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## REMODELLING MERITOCRACY FOR INCLUSIVITY

Towards a Merit-Based Singapore –  
Beyond Narrow Meritocracy



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JULY 2023

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# FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

Singapore has been internationally hailed for its commitment to meritocracy, a system that values and rewards individuals based on their abilities, skills, and accomplishments. However, in the ever-evolving landscape of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is imperative that we critically examine our existing model of meritocracy and explore avenues for improvement.

Singapore's journey towards becoming a meritocratic society has been remarkable. Our success story is grounded in the ability to harness the talents of our people, irrespective of their backgrounds, and provide them with equal opportunities for growth and advancement. This ethos has been pivotal in fostering social cohesion, economic progress, and national development. However, as we navigate the complexities of an increasingly interconnected and diverse world, it is crucial that we pause and reflect on whether our current system adequately meets the challenges and aspirations of our society.

Remodelling Singapore's meritocracy requires us to examine several dimensions. We must consider the systemic biases that can inadvertently limit opportunities for certain individuals or communities, and identify strategies to level the playing field. We need to address the growing concerns of social mobility, ensuring that individuals from all backgrounds have fair access to education, employment, and advancement.

In his article on *Page 10*, veteran community activist, Mohammad Alami Musa calls for us to collectively reevaluate, reimagine, and refine our meritocratic principles. He opined that we should strive to cultivate a broader definition of merit that encompasses a wider range of talents, skills, and contributions, beyond academic achievements alone. Only through rigorous introspection, dialogue, and collaboration can we aspire to foster a meritocratic society that is not only resilient and prosperous, but also compassionate and inclusive.

I sincerely hope that this issue encourages you to question prevailing assumptions, and actively participate in the ongoing discourse on remodelling Singapore's meritocracy. Together, let us forge a future where the principles of fairness, opportunity, and excellence are upheld, empowering every individual to contribute their best to our nation.

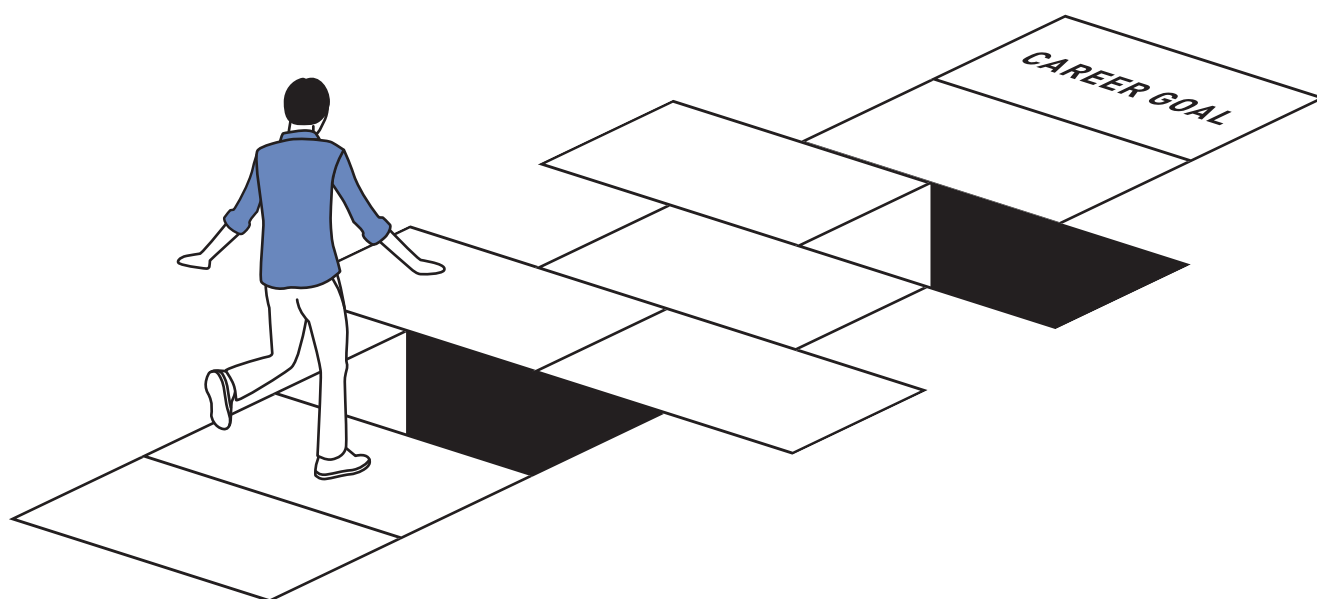


A stylized, handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of several overlapping, sweeping lines that form the initials 'BN'.

**DR MD BADRUN NAFIS SAION**  
SUPERVISING EDITOR

# Career Planning as a Valued Foresight for the Malay Community

BY DR SHAMSURI JUHARI



According to the 2015 General Household Survey, Malay workers comprise less than 10 percent of PMETs (professionals, managers, executives and technicians) in Singapore. This is a significant underrepresentation compared with all other ethnicities<sup>1</sup>. Conversely, Malay workers are overrepresented in vocations that expose them to greater unemployment risks. For instance, the survey noted that proportionally, there are more Malays working in rank-and-file

roles in the sales and services sectors, one of the areas most affected by the COVID-19 outbreak. Similarly, while information on unemployment rates of ethnic groups is yet to be made public, data on “own account workers” indicate that the number of Malays in this category has been increasing over the years<sup>2</sup>. “Own account workers” operate small self-owned businesses without employing paid workers in conducting their trade. These operators tend to be

older or less educated, undertaking jobs such as taxi drivers, small-scale proprietors, insurance sales agents, real estate brokers, as well as platform workers such as private hire car drivers and food delivery riders. Unfortunately, these are workers whose livelihoods have also been the most affected by the pandemic.

Data from SkillsFuture Singapore also tell us that Malay workers are not making full use of upgrading opportunities

<sup>1</sup> Department of Statistics Singapore. *General Household Survey 2015: Table 21 Resident Population Aged 15 Years and Over by Highest Qualification Attained, Marital Status, Sex and Ethnic Group*. 2015. Available at: <https://www.singstat.gov.sg/-/media/files/publications/ghs/ghs2015/ghs2015.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Abou Kassim, A. S. *Advancing entrepreneurship: The role of Malay/Muslim institutions*. Centre for Research on Islamic and Malay Affairs (RIMA). 2016, June 30. Available at: <https://rima.sg/advancing-entrepreneurship-the-role-of-malaymuslim-institutions/>

available to them. For instance, only 8.4 percent of Malay workers have enrolled in skills upgrading programmes through the SkillsFuture Credit scheme since its launch in 2015<sup>3</sup>. As for Malay women in the workforce, 50.4 percent of “married” or “ever married” Malay women are economically inactive<sup>4</sup>. This is again an overrepresentation when compared with women of the same category from the other ethnic groups and represent a potential untapped labour pool. Thus, addressing the issues keeping them out of work may relieve much of our manpower needs.

What is significant to the manpower issue is that ethnic Malays, while a minority group, make up the youngest demographic cluster in the country. Based on the 2020 census, the median age of Malays was 34.5 years, compared with the national median age of 42.2 years; and 18.9 percent of Malays were below the age of 15, compared with 14.5 percent at the national level<sup>5</sup>. This implies that proportionately, more young Malays will reach their working ages and enter the labour market in the coming years compared to an already falling share from the other ethnic groups. There is thus potential for young Malays to be a significant contributor to the country’s economic production in the post-pandemic period. To realise this objective, Malay youths must be made to overcome personal challenges and be guided to maximise their value to the nation by the time they enter the job market.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

There is little literature on how socio-cultural influences impact career-related choices of members of an ethnic group. Nevertheless, findings from related studies at the international level can be instructive. For instance, Constant *et. al.* studied labour market integration of ethnic minorities in various countries and suggested improvements in employment processes that can result in greater labour market integration<sup>6</sup>. They explained that aside from structural barriers such as access to education, attitudes shown by the dominant public

may also act as a strong negative force preventing labour market integration of ethnic minorities. At the same time, negative factors that are experienced by a society’s minority community have also led to its own members lacking the self-confidence to apply for certain jobs. Cumulatively, such socio-cultural factors impede a minority group’s capacity to fully participate in the labour market at the national level. Similarly, Thorat *et. al.* presented findings and centred their discussion on economically irrational phenomena impacting workers from minority groups in the modern Indian economy<sup>7</sup>. These include findings on the cognitive processes reflecting in-group preferences. The Indian case study, while unique to the country due to the existence of the caste system, nevertheless suggests that decision makers who are both workers and business owners do possess the tendency to make economically irrational decisions. The study suggests that understanding the cognitive processes that underlie such decision-making outcomes can lead to findings that may result in more effective social, political and economic policymaking solutions.

With the understanding that such factors may also apply in Singapore society, this article will provide an overview of a key finding from a recent Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) study focusing on workers from Singapore’s Malay community, specifically the finding relating to their attitude and approach to career planning.

## METHODOLOGY

The IPS research focused on the socio-cultural dynamics that serve to motivate or inhibit Singaporean Malay workers from actively seeking pathways to enhance their careers. Data was collected from in-depth, face-to-face interviews; focus group discussions; and a survey of 1,000 respondents. According to the data, respondents’ notions of and approach to career planning varied according to their social network and life experiences. Educational and economic background also played an important role in determining when

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<sup>3</sup> Samsudin, N. *Report on the Closed-Door Discussion on the Use of SkillsFuture and Employability of the Malay-Muslim Community*. Institute of Policy Studies, NUS. 2018.

<sup>4</sup> Aboe Kassim, A. S. *Advancing entrepreneurship: The role of Malay/Muslim institutions*. Centre for Research on Islamic and Malay Affairs (RIMA). 2016, June 30. Available at: <https://rima.sg/advancing-entrepreneurship-the-role-of-malaymuslim-institutions/>

<sup>5</sup> Singstat. *Population Trends 2020*. 2020. Available at: <https://www.singstat.gov.sg/-/media/files/publications/population/population2020.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Constant, A. F., Kahanec, M., and Zimmermann, K. F. *Attitudes towards immigrants, other integration barriers, and their veracity*. *International Journal of Manpower*, 30(1), 2009. pp. 5-14

<sup>7</sup> Thorat, S., Attewell, P., and Rizvi, F. F. *Urban Labour Market Discrimination*. Indian Institute of Dalit Studies, New Delhi. 2009

While respondents felt they had been reactive to relevant job offers, they were often puzzled when rejected by companies. This tells us that these aspiring Malay workers need to understand the range of deciding factors potential employers look for. They may have to be more forward-looking and proactive than their current reactive or retroactive approach to job searches. In this respect, they should be guided to develop a customised career planning strategy.

and how they made their way into their respective industries.

### CAREER PLANNING

Career planning is a process of systematically matching career goals and individual capabilities with opportunities for personal fulfilment<sup>8</sup>. It is a deliberate process of becoming aware of self, opportunities, constraints, choices and consequences. These then become factors used to provide direction, timing and sequence of steps to attain a specific career goal<sup>9</sup>.

According to *The Definitive Guide to Employee Development*, developing a personalised career planning strategy allows jobseekers to map out their careers in employment categories that match their ability and willingness to be “trained and developed for higher positions”<sup>10</sup>. A career plan features short- and long-term career goals, and the actions candidates can take to achieve them. Implementing personalised career plans can help candidates decide on educational pathways; and identify co-curricular activities, research projects and internships that make them strong candidates for the aspired vocation.

### UNDERSTANDING CAREER STAGES

Based on the data analysis, the value of career planning was not pronounced early in Malay workers’ academic years or prior to their entry to work. In fact, many respondents felt left behind by their contemporaries as they needed more guiding steps in creating a career plan customised to their interests and ambitions. One respondent who works for a talent recruitment agency revealed that she was never guided into making a choice of a career for herself, because “even my parents did not really mentor me”. It was only when she started her job as a recruiter that she “saw different people, different industries, different professions, different education levels, and the different salary bands that they make”. She added, “*Maybe if I studied this instead, and I had gone into this [vocation], I would have made twice more money instead.*”

Such a response points to the necessity for young Malays to be aware of the need to identify career options and subsequently develop an action plan to actualise their choice. The process requires them to extrapolate career information, compare career pathways, and choose the best career journey for themselves.

While respondents felt they had been reactive to relevant job offers, they were often puzzled when rejected by companies. This tells us that these aspiring Malay workers need to understand the range of deciding factors potential employers look for. They may have to be more forward-looking and proactive than their current reactive or retroactive approach to job searches. In this respect, they should be guided to develop a customised career planning strategy. A respondent in her 40s pointed out that Malay students tend to be “limited by their social economic environment”. There should be programmes in school serving the objective of raising their aspirations and making young Malays realise that “there’s something worth working towards”.

