indian 374,000 (9,12 %) and other 140,000 (3,41 %) (Statista, 2023). Demographics based on religious affiliation, Buddhists are the majority with 1.07 million (26,09 %), followed by no religion (Agnostic) 692,000 (16,87 %), Islam 539,000 (13,14 %), Christianity (non-Catholic) 411,000 (10,02 %), Taoism 303,000 (7,39 %), Catholicism 242,000 (5,90 %), Hinduism 172,000 (4,19 %), Sikhism 12,000 (0,29 %) and other religions 9,800 (0,23 %) (Statista, 2023). With this composition, it can be said that Muslims or Malays are a minority group in Singapore's demographics. Although not a majority, Muslims remain a part of Singapore's culture where Malays, who make up 99% of the country's Muslim composition, represent Muslims in Singapore's society and government (Aljunied, 2009). Singapore's diverse demographic is a product of its long history as an international trading hub between Europe, the Middle East, Australia and the Far East (Weyland, 1990). So, in the past, Singapore became one of the strategic locations that were useful in spreading information about Da'wah and the development of Islamic treasures in Southeast Asia, both from the time of the Sultanate of Malacca, the Sultanate of Johor to the British colonialism (Pratama, Zain, Erasiah, Oktavia, & Rossa, 2022).

British policies during the colonisation of Singapore in terms of the plurality of society have had a major impact on the strength of Singaporean Muslims, especially the impact on ethnic Malays. The British interest in building Singapore's civilisation and economic progress led them to adopt an 'open door' policy, whereby the British brought in large numbers of workers from China and India. This policy was not accompanied by a policy of integrating ethnic migrants into the mainstream (namely the Malays). As a result of ignoring this issue, "boxes" were created in Singapore's social life. These divisions are based on ethnicity, place of residence, type of work, type of education and religion. Malays tended to live in the village area known as Kampung Melayu and worked as farmers, while ethnic Chinese tended to live in Pecinan (Chinatown) and worked in mining or as entrepreneurs and traders. As well as influencing Singapore's economic development, the impact of 19th-century immigration also affected the political map of Singapore during the colonial period, to the extent that its effects can still be seen in Singapore today. The Muslim Malays, once the majority in Singapore, have been drastically reduced over time to a minority of less than 15%. The political impact is the lack of Malay power in

the colonial political map, weakening the Muslim bargaining position with the government (Helmiati, 2014).

Under British rule, Singapore was incorporated into the Federation of Malaya and became part of Malaysia. Eventually, due to a political dispute between Singapore's People's Action Party (PAP) and Malaysia's Alliance Party (MAP), Singapore left the country and became an independent republic (Helmiati, 2014). Singapore's independence did not mean that Malays or Muslims could take over as a powerful ethnicity as in the past. The overwhelming number of ethnic Chinese and their political and economic power, established since the British colonial era in the 19th century, made them the majority ethnicity, dominant and the holders of Singapore's political power. The Malays have lost out to the Chinese, especially in the economic and educational spheres. When the PAP won the elections in 1959 (before independence), Chinese dominance became unstoppable and the Malays were slowly pushed out of Singapore's political sphere (Rahim, 1998). Like what happen in Malays Peninsula, The Malays became a lower class than the Chinese (Pratama, 2022), and the Malays were also far inferior to Muslims of Indian and Arab ethnicity, who had better jobs and education since the colonial period. So while non-Malay Muslims are a minority compared to the Malays, their position in relation to Singapore's Islam from the colonial period to the beginning of Singapore's independence is quite crucial.

If we discuss Singapore's political policies, Michael Leifer (2000) explains the nature of Singapore's foreign policy, which is heavily influenced by its vulnerable position. This vulnerability is largely due to geopolitical conditions, where Singapore does not have abundant natural resources, as well as the main factor that Singapore is surrounded by the world's largest "Muslim regional giants", Malaysia and Indonesia. There are three main elements in Singapore's domestic policy, namely: 1) national security; 2) economic prosperity; and 3) national identity building (Sadasivan, 2007).

In the early days of independence, Singapore focused first on organising national security. As a result, geopolitical factors have had a strong influence on its national security policy. When it comes to foreign policy, Singapore looks at four aspects: the principles of vulnerability and sovereignty, demography, strategic location and resource base (Riyanto, 2019). Singapore's first and longest-serving prime minister for more than 30 years, Lee Kuan Yew, explained the importance of a foreign policy that can secure his country. For Lee, foreign policy is a matter of life and death for the country. Given the impact

of colonisation on colonised countries in Asia and Africa, which led to long isolation, Singapore must pay attention to the hopes and political aspirations of Asian and African countries. Singapore is also very protective of its trade sector with Asian-African countries, so that during the Cold War, Singapore was a non-aligned country that did not take sides. Because taking sides would only make Singapore an enemy on the other side (Chee, 1969). Singapore's foreign policy also aims to strengthen its economy by building friendships with other countries, and is determined to make its country useful to other countries (reciprocal relations). Singapore aims for the country and its citizens to be good international citizens in the global community (Sadasivan, 2007).