According to the literature, an approach to career planning involves the recognition of the following *5 Different Career Stages for an Employee*<sup>11</sup>:

1. Exploration
2. Establishment
3. Mid-Career
4. Late Career
5. Decline

An opportunity lost at the beginning stages of one’s career will lead to a non-realisation at the later stages, as seen from respondents who had lamented their failure to tap on opportunities the moment they left school. These individuals realise that they should have sought help in navigating the job market before entering work. These include keeping abreast with the requirements of available professional development courses. Respondents in the study

<sup>8</sup> Schermerhorn, J.R., Osborn, R., and Hunt, J.G. *Organizational Behavior*. Phoenix: University of Phoenix, 2002.  
<sup>9</sup> McMahon, M., and Patton, W. *Career Development from a Systems Perspective: The Systems Theory Framework*. In: Metcalf, G.S., Kijima, K., and Deguchi, H. (eds) *Handbook of Systems Sciences*. Springer, Singapore, 2021.  
<sup>10</sup> Bridge. *The Definitive Guide to Employee Development*. 2022. Available at: <https://www.getbridge.com/resources/definitive-guide-employee-development/>

<sup>11</sup> Chand, S. *5 Different Career Stages for an Employee*. 2023. Available at: <https://www.yourarticelibrary.com/business-management/5-different-career-stages-for-an-employee/2500>

revealed that they rarely attended information dissemination sessions by talent acquisition agencies or firms that were hiring. In addition, they had no knowledge about job opportunities offered by intermediaries such as Startup SG, or about internships and training grants. Moreover, the period they began seeking employment was usually after graduation, instead of during their studies. This was reflected by a respondent who would “just jump” into any available employment. Now a full-time homemaker, she realised she could have done things differently by planning ahead and talking to the right people. Unfortunately, some respondents only actively sought career guidance when forced to look for new jobs. Only then did they understand its usefulness, as the career advisor could give relevant information to fulfil the candidates’ aspirations. The respondents related that the career guidance they received involved steps to answering questions like “What job would suit me?”, “What are the educational and skills required for a specific job?”, and “What are the steps that I must take to get the job that I want?”

The ideal time for graduating students to prepare to join the workforce is between a few months to a year before graduation. They should be provided with opportunities to attend hands-on or interactive workshops on themes such as how to find and interpret job advertisements as well as to create materials that will best convey their skills and interests. Other topics could relate to anticipating and responding to questions at interviews, as well as effectively demonstrating one’s abilities to perform the work. A respondent suggested that our Malay youths should be given “more access to career guidance, career coaching” at a younger age as it “helps them open up their eyes to possibilities and not easily [settle] for the familiar options.”

When it came to working overseas or taking on outstation attachments, many

respondents lamented that closing themselves to such prospects had led to poorer career progression. Some noted that they felt more assured working where their immediate and extended families would be nearby to give them support and provide them with a “safety net” when they required it. There were also other concerns such as safety and security. A 25-year-old administrative staff emphasised that he feels that Singapore is a safe country. As such, workers “would think twice about security” in a foreign land.

Equally important to Malay workers were concerns regarding access to halal food. A 28-year-old project engineer shared that Malay workers tend to “avoid relocating to places with a low number of Muslims [where it was] difficult to find halal food.”

While some of these worries may be valid, it also tells us that a proper and thoughtful evaluation of career planning strategies may have provided these individuals with a balance of perspectives to alleviate such concerns.

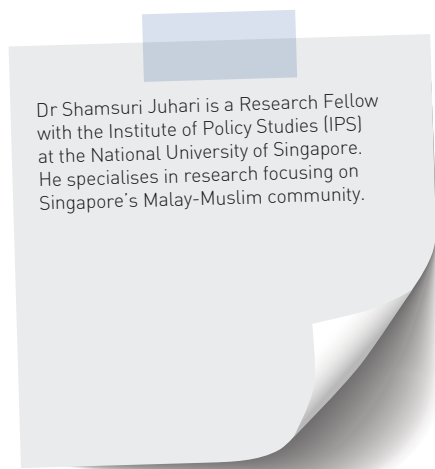
Lastly, respondents were asked if employers assigned as much value to experience as educational qualifications when shortlisting job candidates. Most agreed that although experience in a job would place them in good standing, employers would prioritise those who had academic qualifications. The prevailing opinion amongst these respondents was that paper qualifications remained crucial as it served as a “passport” into a company. A 26-year-old graduate who attained a place in a multinational company’s Graduate Associate Programme felt that in Singapore, opportunities for career progression “are given to those who do well in school”.

Unfortunately, convictions such as these create a defeatist mindset especially among Malay early school leavers. In fact, when such beliefs take root, a vicious cycle develops as respondents forgo career planning.

## CAREER PLANNING AS VALUED FORESIGHT

A main finding from this study is to expose our Malay youths to the importance of career planning. While such initiatives exist in polytechnics and universities, they should also be introduced in secondary schools, junior colleges and the Institute of Technical Education (ITEs). An ITE student, for instance, regretted taking up a National Institute of Technical Education Certificate (NITEC) course and switching to another course for Higher NITEC, based on advice from friends and family. Had she consulted a more informed source, she would have made a more efficient choice in her education pathway.

Hence, students in these institutions should learn about personalised career planning frameworks. Such a curriculum should include personality profiling to enable students to gain a proper understanding of their strengths, interests and employment potential. With such knowledge made available to them, they will hopefully be able to make better career choices. ■



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# SOCIAL MOBILITY IN SINGAPORE

BY NAILUL FARAH MOHD MASBUR



*“Turn our view around and we see that, given the ubiquity of enrichment centers and tutors, some kids – because of class advantages – are advantaged in a system where early exposure and precocity are rewarded. The kids who are able to run forward the moment the gates are open are neither more ‘meritorious’ nor more deserving.”*

– Teo You Yenn<sup>1</sup>

Meritocracy promises Singaporeans their efforts will not let them down. Regardless of race, language, religion, and most importantly, class, all Singaporeans are promised equal opportunity to succeed. Yet the gates of opportunities seem to fit only a selected few, and the distance to the gates is much closer to some and further to others. If access to opportunities is unequal, how then can meritocracy deliver its promises?

### **DOES MERITOCRACY CREATE EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES?**

The education system in Singapore aptly displays how social capital intersects with meritocratic structures. It is extremely challenging for children with disadvantaged resources to keep pace with their socio-economically privileged peers. If two children at Primary 1 had the same learning style and capacity, went to the same school, studied under the same teachers, faced the same schooling demands and sat for the same examinations, the child whose parents provided a comfortable home, a great preschool education, and the best private tutors would have developed greater precocity than a child whose parents can only provide an overcrowded one-bedroom home, could not provide adequate preschool education, and can neither provide private tutors nor any form of enrichment class. In this situation, the child with greater precocity will naturally have advanced capacity to exhibit greater ‘merit’.

The education system, through major streamlining processes, blindly rewards the exhibition of ‘merit’. If the gap continues to grow, especially if the social capital of the children did not change, their education paths will begin deviating. In the case of great deviation, it will lead to

**Social mobility is dependent on both opportunities and capacities. The structure determines and creates opportunities, while the capacities of individuals determine and create their access to the opportunities. The structure may exist in the form of government policies, the education system, the economic system, international economy, or even market trajectories. Capacities refer to the different types of resources individuals have.**

the two children taking completely different education routes. The child with the high socio-economic social capital may be streamlined into the elite route. This route offers opportunities including access to more academically advanced and diverse educators or mentors, and better structural resources such as more advanced syllabuses, science labs, golf and sailing as extra-curricular activities, and so on, resulting in a generation of those with more economically beneficial cultural capital. Hence, the more elite the education course completed, the greater the economic opportunities. In the process, the network of peers and mentors formed by this child will also be more economically privileged. In cumulation, the knowledge, cultural, and social capital created by the child will lead to greater access to opportunities for upward mobility, creating an even greater social and economic deviation between the two children.

This exemplifies how meritocracy in Singapore has yet to create equal opportunity to success. It has created a system where all individuals must play the same game but in different modes. Triumph, for the elites, is at the tip of their fingers while the downtrodden must run a marathon before it even enters their line of sight.

### **WHAT DETERMINES SOCIAL MOBILITY?**

Social mobility is dependent on both opportunities and capacities. The structure determines and creates opportunities, while the capacities of individuals determine and create their access to the opportunities. The structure may exist in the form of government policies, the education system, the economic system, international economy, or even market trajectories. Capacities refer to the different types of resources individuals have. These resources include inherent capital, such as inherent intelligences and personality; social capital, such as family ties, mentors, friends and social networks; economic capital, which is either inherited or self-made; and knowledge-cultural capital such as status, knowledge of the system, and language. The better the fit between an individual’s capacities and the opportunities made available by the structure, the greater their access to opportunities for upward mobility. On the contrary, the more ill-fitting the capacities, the more arduous and even impossible the journey uphill. It should also be noted that if an individual has capacities that are significantly economically privileged, they may have the capacity to influence the structure and create opportunities for upward mobility.

<sup>1</sup> Teo, Y. Y. *This Is What Inequality Looks Like*. Ethos Books, 2018. p. 125

## SOCIAL MOBILITY IN SINGAPORE

Singapore ranked 20<sup>th</sup> out of 82 countries in the World Economic Forum's (WEF) 2020 Social Mobility Index<sup>2</sup>. Despite its relatively high placement, Singapore continues to also rank high on many measures of social inequality, such as income inequality, consumption inequality, and education inequality. The Social Mobility Index measures social mobility by measuring access to high quality healthcare, education access, education quality and equity, access and quality of lifelong learning, social protection, technology access, access to work opportunities, fair wages, working conditions, and inclusive institutions<sup>3</sup>. Singapore ranked top 10 for education access and education quality and equity, which includes measures on social diversity within schools (ratio of students with different socio-economic status, and cultural and religious background) and lack of education material among disadvantaged pupils. The 2020 WEF report noted that Singapore was underperforming on the 'social diversity within schools' measure. This can potentially be attributed to the streaming system, school ranking system, specialised schools, and neighbourhood-based placement of primary school students. Singapore is also performing well on employment opportunities (81.8 out of 100), but contrastingly, is significantly underperforming in fair wages (45.1)<sup>4</sup>. Based on these factors, Singapore's placement on the social mobility index, despite being high, is not a representative indicator for equal access to upward mobility. In fact, if examined closely there are clear indicators of barriers to equal access.

A similar dichotomy can be seen in the outcome of the 2018 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). Singapore ranked second, measuring high on reading, mathematics, and science performance. However, Singapore also "measures 4<sup>th</sup> most likely to perform worst due to disadvantages in economic, social, and cultural status relative to non-disadvantaged students" on PISA's index of economic, social, and cultural status

(ESCS)<sup>5</sup>. This demonstrates the privilege and barrier created by social and economic capital in accessing upward mobility.

This reality is further supported by findings demonstrating the influence of social capital in creating access to higher wages. A recent 2023 study by the National University of Singapore, *Job (Non) Search*, demonstrates the effect of accessing job opportunities through social capital in widening the wage gap between high and low paid work (categorised as professional and non-professional work)<sup>6</sup>. In both categories of work, the study's findings demonstrate access to the first job to be strongly determined by educational certification, but subsequent jobs to be strongly influenced by information and access granted by social networks. Unfortunately, non-searching job opportunities (opportunities created by social networks) only brings significant increases in wages to individuals in high paid work but not to individuals in low paid work<sup>7</sup>. Hence, it creates greater social inequality between workers in the two groups. This reveals another unequal privilege granted to individuals with higher socio-economic social capital.

## RETHINKING SOCIAL MOBILITY IN SINGAPORE

Re-examination of structural systems should be equally focused on both creating more equitable economic capital and more equitable social capital. The 2022 Social Capital and Economic Mobility study by Raj Chetty, et. al. has also found economic connectedness, which is the "degree of interaction between low- and high-income people", to have a strong association with social mobility<sup>8</sup>. The study findings show that higher degrees of economic connectedness in an individual's social capital leads to higher chances for upward mobility. Hence, a particular aspect to consider when improving access to upward mobility in Singapore is to improve the degree of economic connectedness within the social capitals of all Singaporeans.

There should also be a major re-evaluation of the economic system, and it must include a re-examination of the categorisation of jobs and their assigned wages, and a re-evaluation of the value of low-paid occupations and their importance to national stability. Measures should also target the re-evaluation of the importance of education certification as a major source of access to job opportunities and the primacy of social and cultural capitals in creating job accessibility.

<sup>2</sup> World Economic Forum. *Global Social Mobility Report – World Economic Forum*. 2020, January 19. p. 7. Retrieved from: [https://www3.weforum.org/docs/Global\\_Social\\_Mobility\\_Report.pdf](https://www3.weforum.org/docs/Global_Social_Mobility_Report.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p. 16

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p. 26

<sup>5</sup> Tjin, T. P. *Explainer: Inequality in Singapore*. New Naratif. 2023, April 28. p.15. Retrieved from: <https://newnaratif.com/explainer-inequality-in-singapore/>

<sup>6</sup> Chua, V., and Tan, Z. H. *Job (Non) Search*. 2023, March 29. See also: Ng, I. Y. H. *Symposium on In-Work Poverty and the Challenges of Getting By Among the Young*

<sup>7</sup> Chua, V., Tan, E., and Koh, G. *A Study on Social Capital in Singapore*. Institute of Policy Studies, National University of Singapore. 2017. Retrieved from: <https://lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/docs/default-source/ips/study-of-social-capital-in-singapore.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> Chetty, R., et. al. *Social Capital I: Measurement and Associations with Economic Mobility*. SSRN Electronic Journal. 2022, August 1. pp. 1-3. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4177561>

At present, study findings indicate very low degrees of economic connectedness within the general population's social capital. The 2017 study on *Social Capital in Singapore* by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) found very limited network diversity (or social ties across different groups) among individuals from different educational status and type of housing, and greater solidarity within each group rather than across groups. This indicates very limited social connection between individuals from 'elite' and 'non-elite' school backgrounds and public and private housing<sup>9</sup>, implying the source of most Singaporeans' social capital remain within class lines and hence, exhibiting low economic connectedness.


### **HOW DO WE CREATE MORE EQUITABLE ACCESS TO UPWARD MOBILITY?**

To genuinely create more equitable access to upward mobility, meritocracy's weakness and the weight of social and economic capital must be genuinely examined and addressed. Otherwise, inequality will continue to worsen, and upward mobility may become a class privilege rather than an equal right.