For Singapore, therefore, ethnic issues occupy a central place in the formulation of state policy. Singapore envisions a state with a political ideology of multiracialism that proclaims racial equality and the protection of minority groups from racial discrimination. However, despite state policies aimed at managing and integrating different ethnic groups and religious communities, some scholars argue that institutional racism still exists in Singapore (Velayutham, 2017).

The above statement is certainly more of a concern to the Singapore government, as a once colonised country, plus their small country, they have to consider the aspirations of a diverse local population not to feel oppressed, because if they make a wrong move they can be showered with criticism, bans or other bad possibilities from outside countries. In Asia-Africa itself, the issue of racism, ethnicity and religion is a sensitive one. Coupled with its geopolitical location, flanked by countries with a large Muslim population such as Indonesia and Malaysia, Singapore is very careful in formulating its domestic and foreign policies, especially those relating to the rights and religious freedom of Muslims. This research will demonstrate a historical-political overview of how Singapore's policies empower the Malay and Muslim communities.

## **METHOD**

The study used qualitative research with analytical descriptive reporting. Qualitative research can be used for phenomena related to a region, community/group or individual (Bakri, 2016). The research method that will be used in this research is the historical research method. The historical research method consists of four stages, namely (Gottschalk, 1986, p. 35): 1) heuristics or collection of sources; 2) Source Criticism is an activity aimed at selecting sources

based on their strength; 3) Interpretation or this analysis stage has occurred either at the beginning of the research or during the post-research analysis process; 4) research report writing.

The sources collected are done through literature studies, namely by looking for books, journal articles, documents, research reports and journalistic reports, both online and offline. This research analysis uses a political history approach. The dissection of this topic begins with an explanation of the factors that drive historical power. According to Carl G. Gustavson in *A Preface to History* (1955), there are six forces that drive historical events, namely: economics, religion, institutions/politics, technology, ideology and military. In addition to the six aspects, Kuntowijoyo adds other aspects of history where these aspects are considered to drive the occurrence of an event, historical forces, including: economy, religion, institutions/politics, technology, ideology, military, individuals, gender/sex, age, class, ethnicity and race, myths and culture (Kuntowijoyo, 1995).

Previous research has shown that the dominance of ideology, politics, culture, the majority religion, military power and the charisma of personalities have played an important role in the history of the formation of a country's political policies, whether for the common good, for the majority or to 'regulate' the minority. Such as the strength of Islam in the implementation of Islamic law in Kelantan-Malaysia and Brunei Darussalam (Erasiah, Pratama, Zain, Ardy, & Dalela, 2023; Pratama, Rumaisa, & Aliningsih, 2023), Strong colonial influence - Christian dominated - discriminated against Muslims in the Philippines (Erasiah, Pratama, Seskia, Cajuniati, & Ummah, 2023; Pratama, 2022), the strict policy of the communist countries of Indochina towards the Protestant Christian communities, as they were seen as products of the United States in the post-Cold War era (Pratama, 2022; Erasiah, Pratama, & Hazari, 2022). As stated in the Introduction to Singapore's Political Policies, Singapore's political policies take into account its multicultural geopolitical and demographic conditions.

## DISCUSSION

Singapore was originally part of the Malay homeland before British imperialism. The era of Western colonialism has changed the Malay political power to be weak and began to be eliminated and marginalised in social classes along with demographic changes in the Tumasik area which later became the strategic city of the British colony named Singapore. The arrival of foreign ethnic

groups such as Chinese, Arabs and Indians shifted the socio-political position of Malays and Muslims. Ethnic Chinese, who benefited from the political power and population, managed to take over the political power of the country by eventually seceding from the Federation of Malaysia due to prolonged conflict. The position of Prime Minister, which is always controlled by an ethnic majority, underlines the weak influence of ethnic Malays and Muslims in the country's political arena. As a result, government regulations and policies are secular and tend to be discriminatory.

### **Social Class Among Singaporean Muslims And Its Implications**

Singapore's Muslim civilisation was ruled from the Sultanate of Malacca to Johor, but this political permanence began to erode when the British colonised Singapore and Johor in the 19th century (Helmiati, 2014). The Malays, who were later colonised by the British, experienced political difficulties due to the lack of capable indigenous traditional leaders. This affected their interests in dealing with the British colonial government, which had its own priorities. Muslims are also divided into groups, namely Malay Muslims and immigrant Muslims (Indian Arabs), as well as some Muslims from Bawean, Bugis, Java, Sumatra and Riau - Riau Island immigrants (Abaza, 1997).

Although a Muslim minority, Indian-Arab Muslims are a wealthy and educated group. As the dominant force, Arab Muslims have formed a network of commercial elites since the colonial period, owning land and housing, investing in plantations and trade, and controlling the batik, tobacco and spice trades. These immigrants, mostly men, married local women and created two Peranakan Muslim communities, the Arab-Malay and the Jawi Peranakan (Malabar-Malay Indian), who began to identify with the Malay language and local customs and habits (Abdullah & Siddique, 1988). If the Arab Muslims and their Arab-Malay Peranakans control much of the economic sector, the Jawi Peranakan Muslim group is seen as the traditional Malay leaders who are also credited with preserving the Malay language and nationalism. Javanese Peranakan Muslims work as da'i, translators, madrasa teachers and traders. It is they, especially the Arab migrants, who are the main financiers of the construction of mosques, educational institutions and Islamic organisations (Lapidus, 1991).

This suggests that the impact of colonial immigration has created social classes in the Muslim community, as measured by educational and economic indicators, with Arab & Arab-Malay Muslims, Indian & Jawi Peranakan Muslims and Malay Muslims in the strongest order. This is certainly lower if the position

of Singapore's ethnic Chinese is taken into account. It is concluded that the Malays are the ethnicity with the lowest position in Singapore's national scope.

### **Lee Kuan Yew's Political Views On Malay & Muslims**

Singapore gained its independence as a secular state. Secular states have been 'pigeonholed' as states that separate religion from the state. Religion is seen as an apolitical concept, seen in terms of the political legitimacy of the nation state (Cesari, 2021). In general practice, the political surface of secular states does indeed look similar. Particularly in Western countries where secularism is popular, as the birthplace of this ideology, which emerged from the conflict between Christian groups and political authorities controlled by religious leaders, secularism was used as a tool to control religion for political survival. Therefore, at the birth of secularism, Islam and Judaism were seen as political threats to the survival of secularism (Salaymeh, 2021).

However, it is important to remember that the historical process of ideology and policy formation varies from country to country. When examining the state's commitment to the ideology of secularism in each state's policy, it must be remembered that there will never be a single model of the same application of the same model or idea. Therefore, the practice of secularism in one country cannot be universally 'generalised'. The recognition of secularism in each country has a different process (Cooke, 2021).

In terms of strengthening pluralism in a secular state, Neo (2020) explains that this commitment requires a regulated space in which the law plays a critical expressive role in defining appropriate behaviour and reshaping existing social norms. Particularly in the law of religious harmony, there will be no perfect laws and policies to address social problems, and no single solution that fits all problems. What is needed, therefore, is a legal-political policy that can serve and integrate between a group and the vision and mission of the state.

Singapore itself has a presidential-parliamentary system of government. Where the President, as Head of State, is empowered to run the executive system, while matters of government are the responsibility of the Prime Minister, assisted by his Cabinet. The President of Singapore has been directly elected by universal suffrage since 1991, whereas previously the President was elected by Parliament. In organising the country's power at the beginning of its independence, Singapore was able to grow quickly due to the good performance

of its Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew, who served for 31 years. Although Singapore's cabinet includes ministers for Home Affairs and Foreign Affairs, Singapore's political policy is essentially shaped by the Prime Minister.

Lee Kuan Yew is known for his pragmatic approach to politics. He is also very considerate when it comes to profit and loss (Klingler-Vidra, 2012). This includes his view of Islam, where in the early days of his leadership Lee saw Islam as represented by ethnic Malays as negative. This stems from Lee Kuan Yew's doubts when Singapore joined the Malaysian Federation that Singapore could not live peacefully in the Malaysian Federation and feared that it would be treated unfairly (Riyanto, 2019). This can be attributed to the fact that the Singapore region has a stronger ethnic Chinese base than other regions of the Malaysian Federation on the peninsula. Lee's experience in leading Singapore since it was still part of the Malay-Islamic-dominated Malaysian Federation led him to make Malay, especially Islam, an important variable in Singapore's policy making, especially with a political approach of accommodation.

There are incidents of political unrest that Lee Kuan Yew could use as a benchmark in running Singapore's government. Pre-independence Singapore was hit by racial riots in 1964, where these riots involved Malay-Islamic and ethnic Chinese. The chronology begins in 1963 with the general election in the Federation of Malaysia, where the PAP, led by ethnic Chinese, won a landslide victory in the Singapore region over UMNO Singapore, which failed to win a single seat. UMNO Federation of Malaysia split in response to the PAP victory in Singapore. Tunku Abdul Rahman as the former chairman of the Federation of Malaysia 1955-1957 and UMNO officials in Malaysia guaranteed security and the UMNO-led Barisan Nasional would not interfere in the political sphere of the Singapore region. On the other hand, UMNO secretary-general Syed Ja'far Albar did not agree with Tunku Abdul Rahman's compromising nature. He then launched a campaign to change minds through the *Utusan Melayu* newspaper and held a meeting in Pasir Panjang. In this forum, the UMNO secretary accused Lee Kuan Yew of oppressing Singaporean Malays and called on Singaporean Malays to boycott the PAP. On 21 July 1964, just as the Prophet's birthday was being celebrated, riots broke out between the Chinese-Malay ethnic groups in Singapore. The riots took place in the Padang area, around Kalang Road and Kampong Soo Poo. The riots resulted in 4 deaths and 178 injuries. Riots continued in September over the mystery surrounding the murder of a Malay Muslim trishaw driver. Riots broke out in the Geylang Serai area on 2

September. As a result of the riots, 23 people were killed, 454 injured, more than 3,000 arrested and hundreds charged (Han, 2014).