Holistic measures must be undertaken to reverse the class systems in Singapore. This includes the re-evaluation of the education system, which should include a critical rethinking of the 'elite' and 'non-elite' education routes and schools, a re-evaluation of the onset of major education streaming – whether it should be extended to the secondary level rather than begin at primary 6 – and increase the diversity of students from different socio-economic backgrounds at all schooling levels, beginning from kindergartens and primary schools. There should also be a major re-evaluation of the economic system, and it must include a re-examination of the categorisation of jobs and their assigned wages, and a re-evaluation of the value of low-paid occupations and their importance to national stability. Measures should also target the re-evaluation of the importance of education certification as a major source of access to job opportunities and the primacy of social and cultural capitals in creating job accessibility.

Additionally, there should be more programmes and initiatives to encourage economic connectedness at the practical and perceptual levels. This is to create greater interaction between peoples from diverse socio-economic backgrounds not only for the purpose of upward mobility, but also to increase national cohesion and trust among Singaporeans.

It is essential for Singaporeans to understand that social mobility is not solely determined by individual effort, as merit is oftentimes the result of access to unseen and under-appreciated capitals. Singaporeans should also re-examine the definition of merit and whether a broadening of this definition is necessary. Otherwise, meritocracy will continue being used as the justification of social inequality, rather than a measure to reduce social inequality. At the end of the day, the question lies in what kind of Singapore do Singaporeans want? Do they want a Singapore which is a home to all Singaporeans, or a Singapore which is home to only the socio-economic privileged? ■



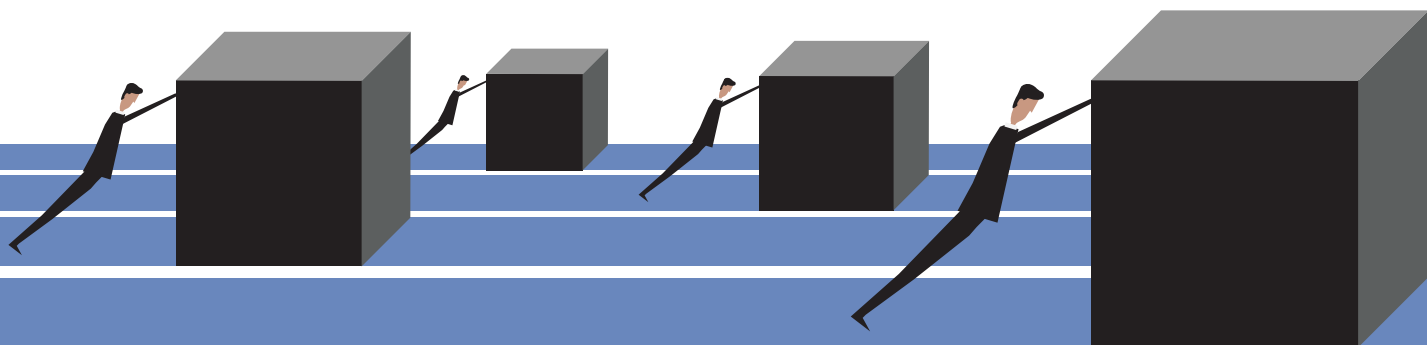
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<sup>9</sup> Chua, V., Tan, E., and Koh, G. *A Study on Social Capital in Singapore*. Institute of Policy Studies, National University of Singapore. 2017. p. 3. Retrieved from: <https://kyspp.nus.edu.sg/docs/default-source/ips/study-of-social-capital-in-singapore.pdf>

# REMODELLING MERITOCRACY FOR INCLUSIVITY

Towards a Merit-Based Singapore –  
Beyond Narrow Meritocracy

BY MOHAMMAD ALAMI MUSA



## FLAWS OF MERITOCRACY

Meritocracy is flawed as an organising principle to select the elite for society. Yet, it has been widely embraced by the liberal world for there is no viable alternative that has been tried and tested, lest society opts for the elite selection based on lineage or family and social connections. Communist countries have their unique selection process based on commitment to the ideology, loyalty to the party and job performance within the network of people's organisations.

This article is a reaction to one of the best speeches made in Parliament during the recent debate on the President's address. It was delivered by Education Minister Chan Chun Sing who was spot on in his theoretical description and practical analysis of the pitfalls of meritocracy. He went on to propose significant shifts in the way that meritocracy should be done in Singapore. It was a bold speech and what *Forward Singapore* should rightly deal with, that is, the big picture changes that are needed to enable the country to remain united and avoid divisions due to deep social stratification by class and the emergence of the underclass.

But this is not the first time the problematics related to meritocracy were publicly surfaced. About 30 years ago, Home Affairs Minister Shanmugam, (then a back-bencher MP), made an excellent critique in Parliament on the downsides of meritocracy. His speech was so impactful that The Straits Times carried an editorial on what he had articulated.

Additionally, in 1990, a group of Malay professionals expressed their serious misgivings about meritocracy during a historic Convention that assembled 500 of their peers. During this large meeting, the National Convention of Malay/Muslim Professionals 1990, they took the position that the meritocratic environment worked against the Malay minority community and expressed grave concern that this exacerbated the situation that Singaporean Malays were lagging far behind other communities in many areas especially education and the economy. They then suggested alternative versions of meritocracy, namely the ideas of "balanced meritocracy" and "meritocracy with compassion", which would be fairer to disadvantaged and underprivileged groups in society. Unfortunately, these alternative ideas were rejected because they were deemed to be affirmative action which would hurt the Malay sense of self-pride.

## MERITOCRACY IS UTOPIAN

It was most welcome when Minister Chan laid out potential pitfalls of meritocracy and suggested some ways to ameliorate them. The pitfalls arise from the inherent defects and imperfections of meritocracy.

To start off, the term meritocracy was born as a satire and not as a well thought through theory. It was a satirical term coined by British sociologist Michael Young who introduced it in his 1958 fiction which he authored. Titled *The Rise of the Meritocracy 1870-2033* it was sharply directed at the elite class of his time and

Young was critical of the elitism as well as the deep social divide meritocracy brought with it. No one wanted to publish Young's writing till much later. His introduction of the term meritocracy presaged the contemporary debate on the "underclass".

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The first condition is that every member of society must have equal opportunity to have a fair chance to succeed in meritocracy and be selected as the elite to provide leadership in politics, the economy and other sectors of public life. This is idealistic and not possible. No two families can give equal opportunity to their children. Even within the same family, each child has unequal opportunity. There are also children whose families provide them with little or no opportunity at all. Having the social condition of equality of opportunity and fair chance for success can never be achieved in real life. It is therefore impossible for meritocracy to work fairly because of this natural human condition of unequal opportunity.

The second condition is that everyone must be at the same starting line and at the same time. This is again an ideal in the real world. Given the situation of unequal opportunity, individuals do not start at the same time and from the same starting line. There will be some who are already running on the track, while the majority have just arrived at the starting blocks or have not even entered the “stadium” or worse are not persuaded that they need to find the way to the “stadium”. How then can we say that meritocracy is a fair system? It is therefore not surprising that meritocracy has given rise to stark social inequalities because it is designed as a “winner takes all” system and sadly, it is indifferent to the fate of all the others who are eliminated as the non-winners. Bluntly put, this latter group constitutes the victims of the inherent flaws of meritocracy.

The third condition that must be fulfilled is that the meritocratic system of elite selection must be able to measure only innate qualities of an individual and these include one’s intelligence, talent, and diligence. It must not measure merit that one accrues from external or social circumstances, that has nothing to do with one’s natural abilities. This, again, can never be achieved in real life because an individual’s merit is certainly influenced by external social factors, like family connections, peer influence and social networking. There is no magical device within the meritocratic system to isolate these external contributions and only measure the individual’s innate qualities. As such, meritocracy favours those whose

merit is positively influenced by external factors. It is therefore not a fair system, and this unfairness fundamentally renders meritocracy as morally unacceptable.

### REMODELLING MERITOCRACY

Notwithstanding its flaws, Singapore has reaped benefits from meritocracy as it has been able to produce a top-notch elite class to make it a highly successful country. A serious pitfall is that meritocracy has made Singapore into a highly stratified society and the emerging class divisions may give rise to ugly consequences. It is therefore urgent and critical to find ways to work around the pitfalls of meritocracy. Three ways can be considered to mitigate the three flaws as mentioned above.

First is to build a comprehensive national infrastructure to achieve an overall upward equalisation of opportunities. Those who are underprivileged and disadvantaged ought to be provided with the whole slew of state-sponsored opportunities. Existing schemes like the Baby Bonus, KidSTART, Edusave and SkillsFuture, can be expanded to offer citizens in the lower social strata with numerous opportunities and special ones that only the elite and upper stratum of society have access to.

Second, there ought to be flexibility in the embrace of meritocracy to give a better chance for all individuals with different talents and abilities to succeed. There should be multiple tracks, a wider choice of starting lines and the freedom for people to decide on when they wish to be at the starting blocks. This means that there can be a variety of ways to measure the merit of individuals with respect to their talents, interests, and abilities. Gone should be the days when meritocracy offers only one track (conventionally the academic track) and one start line (conventionally in the national school system) and the same time for starting (conventionally at primary one). A remodelled meritocracy will have the flexibility to evaluate a diverse range in types of merit as society recognises more kinds of talent and ability, even unconventional ones.

Third and equally important, this new way of doing meritocracy should be very inclusive to give recognition to those from disadvantaged backgrounds that include

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people with disabilities, members of minority communities and marginalised groups. Nevertheless, these individuals must have the required abilities but not necessarily be among those who cross the finishing line first. The merit of such special groups lies in the value propositions that they can “bring to the table”. For example, able members of minority communities can contribute to more enriched as well as inclusive decision and policy making.

In the final analysis, Minister Chan Chun Sing’s speech can be a stepping stone to develop a uniquely Singaporean Meritocracy Model (SMM) – one which not only produces top-notch scholars but importantly, citizens with the best technical, vocational, and creative skills within a meritocracy that is highly inclusive to embrace minorities. *Forward Singapore* is about having merit-based Singaporeans and not about entrapping them within a narrow practice of meritocracy. ■



Mohammad Alami Musa was Chairman of AMP from 1995 to 2003.

# State of Malay-Muslim Entrepreneurship in Singapore

BY AZRULNIZAM SHAH SOHAIMI





Ever since the founding of modern Singapore, Malay-Muslim (MM) entrepreneurs have continued to play a key part in the writing of the nation's story. The combination of Indian-Muslim and Arab traders who entered the region in the search of new markets, together with the existing local Malays, saw the birth of a dynamic entrepreneurship ecosystem, that has continued to exist till today.

The MM business ecosystem continues to develop, supported by national pro-business policies. With Singapore being one of the most business-friendly places in the world, it is no surprise that many members of the community have undertaken their own entrepreneurial endeavour in one way or another. Much of the progress, especially in the last decade or so, can be seen in the following areas.

### **PARTICIPATION**

With the advent of digitalisation, barriers to entry have been reduced, and typical roadblocks such as high start-up cost, sourcing for location, and even access to expertise have been overcome through the use of digital tools, which allow almost anyone to be able to start their own entrepreneurship venture in a matter of hours.

The MM community has seen a pick up in the number of businesses, which can be evidenced by the steady growth seen in membership of the Singapore Malay Chamber of Commerce and Industry (SMCCI), the apex business association for the MM community, whose rate has continued growing, peaking to nearly 1,000 just before the onset of the pandemic in 2020. The most recent Geylang Serai Bazaar in Ramadhan saw a total of over 700 stores open throughout the month, the largest it has ever been, supported by many other more regional bazaars which were open at the same time. Although the official number of MM-owned businesses are unknown (given that ACRA, the official business registry does not categorise businesses by race or ethnicity), these data point to the fact that there has been a growing rate of participation in entrepreneurship.

A key factor behind this participation is also the increased availability of platforms for entrepreneurs to participate in. Unlike the more brick-and-mortar set-ups which exist, there now exist more modular formats such as online campaigns, pop-up events and trade fairs, which do not require as much capital outlay. These remain a favoured format by MM entrepreneurs, who are able to gain first-hand experience of running a business, but without the risk that may come from embarking on such ventures, in a more traditional way.

### **DIVERSIFICATION OF BUSINESSES**

In recent times, the MM community has also begun to show more diversification in the mix of businesses that its entrepreneurs participate in. Taking the SMCCI data, once again as a yardstick, approximately 46% of its membership are in two large sectors, namely food and beverage (F&B), typically at the retail end of the sector (i.e. running frontline services such as restaurants, catering, grab-and-go outlets) as well as lifestyle (i.e. fashion, textiles, Fast-Moving Consumer Goods).

In recent times there has been rapid growth in the professional services industry, with many entrepreneurs monetising their expertise in areas like branding and marketing, and financial services. Other areas that MM entrepreneurs have also shown growth in include areas like education, technology and logistics. This has resulted in growing accessibility to diverse sectors within the business landscape, which can only augur well for the future of MM entrepreneurship, as it would result in the creation of multiple avenues, networks, and possible mentors for budding entrepreneurs to access.

### **DIGITAL ADOPTION**

The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic was imperative in accelerating the drive towards digitalisation, as many businesses rapidly used digitalisation as a tool towards sustaining business. In particular, e-commerce was an important enabler for businesses who had normally relied heavily on face-to-face business flow. With the inability to host customers on-site, many businesses began to adopt omni-channel approaches, by setting up

digital footprints across multiple channels, which include traditional online (e.g. websites), social media (e.g. Facebook, Instagram) as well as e-commerce (e.g. Shopee and Lazada) channels.

A pioneering effort in 2021 was Bazaar Kita, which was an attempt by the SMCCI to provide a digital platform for the selling of Hari Raya goods. Together with tech giants such as Shopee and Grab, more than 100 merchants were onboarded, and able to transact more than \$600,000 in goods across the month of Ramadhan.

As COVID-19 has continued to abate, the digitalisation drive has not stopped as MM businesses are constantly looking to ride on the next wave of online tools (e.g. TikTok shop) to further grow their business.