The Malay-Chinese riots of the 1960s created negative feelings among ethnic Chinese towards ethnic Malays. Malaysia also experienced ethnic riots in 1969 involving Malay-Chinese-Indians. Although the root cause of the riots was different - in Singapore it was more political, in Malaysia it was due to economic inequality - both cases of ethnic unrest in the Federation involved two major ethnic groups, the Malays and the Chinese. Ethnic Chinese see the Malays, who felt dominant during the Federation, as arrogant and violent, especially since riots are always caused by competition between the two ethnic groups, especially over political issues. Lee Kuan Yew saw that Malay, or more specifically Islam, could be an obstacle to Singapore's national integration. This is because ethnic Indians and Chinese, rather than Malays or Muslims, can be more easily mixed in the process of national integration, as well as in terms of friendship and mixed marriages. Muslims, on the other hand, tend to find it difficult to follow this process of development (Bolt, 2011). Given the history of ethnic conflict, the Singapore government has also generalised to conflate Malay and Islam as a Muslim identity in Singapore, even though there are many other ethnicities that are also Muslim. This conflation has led to an assumption of Muslim homogeneity in Singapore (Kadir, 2004).

In addition to historical factors and his country's internal racial conflicts, Lee Kuan Yew also saw geopolitical factors as a consideration in shaping policy towards Malays and Muslims in Singapore. As at the beginning of its independence, the Singapore government must make room for the stationing of Malaysian troops in Singapore around the Tanah Melayu Railway (KTM) (Soon, 1969). Relations between Indonesia and Singapore have been fractured since Singapore joined Malaysia. The Ganyang Malaysia policy has drawn Singapore into the maelstrom of conflict between the two countries. Recognising the importance of relations with Indonesia, Lee Kuan Yew has sought to improve ties through bilateral cooperation since the time of President Soeharto (Riyanto, 2019).

Singapore's geographical location, flanked by "two Southeast Asian Malay and Muslim giants", Malaysia and Indonesia, cannot be underestimated in terms of its image as a plural and multicultural country. In addition to internal pressures, namely the aspirations and political and historical narratives of the country's ethnic Malays and Muslims, external political pressures certainly come from Indonesia and Malaysia, which act as "watchdogs" of Singapore's

religious policies in guaranteeing the rights of ethnic Malays and Muslims as a minority and indigenous population.

## **Singapore's Constitution On A Plural Society**

We begin this discussion with the question, "How does Singapore integrate minorities into the majority? The answer can be found in the meritocratic system that operates in Singapore. The application of meritocracy, a system taht based on the assumption that those with innate talent and proven ability will become the elite has been the guiding principle of the leaders of the People's Action Party (PAP), which has ruled Singapore since 1959. The PAP's success as the longest ruling elected political party in Singapore is due to its meritocratic system, lack of corruption and effective policies (Bellows, 2009). Singapore's meritocracy is supposed to allow socio-economic mobility through hard work and ability, regardless of ethnic differences. In reality, however, as the younger generation of Singaporeans recognise, there are still systemic inequalities and discrimination in the education system (Talib & Fitzgerald, 2015). This is often normalised as a function of a multiracial society (Teo, 2019). Indeed, the main sites for the production of meritocratic ideology in Singapore are the universities (Harney, 2020). Since 1970, Singapore's meritocratic and multiracial system has moved away from inter-racial tolerance to a programme of assimilation of racial minorities into a Chinese-dominated society (Barr & Low, 2005).

The events described above have made Islam a variable that Singapore must take into account in order to maintain good national integrity and good international relations in the Southeast Asian region, especially with Indonesia and Malaysia. It is not uncommon for Singapore to be criticised by the government and citizens of Indonesia and Malaysia if there is discriminatory treatment by the majority group or if Singapore's policies are perceived to be detrimental to Singaporean Muslims. Singapore will choose to accommodate Muslim interests.

So as Singapore develops, it certainly does not want to be trapped in a meritocratic system that might provoke "protests" from its neighbours. The Singapore government has drafted a constitution that guarantees no discrimination against any group or race. Singapore's constitution emphasises that although ethnic Chinese appear to be the majority ethnicity, the existence of all ethnicities is basically equal before the law. As stated in Article 12(1), (2) and (3) of the Constitution of the Republic of Singapore 1965, that: all persons are entitled to equal protection of the law; there shall be no discrimination on

grounds of religion, race, descent or place of birth in matters relating to the acquisition, possession or disposal of property or the establishment or practice of any trade, business, profession, vocation or occupation (Constitution of the Republic of Singapore, Article 12, 1963). In addition, the Singapore Government also provides for the freedom to adopt and practise any religion without any privilege to any religion. As stated in Article 15(1), (2), (3) and (4) of the Constitution of the Republic of Singapore 1965 (Constitution of the Republic of Singapore, Article 15, 1963).

Although only a quarter of the total population, Malay Muslims have a prominent place in the country's constitution and special recognition as indigenous Singaporeans (Mutalib, 2005). So that the Singapore government poured this appreciation and made an article entitled "Minority and Special Position of the Malay People" in Article 152, which indicates that the Singapore government is very serious about the issue of national integrity, especially in relation to Malay as the representative of Muslims in Singapore, both culturally and historically. The granting of special rights to Muslims and Malays certainly gives a new colour to the concept of secularism adopted by many countries. Secularism, which separates religious colours in government and socio-political policies, is actually "modified" by Singapore by providing a special constitution for Malays and Muslims (Osman, 2018). Article 152 of the Constitution of the Republic of Singapore states that it is the duty of the government to look after the interests of the racial and religious minorities in Singapore. In particular, the government guarantees the Malays a special position as an indigenous people. This ensures their self-protection, development and active participation in the political, educational, religious, economic, social, cultural and Malay language fields (Constitution of the Republic of Singapore, Article 152, 1963).

### **The Progress Of The Implementation Of The Singapore Constitution With Regard To Muslims**

Although the Singapore government has included a special Malay language constitution as a representation of Muslims and indigenous Singaporeans, but still as a secular state, the governance of Muslims in Singapore is strongly shaped or dictated by the government through the policies made by Islamic institutions such as the Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura (MUIS), as well as the strict enforcement of the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act (MRHA), the Sedition Act and the Internal Security Act (Rahim, 2012).

The Singapore government does not have a special allocation or treatment of any religious group with fixed financial support. Support or grants for religious activities still exist, but are not the main agenda of the government. Religious groups in Singapore seek other funding from intra-religious communities in the country. The allocation of foreign funds for religious purposes has been banned since 1 November 2019. This is to curb the spread of foreign ideologies that could undermine the fabric of the country and religious life in Singapore (2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Singapore, 2022).

So although there's a special constitution for Malays and Muslims, the secular policies of the Singapore government also make it difficult for the social development and da'wah of Muslims. Then there is the issue of Islamic extremism and terrorism, which has global implication (Zulkifli, Hasyim, Mubarak, Khitam, & Helmi, 2023). This can be seen in the restrictions on the hijab, the adhan and the issue of radical Islamic teachings. On the one hand, Singapore provides religious space for its people, such as Muslims, but on the other hand, it also restricts the development of religious activities of its people.

### **Administration of Muslim Law Act (AMLA) - Muslim Union of Singapore (MUIS)**

The previous three articles can be seen as an indicator of Singapore's seriousness in strengthening its plural society, especially in promoting and respecting the Malays as Singapore's indigenous population. A year after Singapore's separation from the Malaysian Federation, Singaporean Muslims successfully lobbied the government to pass an Islamic Personal and Family Law Act. The success was achieved through the sincere efforts of representatives, both individuals and Muslim organisations, who worked for many years up to 1966. Before the Bill was passed, Singaporean Muslims from various ethnic groups and sects were given the opportunity to make representations and were asked to appear before the Parliamentary Select Committee to give their views on the Bill (Hashim, 1993).

In August 1966, the Singapore Parliament passed the Administration of Muslim Law Act (AMLA). The AMLA is the promulgation of Islamic law. However, this administration is not Islamic law per se. The Act provides flexible space for Islamic Religious Councils, Religious Courts and Islamic Marriage Registrars to implement Sharia law. The AMLA itself was the genesis of the Muslim Union of Singapore (MUIS) in 1968, a statutory body that advises

the President of Singapore on matters relating to Islam. The MUIS, which was established under the provisions of the AMLA, is empowered, among other things, to regulate the administration of Islamic law in Singapore, such as administrative functions dealing with issues of zakat, waqf, hajj and halal certification; the organisation of religious schools; the management of mosques and their use as places for da'wah and other Muslim community activities; and the provision of scholarships for Muslim students. The Majlis Ugama is also authorised to issue fatwas (MUIS: Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura, 2023).

In terms of mosque management, prior to 1968, mosques were built by local Muslim communities. When the Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura (MUIS) was established, it took over the responsibility of building and management. Mosques have also extended their reach beyond the Muslim community. In addition to national institutions such as community-based organisations and government agencies, mosques also liaise with other partners such as Malay/Muslim Organisations (MMOs), Volunteer Welfare Organisations (VWOs), schools and other religious organisations such as churches and temples (MUIS: Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura, 2023).

In order to meet the diverse needs of the Muslim community while ensuring the safety of mosque worshippers, MUIS has introduced two programmes viz: Mosque Building Programme (MBP) and Mosque Upgrading Programme (MUP) - both funded by the MBMF (Mosque Building and Climbing Fund). The Mosque Upgrading Programme (MUP) was launched in 2009 to rejuvenate and refresh mosques, expand prayer areas and provide barrier-free facilities for worshippers. Until 2023, 24 mosques have been upgraded through the MUP with partial funding from the MBMF (MUIS: Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura, 2023).