Notwithstanding, as the face of business continues to evolve, and especially so after the pandemic, the MM business ecosystem will continue to be faced with several structural issues that will need to be resolved so as to continue its upward trend.

### **POSITIONING ALONG THE VALUE CHAIN**

The COVID-19 pandemic magnified the importance of positioning oneself within the value chain. Companies which were positioned further up the value chain were able to gain significant leverage in business deals, where else those further down the chain could only ultimately face the downstream impact of price changes, with little ability to influence the state of play.

For example, many companies in the interior design and/or construction sectors within Singapore, who had normally sourced for both manpower and materials from Malaysia, were significantly impacted as they were faced with the need to complete existing contracts, but with costs from Malaysia increasing rapidly. As such, many were forced to eat into their own profit margins to be able to complete contracts or face the potential consequences of breaching their contracts and having to pay damages. Similarly,

many F&B companies were forced to eat into their already razor-thin margins due to increases in raw material and labour.

However, COVID-19 only served to cast the spotlight on what was already an existing problem within the ecosystem, which was that many MM businesses were placed too far down the value chain and could only become price-takers and not price-makers. With the inability to move up the value chain, the growth of these businesses is limited in nature and are extremely exposed to shocks in demand and supply. With the prospect of continued inflation, geopolitical headwinds, as well as world events (*e.g.* Ukraine crisis), prices are expected to continue rising and as such, MM businesses, most of which exist in the last mile of the value-chain (*i.e.* the last leg of the chain dealing most directly with the end-consumer) will continue to face issues with increasing their profit margins, which in turn, will impact their long-term sustainability and growth.

Structurally, businesses in Singapore, by virtue of the lack of a natural hinterland or natural resources, position themselves in the middle or end of the value chain. The set-up of manufacturing facilities within Singapore remains a challenging task, due to the high costs of land, machinery, and manpower. As such, larger companies in Singapore have begun to 'nearshore' their manufacturing, by looking at nearby areas such as Batam (in Indonesia) and Iskandar (in Malaysia) as potential areas to manufacture, leveraging on the existing ecosystem that have been purpose-built in these areas to keep costs low, while staying in control of their own value-chain, so as to be able to manage costs. This can be a practice that can be considered by MM companies, as they attempt to position themselves further up the value-chain, which in itself is a challenging feat.

### **ACCESS TO CAPITAL**

The reality of business is that it does take money, to make money. This uncomfortable truth is something that has to be confronted by MM businesses should they wish to accelerate their growth – especially so in a dynamic post-COVID world, which has shorter

business cycles, and which requires access to capital, so as to continue staying competitive.

Capital can be accessed in several ways. The first and most common would be through financing via a loan. There exist many options today, be it through more traditional means (*e.g.* banks) or through other means such as peer-to-peer (P2P) funding. Such an arrangement will not require the business to give up equity but will require the risk to be borne largely by the business, although some schemes under the ambit of government agencies do allow some co-sharing of risk.

Another way to access capital is through raising funds through investors, who in turn will take some form of equity in the company, in exchange for the provision of funds. In this case, the risk will be co-shared between the investor and business-owner, with the amount of equity typically being derived as a function of the performance of the business (both current and future) and amount of funding provided.

In both these cases, MM businesses have found it to be challenging to access funds, due to several reasons. The first, which is a common problem for smaller businesses, is having a robust system of recording their financial transactions, thus being able to give the potential lender or investor, a clear idea of the state of the company's financial health, which is an important piece of information needed for such benefactors. Common problems include the inability to meticulously record all transactions, co-mingling of business and personal finances, as well as the lack of systematic pricing.

The second would be the lack of halal or Syariah-compliant instruments that can be used for the lending of monies. With traditional interest-based lending being the norm in this part of the world, MM entrepreneurs who are eager to get financing may be faced with such a stumbling block. Although there exist some options within the local ecosystem, common feedback from MM businesses is that terms for such options are often unfavourable as compared to conventional ones. Faced with this conundrum, MM businesses may decide to take up neither.

**Entrepreneurship serves two important calls that members of the MM community resonate with; the first of which, as an important vehicle towards economic empowerment, and with it, social mobility. Secondly, it gives the opportunity for us to serve others, while earning our keep in life. Both these factors are something closely integrated in the fabric of our community, and with that, the spirit of entrepreneurship will continue to be strong.**

Thirdly, business models of MM businesses often face the challenge of being scalable enough for investors to be attracted to. A key decision-making point for investors is often how much scope a business can grow and provide a significant return on investment (ROI). In common sectors for MM businesses such as F&B and retail, scalability is often an issue as any expansion is often based upon greater capital expenditure, which in itself is not a sustainable model.

However, the lack of access to capital is not something that is only related to material resources, but also something more intangible – equally lacking is social capital. As the saying goes, your network is your net worth, which suggests that the more people one knows, the more one will be worth. However, to be more accurate, the function of this worth is not only based on the number of people one knows, but the quality of the people one knows. A simple cursory search within key business networks such as representation at various trade associations, key positions within multinational companies (MNCs) at both executive and board levels, as well as public agencies, show a clear dearth of MM representation which has a downstream impact on the MM business ecosystem. This creates less opportunity for MM entrepreneurs to get access to crucial networks to key opinion leaders and personalities such as potential investors, legislators and overseas markets, among others. This is especially important as the community continues to expand its wings, through the diversification of business mix into more nascent industries.

### **RIDING THE NEW WAVE OF BUSINESS**

With the continuing development of the business ecosystem, and even with the increased push for diversification, challenges continue to exist in terms of businesses participating in the new economy.

Through Southeast Asia (SEA), two trends in business will continue to grow in the short to medium term, which is the digital economy, and the green economy. In both these areas, capital inflows continue to pour into Singapore, with many venture capital and private equity firms looking for the next big thing that is in need of capital to accelerate its growth.

However, the presence of businesses in these sectors remains limited, as they are something less familiar, as compared to the more traditional sectors. Areas such as Artificial Intelligence, Data Analytics and Augmented Reality, as well as Renewable Energy, Green Mobility and Smart City Development are normally not closely associated to MM companies, yet have tremendous potential for businesses to grow into.

Until MM businesses are able to develop the capabilities and courage to enter such sectors, growth will remain limited.

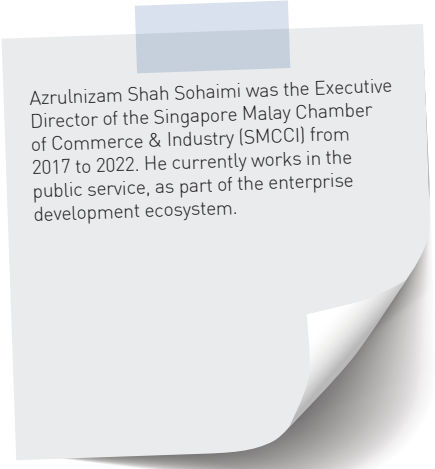
### **THE JOURNEY TO GROWTH CONTINUES**

However, the pace of development that the MM business ecosystem has shown over the past 10 years, and the sheer resilience these businesses have shown through a generational crisis such as COVID-19, bring with them some promise for the future.

The MM community continue to showcase their talents in the business world, with many new entrants in both traditional and nascent sectors. Be it as a vendor at the annual Ramadhan Bazaar, or in the corridors of Block 71 (Singapore's famous tech startup enclave), one will see many young members of the MM community applying themselves, in a bid to build their business. If anything, the zeal to try our hand at entrepreneurship remains something permanent, ever since the earliest days of the founding of modern Singapore.

Entrepreneurship serves two important calls that members of the MM community resonate with; the first of which, as an important vehicle towards economic empowerment, and with it, social mobility. Secondly, it gives the opportunity for us to serve others, while earning our keep in life. Both these factors are something closely integrated in the fabric of our community, and with that, the spirit of entrepreneurship will continue to be strong.

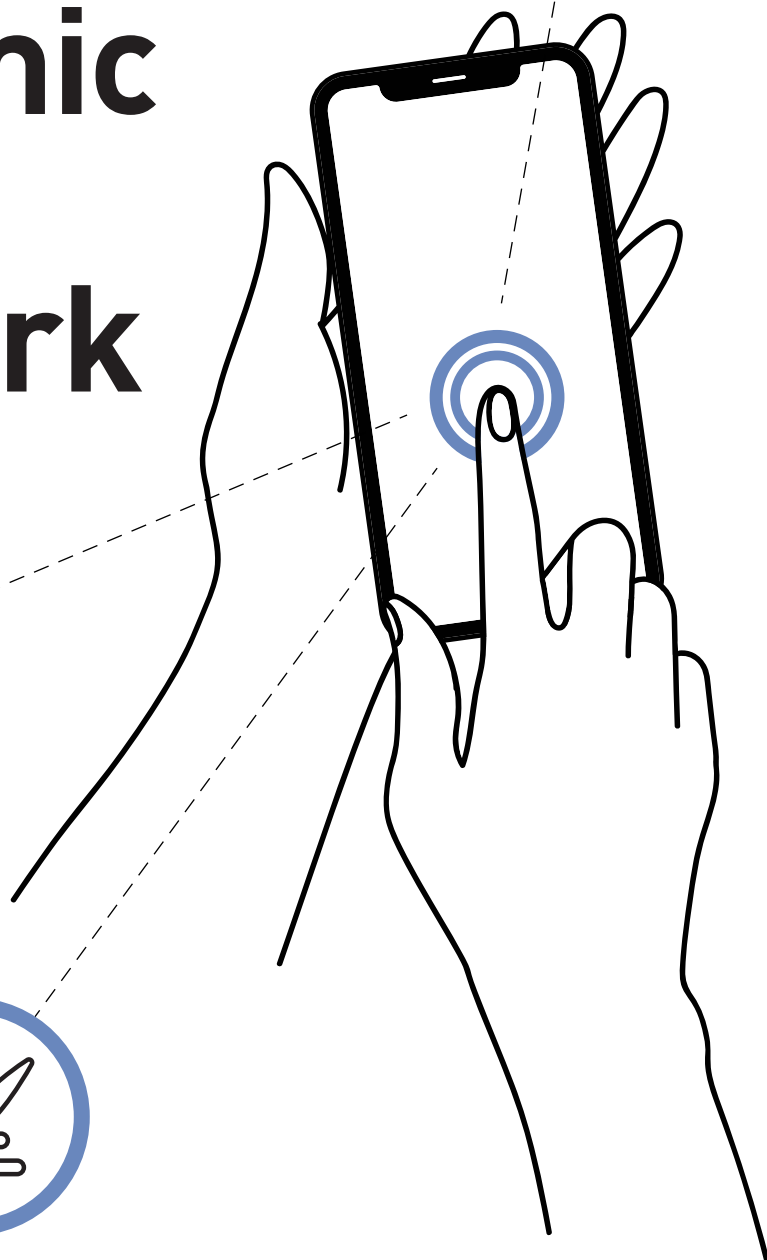
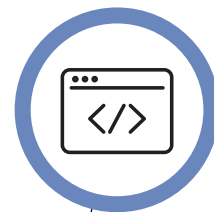
What is left, is to find ways to accelerate the growth of the MM business community, which will require us to confront and accept some hard but necessary truths. ■



Azrulnizam Shah Sohaimi was the Executive Director of the Singapore Malay Chamber of Commerce & Industry (SMCCI) from 2017 to 2022. He currently works in the public service, as part of the enterprise development ecosystem.

# Folk Tradecrafts, Black Boxes and Caches: **A Request for Algorithmic Legibility in Gig Work**

BY SHAMIL ZAINUDDIN



*I a bit IT-oriented ah ... When you go the [online] forum, people complain in the forum, I cannot get this, cannot get that. Full of comments on bad apps. Then I write in, try to clear your cache, that is the secret.<sup>1</sup>*

Neil, a private hire platform driver, shared the above 'secret' to getting more jobs during an interview with me. Another 'secret' shared by another driver was having multiple phones, each with a particular gig work app on, instead of having all the apps switched on the same smartphone. As he says, "If one phone, they will compete with each other!"

These 'secrets' are two of many folk theories or folk tradecraft<sup>2</sup> that have surfaced in an ongoing four-year ethnographic study of especially gig workers by myself and other researchers at the Institute of Policy Studies. The study is part of a more extensive study aided by the Social Science Research Council Thematic Grant examining young workers in precarious jobs in Singapore<sup>3</sup>. Folk tradecrafts in gig work are ground-up ideas and strategies that emerge due to workers attempting to figure out and thrive in the platforms' competitive and often opaque algorithmic management systems.

Folk tradecrafts are not peculiar to just platform workers in Singapore. There have been many reported examples from around the world about how platform workers try to figure out and game the system. From relatively simple ideas like Neil's to more sophisticated methods like delivery riders in the US, hanging smartphones in trees to get more work<sup>4</sup> and Indonesian workers using multiple accounts referred to as *joki*<sup>5</sup> accounts on the same platform, workers worldwide face similar challenges related to figuring

out seemingly inaccessible systems and respond accordingly.

In Singapore, gig workers are an undeniable part of our everyday urban experience. Regarding platform drivers alone, they "outnumber taxis by a mile"<sup>6</sup> on the island. Our study also suggests that platform workers come from various backgrounds, from those with lower educational qualifications to those with diplomas and some higher. While they may have varied backgrounds, many, especially workers who mainly depend on such work (also referred to as full-timers), face similar challenges – related to the lack of worker benefits and protections.

Our reports highlighted aspects of the job's precarious nature<sup>7</sup> and were cited in the Advisory Committee on Platform Workers' recommendation report to the Singapore government<sup>8</sup>. In November 2022, the government accepted the committee's recommendations<sup>9</sup> to provide better job protections for gig workers. As a result, workers will get better insurance protection, representation, and even CPF contributions. While these are substantive policies intended to safeguard the interests of workers, we should also continue to examine other unique aspects of the gig economy, like the impact of opaque algorithmic management systems, to protect these digital workers.