Until 2023 according to MUIS, mosques in Singapore can be divided into 4 types based on the use and funding of the place of worship, namely 1) Waqaf (29 mosques); 2) Leasehold (8 mosques); 3) TOL/Temporary Occupation Licence (9 mosques); 4) MBMF/Mosque Building and Climbing Fund (24 mosques) (MUIS: Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura, 2023). By 2014, 70 mosques had been built in Singapore, according to Helmiati (2014). Then, based on the latest MUIS data in 2023, there are already 70 mosques in Singapore, including: 16 mosques in the Northern District, 18 mosques in the Eastern District, 16 mosques in the Western District, and 20 mosques in the Southern District. This indicates that there has been no increase in the number of mosques in Singapore since 2014.

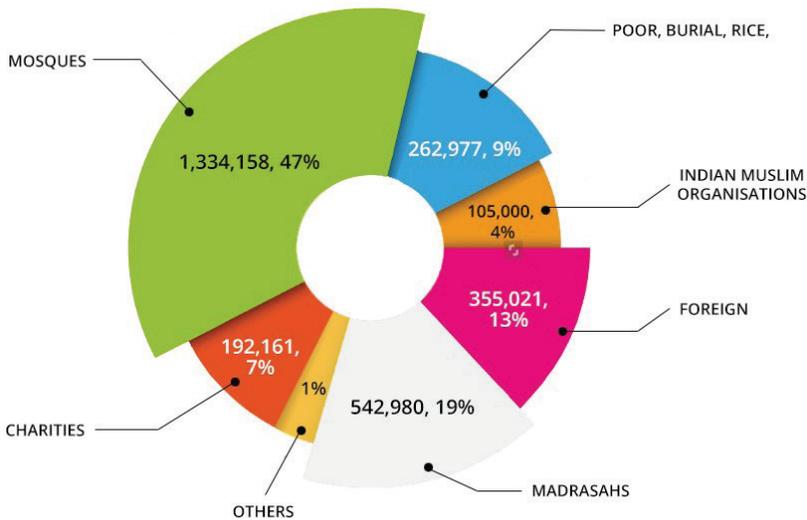
## **Muslim Community Development**

In the context of efforts to develop Islam in the community, one of the problems faced by Singaporean Muslims is the government's New Strait Settlement policy. The arrival of massive foreign immigration and the pattern of British colonisation have divided Singaporean society into separate boxes based on ethnicity and religion. In addition, the spatial problem of contemporary Singapore is the inadequate need for housing, the government built public housing (in the form of flats / apartments) and required all people, including Muslims, to live in the housing provided. Muslim Malays soon moved from their traditional villages of one ethnicity and religion to modern multi-ethnic and multi-religious housing.

This has had a major impact on Malay Muslims in particular, especially in the practice, maintenance and preservation of their culture and religious teachings. The minority position of Muslims in the country, as well as in government-provided housing, does not encourage religious associations as it once did. Those who used to live in a Muslim community and were accustomed to practising their religion together, helping each other and strengthening their friendship, are now scattered and divided from the community that was naturally formed in the past (Helmiati, 2014).

Thus, rather than the government dominating or being directly involved in religious issues, the government has allowed the formation of the MUIS (Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura) to accommodate the expression and reconstruction of the identity of Singaporean Muslims. MUIS advises the government on issues affecting the Muslim community, produces government-approved weekly sermons used in mosques across the country, regulates some Islamic religious matters and oversees the Mosque Building Fund, which is funded by voluntary payroll deductions (MUIS: Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura, 2023). MUIS' largest operating income comes from Waqf. This Waqf allocation is used for the development of Muslims (not just Malays) in Singapore in all spheres (Figure 1).

**Figure 1.**  
*Waqf Disbursement in Singapore by MUIS*



*Source: (MUIS: Majelis Ugama Islam Singapura, 2023)*

## The Dynamics Of The Development of Muslim education

Talking about education, education is an important aspect in shaping quality individuals or communities, especially to realise good Human Resources (HR), especially in the developed country of Singapore. Singaporean Muslims, who are ethnic Malays, were still lagging behind economically and educationally in the early era of independence until 1980. In 1980, it was recorded that only 679 Malays had a university degree. So there is less Malay echo and gait in the benches of the state economy and government. Students studied in old buildings with limited facilities and less competent teachers. In secular schools, Islamic education is taught for only 35-45 minutes a week (Helmiati, 2014).

Recognising the weaknesses and shortcomings in the field of Islamic education, a Majelis Pendidikan Anak-Anak Islam or Islamic Children's Education Council (MENDAKI) was established in August 1981. The main agenda of MENDAKI is to reform the Islamic education system by organising an education that combines science and Islamic education, so that the output is expected to be students who receive Islamic religious education while having general knowledge and life skills to secure their future. A year later, Singapore's Ministry of Education made religious education compulsory for Muslim secondary school students in government schools (Helmiati, 2014).

As a private institution, Islamic religious education in Singapore does not suffer from financial difficulties. A steady stream of financial support has been provided since 1981 through a tripartite investment between the madrasa, the community and the government. The madrasas raise funds through tuition fees and fundraising. The community contributes through Zakat and Waqf, Madrasah Funds and MBMF. The government supports and supplements this through Edusave contributions for all madrasa students, national exam fee waivers, and support for teacher development in secular subjects (MUIS: Majelis Ugama Islam Singapura, 2023).