## THE NEED TO ADDRESS ALGORITHMIC MANAGEMENT

Gig workers are also seen as digital workers and are believed to be strongly influenced by platforms and their sophisticated algorithms, which control their earnings and aspects of behaviour. This is referred to by academicians as algorithmic management or software algorithms that perform the functions of a manager<sup>10</sup>.

However, crucial things like fare prices, trip allocation, and factors influencing these things are often unclear to workers. In addition, getting basic answers seems more complex "when your boss is an algorithm"<sup>11</sup> as with platform workers.

Things like algorithms are commonly associated with other terms like Artificial Intelligence (AI), Big Data and Machine Learning, which are parts of the technologies we use daily. From powerful popular applications like AI resume screening tools used by human resource (HR) departments of major organisations<sup>12</sup> to ChatGPT, which is available to practically anyone, their usage is becoming ubiquitous. However, many – myself included – do not really know how they function.

There has been much enthusiasm around how algorithms are changing our lives positively. The positive changes they have brought are undeniable. Nevertheless, hearing about algorithms' adverse effects is also common. The existence of groups like the Algorithmic Justice League, which was set up to "illuminate the social implications and harms of artificial intelligence"<sup>13</sup>, indicates algorithms' adverse – actual or potential – effects and the need for oversight.

However, the algorithms employed are not legible to everyday stakeholders like platform workers, who depend on the platforms to earn a living – workers do not know how trips are assigned and how earnings are calculated.

Also, the lack of possessing qualities that make these algorithms understandable or legible to people makes it very difficult to govern and audit them to determine fairness and adherence to ethical practices. Without transparency, it is an inscrutable

<sup>1</sup> Mathew, M., Zainuddin, S., Thian, W. L., Phoa, F. and Lee, C. *Precarity in Platform Work: A Study of Private-Hire Car Drivers and Food Delivery Rider*. IPS Working Paper No. 44, 2022, p. 67. Retrieved from: [https://kyssp.nus.edu.sg/docs/default-source/ips/working-paper-44\\_precarity-in-platform-work.pdf](https://kyssp.nus.edu.sg/docs/default-source/ips/working-paper-44_precarity-in-platform-work.pdf). Besides the names cited in this article, I am also grateful for the essential assistance rendered by Ali Akbar and Shane Pereira in our study on platform workers.

<sup>2</sup> Whittaker, M. [Gmer\_edith]. "The folk tradecraft of workers observing and assessing opaque algorithmic management systems then modifying their behavior in response is both heartbreaking and impressive 'people's research.'" 2022, September 2, 3:28 a.m. Tweet. Retrieved from: [https://twitter.com/mer\\_\\_edith/status/1300878248059056134](https://twitter.com/mer__edith/status/1300878248059056134)

<sup>3</sup> See: Project Page. *In-Work Poverty and the Challenges of Getting By Among the Young*. Social Science Research Centre, National University of Singapore. Retrieved from: <https://fass.nus.edu.sg/ssr/research-projects/in-work-poverty-challenges-getting-by-among-the-young/>

<sup>4</sup> Soper, S. *Amazon Drivers Are Hanging Smartphones in Trees to Get More Work*. Bloomberg, 2020, September 1. Retrieved from: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-09-01/amazon-drivers-are-hanging-smartphones-in-trees-to-get-more-work#xj4y7vzkg>

<sup>5</sup> Mustika, W., and Savirani, A. "Ghost Accounts," "Joki Accounts," and "Account Therapy": *Everyday Resistance Among Ride-hailing Motorcycle Drivers in Yogyakarta, Indonesia*. The Copenhagen Journal of Asian Studies, Vol. 39, No. 1, March 2021, pp. 48–67. Retrieved from: <https://fauli.cbs.dk/index.php/cjas/article/view/175>

<sup>6</sup> Tan, C. *Private-hire cars outnumber taxis by a mile*. The Straits Times, 2017, May 24. Retrieved from: <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/transport/private-hire-cars-outnumber-taxis-by-a-mile>

<sup>7</sup> See: Mathew, M., Zainuddin, S., Thian, W. L., Phoa, F., and Lee, C. *Precarity in Platform Work: A Study of Private-Hire Car Drivers and Food Delivery Rider*. IPS Working Paper No. 44, 2022. Retrieved from: [https://kyssp.nus.edu.sg/docs/default-source/ips/working-paper-44\\_precarity-in-platform-work.pdf](https://kyssp.nus.edu.sg/docs/default-source/ips/working-paper-44_precarity-in-platform-work.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> See also: Mathew, M., Thian, W. L., Lee, C., Zainuddin, S., and Chong, M. *Current Realities, Social Protection And Future Needs of Platform Food Delivery Workers in Singapore*. IPS Working Paper No. 47. Retrieved from: [https://kyssp.nus.edu.sg/docs/default-source/ips/working-paper-no-47\\_current-realities-social-protection-and-future-needs-of-platform-food-delivery-workers-in-singapore.pdf](https://kyssp.nus.edu.sg/docs/default-source/ips/working-paper-no-47_current-realities-social-protection-and-future-needs-of-platform-food-delivery-workers-in-singapore.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> Advisory Committee on Platform Workers. *Strengthening Protections for Platform Workers*. Ministry Of Manpower, Singapore, 2022. Retrieved from: <https://www.mom.gov.sg/-/media/mom/documents/press-releases/2022/strengthening-protections-for-platform-workers-report.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> Koh, W. T. *Singapore's gig workers to get better job protections from 2024, including in CPF and injury compensation*. CNA, 2022, November 23. Retrieved from: [https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/gig-workers-injury-compensation-cpf-platform-drivers-food-delivery-advisory-committee-3094721?internal\\_sharetool\\_iphone\\_23112022\\_cna](https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/gig-workers-injury-compensation-cpf-platform-drivers-food-delivery-advisory-committee-3094721?internal_sharetool_iphone_23112022_cna)

<sup>11</sup> See: Lee, M. K., Kusbit, D., Metsky, E., and Dabbish, L. *Working with Machines: The Impact of Algorithmic and Data-Driven Management on Human Workers in CHI '15: Proceedings of the 33rd Annual ACM Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*. Seoul, South Korea, 2015.

<sup>12</sup> Rosenblat, A. *When your boss is an algorithm*. The New York Times, 2018, October 12. Retrieved from: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/12/opinion/sunday/uber-driver-life.html>

<sup>13</sup> Dennison, K. *Are AI Recruitment Tools Ethical And Efficient? The Pros And Cons Of ATS*. Forbes, 2022, June 27. Retrieved from: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/karadennison/2022/06/27/are-ai-recruitment-tools-ethical-and-efficient-the-pros-and-cons-of-ats/?sh=b9a0f362e4ff>

<sup>14</sup> See: *About Algorithmic Justice League*. Retrieved from: <https://www.ajl.org/about>

black box affecting, in this case, gig workers, a sizeable swarth of Singapore's labour market.

### REDESIGNING FOR TRANSPARENCY AND LEGIBILITY VIA XAI

Employing frameworks and principles from the emerging field of XAI or explainable artificial intelligence might help organisations make their AI systems more legible and accountable<sup>14</sup>. XAI-engineered systems will allow relevant stakeholders to understand AI results and see that they meet regulatory standards. This would help increase trust between humans and machines or, in this case, between workers and platform providers. There is also evidence to suggest that digital trust could help increase revenues for businesses<sup>15</sup>.

By disclosing the decision-making processes of AI systems, XAI promotes transparency. Gig workers could potentially comprehend why they were given particular jobs, how their performance is assessed, and how their rates are set.

XAI can assist with accountability in disputes or disagreements. A gig worker can receive a clear explanation and relevant data from the system if they feel they have been treated unfairly or received an unjustified rating. Because of this openness, it is simpler for workers or their representatives from relevant associations to address complaints and obtain just compensation.

Also, by understanding how personal fare and ratings are calculated clearly, a worker would better understand what has worked and what has not. This would help them hone their skills and improve their overall performance.

### DATA COLLECTIVES AND ASSOCIATIONS

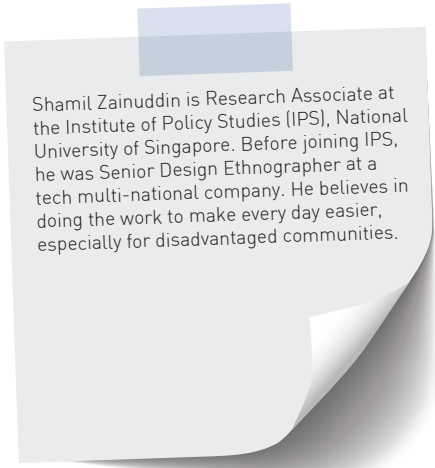
Other than pushing for algorithmic legibility, some labour scholars have argued that data cooperatives would empower platform workers by helping them compare fares for similar routes and distances<sup>16</sup>. This would help workers know whether they are being fairly paid. An example of such a data collective is Driver's

Employing frameworks and principles from the emerging field of XAI or explainable artificial intelligence might help organisations make their AI systems more legible and accountable. XAI-engineered systems will allow relevant stakeholders to understand AI results and see that they meet regulatory standards. This would help increase trust between humans and machines or, in this case, between workers and platform providers.

Seat Coop which was started in the US<sup>17</sup>. These initiatives help collect data using a different app and help workers better understand their working conditions, like their actual hourly rate, how much they make after expenses and time to log in to particular platforms to maximise pay. Other organisations like the Worker Info Exchange (WIE), which is a platform that a British driver started, are responding to the information asymmetry that is said to exist in the gig economy by helping workers retrieve their personal data from various platforms<sup>18</sup>. Associations in Singapore set up to represent the interest of private hire drivers and delivery riders might want to take a leaf from such collectives so that data is available when needed in times of dispute and/or providing drivers with personalised tips on how to better their earnings.

In summary, significant progress has been made in giving gig workers in Singapore better protections, benefits, and representation. We do not yet know how these rules will be implemented or how increased costs will affect things like fares, but they seem consistent with making the workers' jobs safer and more viable in the long term. On top of this, I believe we should also address issues related to

opaque algorithmic management systems and work towards making them more accountable. This is so that gig workers like Neil will finally know why he earns the amount he does, whether what he earns is fair, and whether the daily clearing of his phone's cache actually works. ■



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<sup>14</sup> Surkov, A., Srinivas, V., and Gregorie, J. *Unleashing the power of machine learning models in banking through explainable artificial intelligence (XAI)*. Deloitte Insights. 2022, May 17. Retrieved from: <https://www2.deloitte.com/xe/en/insights/industry/financial-services/explainable-ai-in-banking.html>

<sup>15</sup> Boehm, J., Grennan, L., Singla, A., and Smaje, K. *Why digital trust truly matters*. McKinsey & Company. 2022. Retrieved from: <https://www.mckinsey.com/capabilities/quantumblack/our-insights/why-digital-trust-truly-matters>

<sup>16</sup> Pentland, A., and Hardjono, T. *Data Cooperatives in Building the New Economy led.* MIT Press, 2020. Retrieved from: <https://assets.pubpub.org/c2g7vkvs/f0013654-2966-4def-a81f-3117ce0724f3.pdf>

<sup>17</sup> See: *Driver's Seat Coop*. Retrieved from: <https://driversseat.co/>

<sup>18</sup> See: *Worker Info Exchange*. Retrieved from: <https://www.workerinfoexchange.org/>

# INTEGRATING MUSLIM EXPATS & MIGRANT FOREIGN WORKERS INTO SINGAPOREAN COMMUNITY

BY AHMAD UBAIDILLAH MOHAMED KHAIR



The Muslim community in Singapore has never been monolithic; it has always been diverse in a variety of ways, be it in terms of ethnicities or religious orientations. This diversity is acknowledged in our religious sources and traditions, where it is mentioned in several instances about the plurality of society. In the Quran, Allah decrees, *“Indeed, We created you from a male and a female, and made you into peoples and tribes so that you may get to know one another.”* (Quran, 49:13) Through this diversity, we are able to see how these differences that exist between various segments of the community can be harnessed for collective benefit and progress. It should be realised that each segment within the Muslim community – regardless of how they are defined, be it through race, religious orientation, or occupation – has their own strengths and ways of contributing to the community. Each has their own resources to give back to the community, be it time, energy, or material.

This diversity and the benefits that it brings can be seen from the early days of pre-modern Singapore to our present time, with Muslims from different backgrounds choosing Singapore as their home. Historically, Muslims from various regions and countries have travelled and migrated to Singapore in search of trading and commercial opportunities. During pre-modern Singapore, we saw Arab and Indian traders and merchants who settled in Singapore and subsequently established themselves as community leaders and philanthropists. These pioneers greatly contributed to the nation-building process of Singapore<sup>1</sup>. These merchants, along with contributions from the local Muslim community, built mosques that are still operating until today. Masjid Hajjah Fatimah, Masjid Ba’alwie, Masjid Abdul Gafoor, Masjid Malabar, and Masjid Angullia are a few examples of their lasting contributions.

In current context, the local Muslim community has become more diverse. With the advent of modernisation and globalisation, Singapore is constantly attracting Muslims from different parts of the world to work and live here. This

has led to the formation of a substantial community of Muslim expatriates in Singapore, whose presence has contributed significantly to the vibrant fabric of Singaporean society. We are fortunate to have such an array of expatriates from different regions and countries, such as Indonesia, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Turkey, and the Middle East. These individuals contribute to various sectors within Singapore, such as tech, research, academia, medical and education. With their unique backgrounds, traditions, and perspectives, they have played a vital role in enhancing both communal and social elements in Singapore, be it culturally, religiously, or economically.