The positive impact of this programme was felt by Muslims, especially Malays. In the twenty years between 1970 and 1990, says Sharon Siddique, there were dramatic changes for Singapore's Malay Muslims. For example, there has been an increase in education: from 36.4% to 47.3% at the junior secondary level; from 1.0% to 3.5% at the senior secondary level; and from 0.2% to 1.4% at the tertiary level. In terms of occupation, it is interesting to note the decline in agriculture (from 5.3% to 0.3%), sales and services (from 27% to 14%) and the sharp increase in production (from 43% to 57%). There has also been a shift in the ability of ethnic Malay skills to keep up with high-tech developments. Higher wages are only possible with higher levels of skills and productivity. Average monthly family income is S\$2,246 (Siddique, 1995).

In general, despite the decline of formal Islamic education in Singapore, the general interest in non-formal Islamic education has increased. This is because many parents send their children to government or secular schools to equip them with science and technology, and to equip them with religious knowledge through non-formal education. Non-formal education can take place in mosques. Apart from being a place of ritual worship, mosques are also places of religious learning, development of Islamic propagation and meeting places. For example, the Grand Mosque, which accommodates up to 2,000 congregants and is located in the city centre of Singapore, organises kindergarten education, courses for primary and secondary students, religious classes, family counselling, leadership and community development classes, and Arabic language classes (Helmiati, 2014).

MUIS's pioneering programme is the establishment of full-time madrasas. The aim of this programme is to create a generation of Singaporean Muslims who are not only strong in religious knowledge, but also in the general sciences. The Singapore government has provided MUIS with a grant of \$1.5 million to run the programme. This grant is not for the purpose of religious education,

to avoid questions of government 'favouring' a religious group in a secular country. The grant is for strengthening secular studies in full-time madrassas. MUIS also organises grants for the strengthening of religious studies, so that the strengthening of the two sciences can be balanced. The MUIS Government Assistance Grant consists of 3 schemes, namely: 1) Madrasah Student Awards (MSA); 2) Financial Incentives for the Madrasah teachers (FI); and 3) Teachers Training Support Grant (TTSG).

By 2023, more than 90% of MUIS madrasah teachers will have achieved basic teaching certification, while 59 teachers and principals will have participated in middle management and leadership capacity building programmes. At the same time, 98.5% of madrasa students will have achieved a PSLE pass rate above the national benchmark (MUIS: Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura, 2023). On the basis of these data, it can be concluded that the management of the religious non-formal education system administered by the MUIS has developed well. Both in terms of the welfare and career progression of teachers, and in terms of the intellectual competence of madrasa students in the field of religion or in general to compete at the national level.

### **Adhan & Hijab: Restriction Or Prohibition?**

Another problem with the development of Islam in a non-Muslim majority country like Singapore is the relative lack of understanding and favourable government policies on the implementation of Islamic teachings. This can be seen, for example, in the prohibition of loudspeaker calls to prayer and the wearing of headscarves by Muslim students in government schools.

The Singapore government has banned the use of loudspeakers to call for prayer. The ban was issued on 14 July 2010. Singapore's Muslims, who are a minority or about 15 per cent of the population, will have to comply with the order issued by Minister Goh Cok Tong. This is out of respect for the majority population. This ban is a result of the ban imposed by the United States after the WTC 9/11 tragedy in 2001. The reasons of security and tolerance of the majority were propagated by the Prime Minister of Singapore, hence the ban. MUIS cannot do much about the loss of the Adhan in the mosques. Of the 69 mosques in Singapore, only one is allowed to use a loudspeaker, the Sultan Mosque in the Arab Street area, where the loudspeaker can be heard from a distance (Setiyadi, 2022).

If you look at Singapore's policy steps, this is a tricky policy that can invite different perceptions. In fact, if you look at it, this ban does not violate Articles

12 and 15 of the Singapore Constitution. Where Singapore does not ban the adhan altogether, the adhan is still allowed, but with restrictions, namely that no loudspeakers may be used. A policy that is quite controversial for Muslims, but on the other hand, this policy does not violate the Singapore Constitution as it does not prohibit the practice of worship of a religious ummah as a whole.

On the headscarf issue, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, son of former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, told Muslims at the opening of the new school year: "*Hijab is not part of the school uniform and is effectively banned in educational institutions*". In an interview with the Malaysian newspaper Berita Harian, Lee Kuan Yew's son reiterated that the issue of hijab in schools was a matter of social integration. Allowing Muslim women to wear the headscarf in schools would undermine national integration as it would create problems among other students, leading to divisions, resentment of non-Muslim students and lack of interaction between students of different religions. The same ban is also imposed on Muslim employees working in government institutions.