Despite the impact and influence of Muslim expatriates in Singapore, there is more that can be done to further analyse and leverage the potentialities of Muslim expats in relation to integration with the local Muslim community, as well as being a catalyst for growth and upliftment. During the 3<sup>rd</sup> National Convention of Singapore Muslim Professionals held by AMP Singapore in 2012, the Muslim expats community in Singapore was identified as one of the focal points of discussion. This was conducted with the objective of integrating them with the local Muslim community for the purpose of achieving progress for the Muslim community in Singapore.

*“Indeed, the integration of the local Muslim community and foreign Muslim communities will result in a Muslim community that is not only larger in numbers but more affluent and dynamic thus shaping positively the future landscape of the Muslim community in Singapore. The local Muslim populace could in turn harness the talent and resources of the foreign Muslim community to assist in propelling the overall community forward. In essence, the Muslim expatriate community can be the new engine of growth for the local Muslim community.”*<sup>2</sup>

A panel was drawn up to conduct a study on the matter of Muslim expatriates in Singapore, which resulted in a number of proposals and recommendations. While it should be acknowledged that some time

While several suggestions were proposed, one that should be pondered upon is the integration of Muslim expatriates into the community and Singapore society. Such integration will lead to a more culturally vibrant community, which will lead to further benefits such as the development of social capital and networks. This should not only be perceived in an economic sense, but religious, cultural, and artistic as well. A community that is eclectic in its outlook will surely stand to benefit from the diversity that surrounds it.

<sup>1</sup> See: Chabasha, A. R. *Indian Muslims in Singapore: History, Heritage and Contributions*. Centre for Research on Islamic and Malay Affairs (RIMA), 2021; and Wahap, R. *Singapore and the Arab Connection*. Edited by Saat, N., Zohri, W. H., and Rasheed, Z. A. *Beyond Bicentennial*. World Publishing, 2020. pp. 641-649

<sup>2</sup> See: AMP Singapore. *Muslim Expatriates Paper in The Next Decade: Strengthening Our Community's Architecture* (Convention Journal), 2012. Available at: <http://amp.org.sg/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/5-Muslim-Expatriates-Paper.pdf>



has passed since the Convention, we can find that the points raised are still relevant and should be reflected upon in current context.

An example would be the fundamental objective of the Muslim expatriates panel, which was to reflect on how foreign Muslim talent should be harnessed as a new engine of growth for a more dynamic community. While several suggestions were proposed, one that should be pondered upon is the integration of Muslim expatriates into the community and Singapore society. Such integration will lead to a more culturally vibrant community, which will lead to further benefits such as the development of social capital and networks. This should not only be perceived in an economic sense, but religious, cultural, and artistic as well. A community that is eclectic in its outlook will surely stand to benefit from the diversity that surrounds it.

In current context, there is more that can be done to develop common spaces for both local and foreign Muslims to gather and engage with one another. These spaces, which can be held both virtual and physical, should be directed towards providing opportunities for people to learn about one another's culture, and form organic friendships and relationships. With the existence of several active social groups, such as the Singapore Bangladeshi Society, Singapore Pakistani Association, and Indonesian Muslim Association, the local Muslim community has several avenues to engage with these communities.

The potentiality of our common religious identity should also be utilised as a point for *taaruf*, as aforementioned in the Quranic verse, which means to know one another and benefit from our differences. While we share similar religious beliefs, we should continue striving to ensure that our religious spaces remain open and welcoming for all Muslims. In recent times, we have seen how local mosques have provided spaces for foreign Muslims to conduct their events and programmes. The local Muslim community has also made changes to accommodate non-Malay Muslim speakers with more content being in English, including our Friday sermons. Our religious spaces can build upon this culture of openness, such as by organising cultural exhibitions regarding

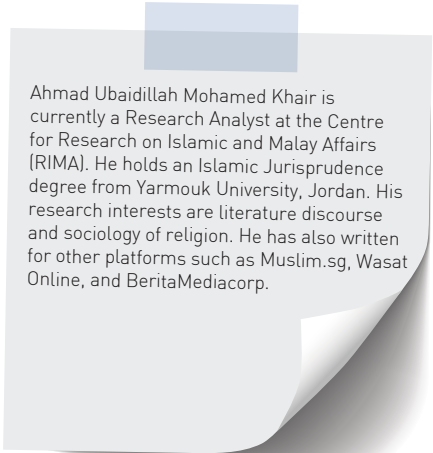
the different communities of Muslims in Singapore. This will surely benefit our local youths through exposing them to the wider fabric of the Muslim community that extends beyond their Singapore.

While the term expats denote those of higher socio-economic status (SES), it is important for us to look towards improving integration for segments of our Muslim community who are of the lower SES, such as migrant foreign workers and domestic workers. These individuals are mostly from low-income families, striving in Singapore to earn money for their loved ones back home. Following our religious values and teachings, it is part of our Islamic faith to extend a hand to those in need. As how we would want to be assisted and welcomed when working in a foreign country far from home, that is how we should conduct ourselves.

In recent times, we have seen more efforts by local grassroots organisations in reaching out to these communities and assist them in various ways. Organisations such as Muslim Youth Forum and Al Ustaz SG have initiated various events and programmes to show appreciation for migrant workers. On the other hand, our mosques and religious institutions such as Muslim Converts' Association of Singapore (Darul Arqam), have provided spaces for domestic workers to gather and attend religious classes. On social media, we see initiatives such as #SGMuslim4MigrantWorkers that mobilises the community to direct their Zakat to help migrant workers in need. Such initiatives should be applauded. Our role as the wider community is to support these organisations and their programmes to ensure that they remain sustainable.

While there is much that can be done to integrate and benefit our wider foreign Muslim community, it is important that we hold on to two important religious teachings. The first is the Prophet's (*peace be upon him*) narration, "The upper hand is better than the lower one (i.e. the spending hand is better than the receiving hand)". This can be perceived as an advocacy by the Prophet (*pbuh*) to strive in being of benefit to others. In another narration, the Prophet (*pbuh*) reminds us, "None of you will have faith until he loves for his brother what he

loves for himself". This underlines the importance of empathy; what we would like and dislike for ourselves, we should apply the same to others. Only then we will be able to witness the beauty of both religion and humanity. ■



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# Maqam Habib Noh: *Keramats* and Their Place in Singapore's Public Memory

BY WAN NUR SYAFIQA SYED YUSOFF



*Keramats* (or sacred shrines) occupy a peculiar space in Singapore. Against modern skyscrapers and sites of gentrification, these grave-shrines stand out with their old tombstones adorned with yellow pieces of cloth. Certain *keramats* can be clearly seen in areas such as Fort Canning Park, Outram Park, and even in the Central Business District. However, their numbers have declined steadily over the years, making them a more common sight in the past.

Past locations of these *keramats*, which have either been exhumed or demolished, can be traced through various historical sources. In 2011, NUS Museum held an exhibition entitled, *The Sufi and the Bearded Man: Remembering a Keramat in Contemporary Singapore*, which displayed photographs and artefacts related to the past Siti Maryam shrine located at Kallang<sup>1</sup>. Scholars such as William L. Gibson offer comprehensive works on past and existing *keramats*, with extensive narration of oral traditions associated with these sites<sup>2</sup>. Old newspaper articles similarly featured certain sites, implying that they were of public interest. In 1939<sup>3</sup> and 1952<sup>4</sup>, The Straits Times published two features on *keramats*, noting how they were respected by visitors of different ethnicities and religions.

A multitude of factors culminated in the steady decline of the popularity of these spaces within the Malay community. An oft-cited reason is the shifts of beliefs within the Malay community in Singapore. Earlier works on *keramats* that were written by colonial authorities, such as Walter W. Skeat<sup>5</sup> and R. O. Winstedt<sup>6</sup>, characterise *keramat*-worshipping as Malay practices. While these works lack nuance and do not analyse the influences of different cultures on visiting such spaces, they hint at the pervasiveness of this practice among the Malay community. Other

scholars in post-colonial Singapore subsequently tended to address Malays' lessened interactions with these sites. Cheu Hock Tong historicised the act of worshipping Malay *keramats* and how the Chinese eventually became primary worshippers of the sites, noting that Malays were no longer as involved as compared to the past<sup>7</sup>. Rivers also notes a "Chinese take-over" of *keramats* in Singapore<sup>8</sup>. A separate study on the management of Kusu Island cited that close to 100,000 to 200,000 pilgrims visit the island every year, hailing from Singapore and other Southeast Asian states<sup>9</sup>. These visitors are mostly devotees of Chinese folk religion asking for blessings at the Da Bo Gong Temple, who also visit the *keramats* dedicated to Syed Abdul Rahman, Nenek Ghalib and Puteri Fatimah as part of their pilgrimage. Another *keramat*, dedicated to Datuk Gong, is located within the Loyang Tua Pek Kong temple. According to the legend stated on the temple's website, Datuk Gong is a spirit that was once respected by Malays<sup>10</sup>. The Buddhist temple is now mostly known for its 'multi-religious' nature, housing different Buddhist, Taoist, and Hindu deities alongside the *keramat*.

Within the Muslim community, a site that remains popular is the Maqam Habib Noh. Perched at the top of Palmer Hill, the *maqam* (tomb of a holy Muslim person) lies beside the Haji Muhammad Salleh Mosque. The history of the *maqam* itself seems to be shrouded in mystery. When Habib Noh passed away, there was an incident that prevented him from being buried at a Muslim cemetery, and it was revealed that he specially chose the hill as his resting place<sup>11</sup>. A century later, when the Singapore government planned to demolish the *maqam* to build a highway, the construction company faced many challenges that prevented it from happening. Instead, the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS)

upgraded the space, allowing it to remain to this day.

Moving beyond the ritualistic importance of such spaces, it is fruitful to think about how these sites are valuable in other ways. In a country where land is scarce, space becomes a large concern for city planners. What bears interest is the remaining *keramats* in Singapore. With constant redevelopment, *keramats* that occupy prime land are indicative of a special significance. Indeed, these sites have been deemed as important heritage sites by various organisations, as they offer a rich history that is meaningful to a diverse group of people. Maqam Habib Noh is no exception.

## THE MAQAM AS A HERITAGE SITE

The significance of the *maqam* is undoubtedly tied to the figure behind it. Habib Noh himself is popular among Muslims in Singapore and beyond. He was well-known in his lifetime, especially when he resided in Singapore from 1819 to 1866. Many miracles were also ascribed to him, with oral traditions being passed down and compiled in a biography by Muhammad Ghouse Khan Surattee of Al Firdaus Mosque<sup>12</sup>. Newspaper articles also featured the Habib, citing him as an important figure in the community<sup>13</sup>. It is no wonder then that his grave would be deemed significant by many.

Heritage sites in Singapore are often identified by the public but may need recognition from the state. In studying the heritage value of the *maqam*, it is important to note the history of heritage conservation in Singapore. Kevin Blackburn and Alvin Tan Peng Hong suggest that preservation efforts of certain buildings were already made in late colonial Singapore<sup>14</sup>. After World War II, urban planning in Singapore was primarily concerned with

<sup>1</sup> Gibson, W. L. *A Complete Catalog of Keramat in Singapore*. National Library Board. 2022.

<sup>2</sup> NUS Museum. *The Sufi and the Bearded Man: Re-remembering a Keramat in Contemporary Singapore*. 2011. Available at: [https://www.nus.edu.sg/museum/pdf/2010/Sufi\\_And\\_The\\_Bearded\\_Man.pdf](https://www.nus.edu.sg/museum/pdf/2010/Sufi_And_The_Bearded_Man.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Yahya. *Singapore's Keramats*. The Straits Times. 1939, June 11. Available at: <https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/straitstimes19390611-1.2.119>

<sup>4</sup> Street, S. *Singaporeana*. The Straits Times. 1952, January 5. Available at: <https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/straitstimes19520105-1.2.92>

<sup>5</sup> Skeat, W. W. *Malay Magic: Being An Introduction to the Folklore and Popular Religion of the Malay Peninsula*. Oxford University Press. 1984

<sup>6</sup> Winstedt, R. O. *Keramats: Sacred Sites and Persons in Malaya*. Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society 2, No. 3, 1924, pp. 264-279

<sup>7</sup> Cheu, H. T. *The Sincization of Malay Keramats in Malaysia*. Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society 71, No. 2, 1998, p. 31

<sup>8</sup> Rivers, P. J. *Keramats in Singapore in the Mid-Twentieth Century*. Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society 76, No. 2, 2003, pp. 93-119

<sup>9</sup> Chia, J. M. *Managing the Tortoise Island: Tua Pek Kong Temple, Pilgrimage, and Social Change in Pulau Kusu, 1967-2007*. New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies 11, 2, 2009, p. 81

<sup>10</sup> *Datuk Gong, Loyang Tua Pek Kong*. Available at: <http://www.lytpk.org.sg/legend.datuk>

<sup>11</sup> Surattee, M. G. K. *Lambang Terukir: Dalam Mengisahkan Manaqib Habib Noh bin Muhammad Alhabsyi yang Syahir*. Masjid Al Firdaus. 2006

<sup>12</sup> Ibid

<sup>13</sup> Yahya. *Singapore's Keramats*. The Straits Times. 1939, June 11. Available at: <https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/straitstimes19390611-1.2.119>

<sup>14</sup> Blackburn, K., and Tan, A. P. H. *The Emergency of Heritage Conservation in Singapore and the Preservation of Monuments Board (1958-76)*. Southeast Asian Studies. Vol. 4, No. 2, 2015, pp. 341-364

The significance of the *maqam* is undoubtedly tied to the figure behind it. Habib Noh himself is popular among Muslims in Singapore and beyond. He was well-known in his lifetime, especially when he resided in Singapore from 1819 to 1866. Many miracles were also ascribed to him, with oral traditions being passed down and compiled in a biography by Muhammad Ghouse Khan Surattee of Al Firdaus Mosque. Newspaper articles also featured the Habib, citing him as an important figure in the community. It is no wonder then that his grave would be deemed significant by many.

controlling the density of different areas of Singapore. However, the 1955 Master Plan included a table listing, *Ancient Monuments and Land and Buildings of Architectural And/Or Historic Interest*<sup>15</sup>. Of these 32 sites, 25 were either churches, temples, mosques or graves, which included Maqam Habib Noh. Blackburn and Tan further argue that these buildings were chosen due to Western ideas of heritage, which was concerned with the “authentic and original”. For Singapore, these sites were either of ethnic or religious importance.

Being on the identified list did not actually exempt sites from being demolished for urban redevelopment in the 1960s. Blackburn and Tan cite the Hajjah Fatimah Mosque and the Outram Park Prison as prime examples. The mosque was allowed to remain despite

the demolition of most of Kampong Rochor, while the prison was demolished in 1966<sup>16</sup>. Certainly, it is important to note the different significance of the spaces as Hajjah Fatimah is an important figure in Singapore and was laid to rest in the premises of the building with other descendants of the Alsagoff family<sup>17</sup>. Nonetheless, the case of the prison showed that there were no proper stipulations to protect sites that were on the list. Being gazetted may not necessarily bring tangible benefits to the site, especially when it comes to remaining in the ever-changing landscape of Singapore.

Despite Maqam Habib Noh no longer being on the list of gazetted buildings by the Preservation of Monument Board from the 1970s, scholars and activists still consider it a heritage site. Hence, it is

important to consider how the discourse on heritage in Singapore has shifted over the years. In the 1980s, heritage in Singapore became tied to tourism as it became a prominent source of revenue. Blackburn and Tan argue that Western hegemonic thoughts of heritage were most prominent in the 1950s, with its legacy still manifesting in how buildings are officially considered worthy of preservation. Heritage remained tied to showcasing different ethnicities as “Asianness” became a way for Singapore to showcase itself as a special “global city”<sup>18</sup>. Religious sites seem to perpetuate this image and subsequently became national monuments, accounting for almost half of this list<sup>19</sup>. Although there are mosques on the list, *keramats* are noticeably excluded. This is perhaps indicative of how *keramats* may not be officially considered a religious site by the different governing bodies in Singapore.

While it appears that the state is the final arbiter of determining heritage sites, the role of non-state actors should not be neglected. From Blackburn and Tan’s article, there were already groups such as Friends of Singapore that advocated for preservation. However, other voices appear to be mostly marginalised until 2001. Yuen cites the Urban Redevelopment Authority’s 2001 Master Plan as significant in stipulating public participation in determining heritage sites, especially for those in the communities associated with the space<sup>20</sup>. In the case of Palmer Road, scholars and activists have been active in calling for its conservation due to its rich history. For example, Johannes Widodo wrote a paper in 2004 on the area as a “humble attempt to bring attention” to the different historical sites in the vicinity<sup>21</sup>. One such site is Tanjong Malang, citing its historical significance as the location of the Syed Yasin Keramat that was erected in 1823. Multi-ethnic villages were also located nearby housing the Parsi and Hakka communities. Other than Maqam Habib Noh, there were other historic places of worship such as

<sup>15</sup> Colony of Singapore. *Master Plan*. 1958, April. Available at: [https://www.ura.gov.sg/dc/mp58/mp58map\\_index.htm](https://www.ura.gov.sg/dc/mp58/mp58map_index.htm)

<sup>16</sup> Blackburn and Tan, p. 348

<sup>17</sup> Chung, S. P. *Creating ‘Family’ Networks across Time and Space: The Alsagoffs in Singapore, 1824–2009*. *Modern Asian Studies* 52, 2, 2008, p. 466

<sup>18</sup> Yuen, B. *Reclaiming Cultural Heritage in Singapore*. *Urban Affairs Review*, Vol. 41, No. 6, 2006, p. 835

<sup>19</sup> Henderson, J. *Understanding and using built heritage: Singapore’s national monuments and conservation areas*. *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 17, 1, 2006, p. 11

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, p. 52

<sup>21</sup> Widodo, J. *Preserving the Memory of Place: Case for support for Palmer Road Area Conservation in Singapore*. 2004

However, heritage researchers report that the lease of the Maqam Habib Noh and the nearby Masjid Haji Muhammad Salleh are expected to expire in 2025. While one can't predict the state's decision-making process when it comes to such spaces, we can be hopeful that community efforts do play a part in highlighting the significance of different sites in Singapore.

the Fu De Chi temple and the Seng Wong Beo temple, built in 1844 and 1906 respectively. Kampung Sambau was also a significant site that existed where the *maqam* is located<sup>22</sup>. The village's occupants were Melaka Malays and it was also the home of Haji Muhammad Salleh, the man behind the mosque built near the *maqam* in 1903. Singapore Heritage Society has also been conducting studies on Tanjong Malang and even brought groups on heritage walks.

In 2015, The Straits Times published an article on Maqam Habib Noh as a "historic" site<sup>23</sup>. In the midst of its plans for upgrades, it was hoped that the *maqam* would be given "preservation or conservation status". Other than having heritage value, it is a space of 'tranquility' within the Central Business District of Singapore. In its shared environment within the city, the significance of the *maqam* is now expanded beyond being just a *keramat*. It seems that the only way to further elevate the *maqam* as a heritage site is getting it gazetted by the state. One of its latest existential threats was the building of Prince Edward MRT Station. It is now planned to 'skirt around' the *maqam*, assuaging previous fears that the *maqam* would be demolished for the station. Instead, other sites such as Palmer House would be demolished as the involved governing bodies wanted to leave "structures with the most heritage value" intact<sup>24</sup>. However, heritage researchers report that the lease of the Maqam Habib Noh and the nearby Masjid Haji Muhammad Salleh are expected to expire in 2025<sup>25</sup>. While one can't predict the state's decision-making process when it comes to such spaces, we can be hopeful that community efforts do play a part in highlighting the significance of different sites in Singapore.

### SITES AS PUBLIC MEMORY

Amid researching about *keramats* in Singapore, I personally sensed a palpable loss as many such sites no longer exist

in Singapore. This only makes current efforts to conserve remaining *keramats* more important to support as they are valuable, tangible sources of history and culture. A recent example would be the Moonstone Lane Keramat, which was discovered in 2019. Although it was virtually unknown before then, members of the community such as Assistant Professor Imran Tajudeen from the National University of Singapore's Department of Architecture was able to garner interest in investigating the site. To this day, it remains undemolished as it was argued to be the resting place of Syarifah Zainah, a descendant of Habib Noh and the Aljunied family<sup>26</sup>. By collectively deciding what sites remain important in Singapore, we can hopefully play a bigger role in deciding what remains in our public memory in the time to come. ■

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<sup>22</sup> *Singapura Stories* [Facebook post]. 2016. Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/SingapuraStories/posts/kampung-sambau-masjid-haji-muhammad-salleh-and-makam-habib-noh-are-part-of-tanjo/924011544361711/>

<sup>23</sup> Zaccheus, M. *Historic hilltop shrine for renowned Muslim saint set for upgrade*. The Straits Times, 2015, February 12. Available at: <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/historic-hilltop-shrine-for-renowned-muslim-saint-set-for-upgrade>

<sup>24</sup> Zaccheus, M. *Parts of heritage site Palmer House to be cleared for MRT*. The Straits Times, 2016, February 26. Available at: <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/parts-of-heritage-site-palmer-house-to-be-cleared-for-mrt>

<sup>25</sup> Loh, P. Y., Chua, A. L., Wang, L., and Ismail, F. *Singapore Heritage Society – Singapore's historic sites of worship: Communities in a changing city*. Kontinentalist, 2020, September 2. Available at: <https://kontinentalist.com/stories/singapore-religious-heritage-sites-history-and-conservation>

<sup>26</sup> Zaccheus, M. *Exhumation plans on hold for 1930s grave at Moonstone Lane after heritage community digs up its history*. The Straits Times, 2019, March 26. Available at: <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/exhumation-plans-on-hold-for-1930s-grave-at-moonstone-lane-after-heritage-community-digs>

# Social Context and One's Religious Experience

BY SYED IMAD ALATAS



Today, around two billion people identify as Muslims across the world. They live in various parts of the world, from North America to Southeast Asia, in addition to regions we may not associate with a Muslim presence, such as Eastern Europe, South America, and North Asia. The cultural expressions of Muslims in the world are as varied as their geographical distribution. One element of cultural expression is language. A Malay Muslim in Singapore and a Muslim in Pakistan may share the same faith but may not necessarily understand one another (unless the two of them are accomplished polyglots in Urdu and Malay). For Muslim women who wear the *hijab*, there are differences too in terms of style. Islamic architectural motifs differ across the Muslim world, with mosques being an example. Another significant source of difference among Muslims is the environment in which they live. This article will focus on how the social context of a Muslim in a particular society influences the ease (or difficulty) they feel as they strive to practise their religion.

I grew up in Singapore for all of 30 years, with long holidays spent in my birthplace, Kuala Lumpur. A religious community for me was present very early on in my childhood. This would be understandable in Malaysia especially, a Muslim-majority country. Since primary school, I would go to Ba'alwīe Mosque in Bukit Timah every week for the Friday prayers. It was a ritual, even if I did not go every Friday, but I knew a Muslim community was within reach. After prayers, there would be lunch followed by a post-lunch tea chat. The same community was there during Ramadan. Almost every evening I would go there for *iftar* and stayed for *tarawih* prayers when I could. I looked forward to going to the mosque during the festive season. During the year I sat for my 'O' levels exams, I would sleep over at the mosque and go back home in the morning, only to return in the evening for *iftar*. During National Service, I served in the Singapore Civil Defence Force (SCDF), where most of my colleagues were Malay. Although Muslims are a minority in Singapore, I never felt out of place or different. I never felt like a religious minority, perhaps because the Muslim

community was present and I shared similar life experiences with Muslim friends or people I saw at the mosque. In Anglo Chinese School (ACS), a Methodist school, being Muslim did not feel like an anomaly either.

By the time I arrived in the US in August 2021, Joe Biden had been sworn in as president seven months earlier. A Trump re-election probably would have increased even more suspicion and misperceptions regarding Muslims. I felt safe being a Muslim in the US, and still do. I never really worried about being on the receiving end of religious discrimination. I have not experienced it thus far. However, feeling safe and feeling at home, or religiously inspired, are two different feelings. The transition for me was also quite drastic. I had grown up in Singapore most of my life. I was not just moving to a new country. I was moving to a new Islamic landscape, one I was not familiar with. Would there be a Ba'alwīe Mosque equivalent in the US?

Our social environment plays a significant role in our religious experience. While it is true that religiosity is an individual journey, the social environment is a key part of this journey. If one is born into a family that prays five times a day, the child might pick up on these practices. Or they may be religious up to a certain age and cease practising. Alternatively, a child may be born into a family not cognisant of Islamic practices but end up cultivating their own relationship with God as they get older. The same goes for friendships. The friends that you associate with more can have an impact on your own religious trajectory. Faith of course wavers, wherever we live. I think most, if not all, Muslims can attest to this reality. Hence, it is not easy to draw a linear relationship between the religiosity of one's immediate environment and the religiosity of the individual. What I am talking about is nothing new. Many studies have looked at the effect of one's social environment on their religious experience. The family is indeed the core of religious socialisation for many youths<sup>1</sup>. Adolescents are more likely to be religious in religious families than in families where religious beliefs hold little significance. Along the same

vein, other studies suggest that the religious practices of parents are a reliable indicator of the religious life of their children. My article is more personal and talks about the broader society, not just the family. My experience may or may not resonate with other readers.

Living in North Carolina, admittedly not representative of the US, I can feel the difference in religious experience when compared to my years in Singapore. Where I am (Chapel Hill, North Carolina), there is just one mosque. Without a car, going there requires a bit of effort. Granted, the simple, but costly solution would be to get a car, but that is beside the point. Not everyone has a car, whether due to financial constraints or personal choice. Not having a car has a psychological effect. Places that you want to go to feel a lot further away. However, this is not the case in Singapore. You do not need a car. Mosques are reasonably physically accessible by public transport, unlike in Chapel Hill, where buses operate less frequently. Mosques in Singapore are usually open during the day too. In Charlottesville, Virginia, I decided to perform *Zuhr* prayer at an Islamic centre on a weekday afternoon, but it was closed. Alternative centres or mosques were far away. Apart from being homesick, being in the US made me realise that I took the geographical distribution of mosques in Singapore for granted.

Mosques are a physical symbol of a Muslim community. People also define that community. Where I am, it is not easy to find Muslims who are around my age – 31. The Muslim Student Association tends to comprise undergraduates, some as young as twenty. They are genuinely nice people who care about their faith. However, religion is not just about the theological, but the relationships you build with people in this world. It is the interactions with people around you that determine how you feel in a community. It is not easy to build relationships with people so much younger than you. Common interests are hard to find. There are of course graduate students who are Muslim, but graduate school is a solitary and lonely enterprise. Graduate Muslim students are then hard to find. Lacking

<sup>1</sup> Sârbu, E. A., Lazâr, F., and Popovici, A. F. *Individual, Familial and Social Environment Factors Associated with Religiosity Among Urban High School Students*. *Review Religious Research*, 63, 2021. pp. 489-509

**Our social environment plays a significant role in our religious experience. While it is true that religiosity is an individual journey, the social environment is a key part of this journey. If one is born into a family that prays five times a day, the child might pick up on these practices. Or they may be religious up to a certain age and cease practising. Alternatively, a child may be born into a family not cognisant of Islamic practices but end up cultivating their own relationship with God as they get older. The same goes for friendships. The friends that you associate with more can have an impact on your own religious trajectory. Faith of course wavers, wherever we live. I think most, if not all, Muslims can attest to this reality.**

relationships with other Muslims for whatever reason also means lacking a sense of belonging. Lacking a sense of belonging does not automatically compromise one's religiosity, but it does make it difficult to feel like you are part of a Muslim community.