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's hijab ban has drawn widespread criticism, particularly from Singaporean women's activists and Singapore's current president since 2017, ethnic Malay woman Halimah Yacob. Halimah criticised the policy on her Facebook page, "*People should be judged only on their merit and ability to do a job and nothing else*". The activists want freedom of choice for women and an end to discriminatory measures against women who want to work. Filzah, from the group Beyond the Hijab, said the restrictions could make it harder for women to enter the workforce (Soraya & Nashrullah, 2020).

The headscarf issue is now beginning to see a ray of hope in the form of a solution to the wearing of headscarves in uniformed professions, such as the health service. In August 2021, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong will allow Muslim workers to wear the hijab. Lee said "*We must be prepared to make such changes to nurses, because people's attitudes have changed, in social and work environments, hijab is common*" (Nurhadi, 2021). Following the enactment of the Ordinance, the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore issued Guidelines on the Use of Hijab for Nurses. The guidelines regulate several provisions related to the use of the hijab. In the guidelines, MUIS does not specify the length or design of the hijab that nurses can wear. However, they do allow hijab-wearing nurses to comply with hospital regulations by wearing short-sleeved uniforms. Like doctors, nurses must wear short-sleeved clothing. This requirement was made in light of the risk of infection and the need to ensure the safety of healthcare staff and patients.

These guidelines were issued before Muslim nurses were allowed to wear the hijab from 1 November. This too is optional, not mandatory. Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong announced the policy change in his National Day speech on 29 August. The policy was enacted after years of community consultation and consensus-building. The uniform policy for other services, such as the police and armed forces, remains unchanged. Lee said these two areas were tools of the state that should not favour any particular religion (Baiquni, 2021).

Based on the form of policy as a secular state towards religious people, it is concluded that Singapore will play the political practice of 'flexibility of secularism' (Musa, 2023). On the other hand, Singapore will use the power of government authority in determining the boundaries between religion, politics and the state. The government can be lenient, for example by providing grants to MUIS to run Muslim empowerment programmes in Singapore. On the other hand, the government can also adopt 'hardline' policies, such as banning outside religious grants, banning outside preachers, banning the hijab, regulating the volume of the call to prayer, and so on, under the pretext of maintaining the balance of plurality in Singapore.

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong described its policy as a 'neutral and secular' approach to accommodation. The Singapore government says it recognises and respects the range of legitimate views and aspirations of Singaporeans, and balances them fairly to achieve political accommodation (PM Lee Hsien Loong, 2022). Although in power, Muslim groups, who now have the figure of President Halimah Yacob, have the opportunity to criticise and politically negotiate these controversial policies, especially on matters of worship such as the hijab and the adhan.

As a Muslim minority, Singaporean Muslims face a choice when dealing with the Singapore government or the majority population. The obvious choices for the minority community are to adopt an assimilationist stance, to cooperate favourably and fight to maintain their specific identity, or to break away from the national bond. The experience of a number of countries shows that there is a strong desire for minority groups with specific identities to break away from the bonds of nationality (Voll, 1997). But the experience of Singaporean Muslims has been one of assimilation and cooperation within the Singaporean national bond, while maintaining their own cultural identity, Islam and Malay culture.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the research on the evolution of Singapore's policy towards the Malay and Muslim communities, there are several recommendations for Indonesian religious policy makers as a form of reflection on Singapore's policy towards Malays and Muslims, including 1) The need to study the history and changes in the social dynamics of the society (whether ethnic or religious) in a region in order to know when making religious policies that are considered non-discriminatory; 2) Fair and equitable religious policies can be implemented by equalising the level of quality and awareness of education regarding the importance of tolerance in a multicultural society. and fairness in the economy, so as not to increase the feeling that the majority is favoured; 3) Inclusive policies and legal protection. The government must adopt policies that allow people to freely follow their religion and worship without fear of religious rights being violated; 4) Improving the quality of tolerance and respect for differences through religious dialogue. Seeking peace in differences, solutions in conflicts; 5) Joint evaluation of the government and society in promoting tolerance, or in the Indonesian government through the "Religious Moderation" programme. These recommendations will be successful if they are implemented with the active participation of all relevant parties, from the government to the community.

## CLOSING

In the context of Malay and Islam, it appears that Singapore has a cautious and pragmatic attitude in formulating state policies related to Malay and Islam. Singapore's cautious nature can be seen in its small geography with a multicultural society, as well as Singapore's geopolitical position flanked by two Muslim-majority countries such as Indonesia and Malaysia. Singapore's historical factors also make it quite sensitive in determining the flow of political policy on multicultural issues, especially Malay and Islam. The bitter history of the Malayan Peninsula conflict between Singapore and Malaysia when they were members of a federation had a major impact on the political policies of Lee Kuan Yew and subsequent Singaporean leaders, especially in balancing the majority ethnic Chinese and the Malays who were a minority but had indigenous status. In response, Singapore's development has taken the path of accommodation, both through a special constitution that privileges the history and position of the Malays, and through accommodation with representatives of Singapore's Muslim community in the application of Muslim religious social rules in this

country. although there is accommodation in this case, there are still limits that Muslims must observe within the framework of a secular state. Islam is recognised as a benchmark for Singapore's domestic and foreign policy.

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