A community is also defined by shared cultural references, such as sports. The sports culture in the US primarily consists of American football, basketball, and baseball, sports that I am simply apathetic to. I watched a live basketball game between the University of North Carolina (UNC) and the University of Kansas for the college championship. That was in April 2022. That was my first and probably last time watching a live basketball game. Sports alone seems like a trivial topic for this article, but they are part and parcel of American popular culture, whether you are a Muslim or not. Growing up in

Singapore, the English Premier League was the talk of the town, whether in mosques or Malay classes in secondary school. Manchester United was usually the star of the conversation then. In Southeast Asia, ASEAN football competitions reflect football's prestige and are popular in the Muslim-majority countries of Malaysia and Indonesia. It is fun to talk about soccer with Muslims in Singapore but not so much at UNC, albeit with a few exceptions. It is not that sports chit-chat is supposed to enhance your religiosity, but having less things to talk about with fellow Muslims makes it more difficult to feel like you are in a community.

There is also the added element of being an international student from a region far away. Although this relates to a lack of shared cultural references that I mentioned earlier, it also does not help that Malaysia and Singapore are countries that are

mentally far away for most Americans I have interacted with. It is difficult to feel like you are in a community when you know the place you come from is almost an afterthought for those around you. I am certain this article would read differently if I could interact with more Muslim international students on campus. In Singapore, I feel more heard and seen within the Muslim community. Maybe there will be jokes from others about Malaysia which I indulge in too, but those jokes only emphasise my visibility which I appreciate.

As Muslims, we may seek to establish a closer relationship with God, whatever it may be now. It is our individual responsibility, but some social environments are simply more supportive of this relationship. I have talked about the US and Singapore. Imagine living in a society that is hostile towards the religion, or even indifferent. I imagine it will be harder to build that relationship, though not impossible. In fact, experiencing persecution could prove to be an impetus to get closer to God. In other cases, a government may be too strict with their interpretation of Islam to the point that it becomes disenchanting. In Iran, a growing number of Iranians seem to be leaving Shia Islam, "or experimenting with alternatives to Shiism"<sup>2</sup> such as Christianity, Zoroastrianism, and Bahaism. Ultimately, Islam is about your relationship with God and your fate in the afterlife. However, the journey between now and the afterlife is where the social environment comes into play. It influences what kind of religious community we are in, and how much we feel at home in this community. ■

Syed Imad Alatas is currently pursuing his PhD in Sociology at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. His main research interests are in gender and religion, topics on which he has written for Singaporean and Malaysian publications.

<sup>2</sup> The Economist. *Disenchanted Iranians are turning to other faiths*. 2021, January 21. Available at: <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2021/01/21/disenchanted-iranians-are-turning-to-other-faiths>



# REAL ESTATE INVESTING WITH **KHAIRUL ABDULLAH**

BY NUR DIYANA JALIL



Abu Dhabi, the economic superpower of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), is renowned as a prime location for real estate investments, offering diverse opportunities for both local and international investors<sup>1</sup>. Driven by its government's efforts to diversify the economy beyond oil, the emerging new sectors have created more job opportunities, thus driving a surge in demand for residential and commercial properties. The real estate sector has continued to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic and saw massive growth with the value of transactions in the first quarter of 2023 increasing by 147 percent<sup>2</sup>, compared to the same period last year.

With more than a decade of experience in investment roles across private equity, real estate investment managers and developers globally, 38-year-old Khairul Abdullah decided to move to Abu Dhabi at the height of the pandemic to work for a leading real estate investor and developer, Aldar Properties.

Khairul shares his journey from how he started his career in the real estate industry to how he enjoys the current quality of life in Abu Dhabi with the *Karyawan* team.

**Q: Could you tell us more about yourself and your family?**

**Khairul:** I am an only child raised by a single mother, who worked odd jobs in hawker centres and school canteens to make ends meet. We did not have a place of our own, hence for the most part of my life, I was living in my late grandmother's flat with several of my mother's younger siblings. Growing up, I remember my aunts taking care of me when my mother went to work. These experiences have essentially shaped who I am today, as one who firmly believes that it takes a village to raise a child and will always have deep empathy for people from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

I got married after completing both my master's and bachelor's degrees from National University of Singapore (NUS). Today I am blessed with three children – Mikhail, 9, Mishal, 8, and Nusaybah, 5, who all go to school here in Abu Dhabi.



Khairul with his colleagues at Aldar Properties

**Q: What led you to carve a career in real estate?**

**Khairul:** I went through the typical junior college (JC) route. So, like many of my peers, I was mathematically and scientifically inclined. Maths and Science were all we knew. In fact, till today, most of my JC peers are in the STEM field.

Luckily for me, I was exposed to the world of real estate and commerce during my National Service (NS) days when I got hooked on the TV series, *The Apprentice*. It was a famous reality TV show that featured contestants vying for a job with Donald Trump, a real estate mogul. That was when I decided to switch my NUS course from a STEM-related degree to real estate – a move that I definitely did not regret.

I was in NUS for six years where I did my bachelor's degree with a specialisation in real estate finance for the first four years. Then in the next two years, I successfully completed my master's degree in urban economics while working as a research assistant within the NUS Department of Real Estate.

**Q: What does your job entail?**

**Khairul:** I started as a real estate finance researcher at NUS, and I have since spent the next decade in investment roles across

private equity, real estate investment managers and developers. My career has given me global exposure, travelling to various regions within Asia Pacific, the Middle East, Europe and the US. A lot of the work at the junior level was on investment analysis and recommending to senior leaders on the feasibility of various real estate deals. When I got to middle management, the work entailed mentoring junior colleagues and managing the transaction process. At a more senior level, a lot of the work is on originating transaction ideas, strategising and interacting with investors.

Today, as a Director, I oversee the overall group corporate finance function at Aldar. My job involves crafting policies and advising the CFO and CEO on capital allocation, strategic mergers, and acquisitions and investment appraisal. I also double-hat as a board member for one of our largest subsidiaries, Aldar Hospitality.

**Q: What has your experience been working for a leading real estate investor and developer in Abu Dhabi? Is it a competitive working environment?**

**Khairul:** My past global experiences have definitely helped with the transition. Even though I have changed employers, I am still fundamentally in real estate, a sector that I have covered for years. Thus far, the

<sup>1</sup> Vernon, H. *Abu Dhabi: A Prime Spot for Real Estate Investment*. 2023, March 8. Available at: <https://www.benoitproperties.com/news/abu-dhabi-a-prime-spot-for-real-estate-investment/>  
<sup>2</sup> Arabian Business. *Abu Dhabi real estate sees massive 147% growth, \$7.6bn property deals in Q1 2023*. May 3. Available at: [www.arabianbusiness.com/industries/real-estate/abu-dhabi-real-estate-sees-massive-147-growth-7-6bn-property-deals-in-q1](http://www.arabianbusiness.com/industries/real-estate/abu-dhabi-real-estate-sees-massive-147-growth-7-6bn-property-deals-in-q1)

Aldar experience has been nothing short of great. I have colleagues from multinational backgrounds, and we have a very collaborative environment here at Aldar.

**Q: What challenges did you encounter when you moved to Abu Dhabi and how did you overcome them?**

**Khairul:** Logistics will always be a challenge for anyone who is moving to a new place, especially overseas. In my case, there is the need to ship certain belongings, search for a new house to stay in, and of course, secure a school for my children, which is very competitive in Abu Dhabi. Luckily, Aldar helped a fair bit with the onboarding. You have to do your research on schools and areas to stay in before you leave Singapore. Connecting with fellow Singaporeans in Abu Dhabi also helps.

**Q: What were you most worried about before you made the move to Abu Dhabi?**

**Khairul:** I have done transactions in Abu Dhabi, and lived in Bahrain in the past, thus I am familiar with the overall environment. There is no real concern about the city. My only concern was my kids' ability to adapt to the new school environment. Thankfully, we found a great school, they made new friends, and are adapting well.

**Q: Was it easier for you and your family to adapt to the new environment since Abu Dhabi is a Muslim city?**

**Khairul:** *Alhamdulillah*, it is a very easy city to integrate into for Muslims, as well as non-Muslims. Mosques and prayer spaces are everywhere even in the malls, and public toilets are usually very clean too.

**Q: How different are the culture and lifestyle in Abu Dhabi compared to Singapore?**

**Khairul:** There are some similarities and differences. One similarity is a big emphasis on family. It is quite common for local Emiratis to gather with their families on Fridays and have *iftar* together – something which is synonymous with our Malay/Muslim community in Singapore.

The big difference is the driving culture, and taking extended breaks during summer months, which is an opportune time for my family and I to return to Singapore for a break.

**Q: Is there a big community of Singaporean Malays living in the UAE?**

**Khairul:** If you include Dubai, then there is a fairly large community. Some of them have been staying in UAE for 20 years or so. But within Abu Dhabi, our community is

smaller, and we have our own WhatsApp group to keep in contact.

**Q: What have been the highlights of living and working overseas so far?**

**Khairul:** The quality of life in Abu Dhabi is great; you essentially have access to any modern amenities in a Tier 1 city. Cars and petrol are affordable, and when you are eager for some excitement, Dubai is a mere hour's drive away. It is also a very safe city like Singapore.

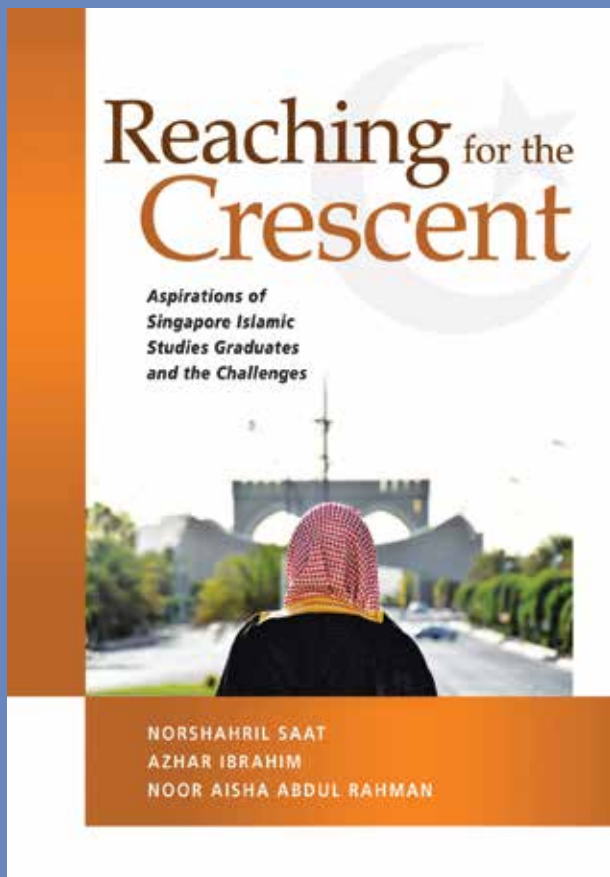
**Q: Do you recommend Malay/Muslim youths to venture out of Singapore for work?**

**Khairul:** It is essential for youths to gain overseas experience to the extent that is possible for them, for example, via school programmes. Having an international perspective is critical in order to have a wider view of the world. I would still recommend starting your work experience in Singapore given that we are a global hub, so you will receive better training if you work for the right employer. However, if the opportunity arises to work in other global hubs, such as New York or London, I highly encourage it as well. ■



Khairul with his family

Nur Diyana Jalil is an Executive Officer of People and Culture at AMP Singapore.



It has been 58 years since Singapore gained its independence. What benefits has Islamic education brought to Singapore's Muslim and larger communities over the course of all this time? Do local Islamic religious teachers, with the training they received abroad such as in the Middle East, Africa, Malaysia, Indonesia and Brunei, remain relevant to meet Singapore's demands and also prioritise Singapore's needs? What difficulties do Islamic studies graduates encounter when they return to Singapore? These concerns are at the centre of the book, *Reaching for the Crescent: Aspirations of Singapore Islamic Studies Graduates and the Challenges* by Norshahril Saat, Azhar Ibrahim, and Noor Aisha Abdul Rahman. This book focused on the decade, beginning in the 1990s when former Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong stated in his National Day Rally speech that the large number of full-time madrasah dropouts may not have been well-equipped for the new economy.

The introduction addresses the various Islamic educational routes to be an *asatizah* or religious teacher in Singapore. Students normally spend 10 years obtaining their education at local madrasahs before pursuing their higher religious studies overseas. Due to Singapore's lack of an institution for higher Islamic studies, students have to pursue their tertiary religious education abroad. The types of research methodology, such as questionnaires and focus groups targeted towards recent graduates in religious studies, as well as current undergraduates, are also discussed in this chapter.

In the second chapter, it provides a general view of Islamic studies and the modes of thinking in countries such as the Middle East, Malaysia and Indonesia. Students in Singapore are frequently travelling to these places to further their religious studies. For instance, Islamic studies are taught using a confessional approach in the Middle East, where students are required to demonstrate piety and devotion. Memorisation of religious texts takes precedence over research and academic writing as the primary method for learning. Singaporean students were drawn to the Middle East because of the generous scholarships and financial aids available there, particularly in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States. Although Malaysia is one of the most popular places for Singaporeans to seek religious education, it is believed to be less prestigious than the Middle East. Due to prejudicial views such as liberal and deviant orientations being propagated, Indonesia does not attract much of Singapore madrasah graduates (Page 24). Among the graduates of Islamic studies, there are four different ways of thinking, 1) precedence of religious traditionalism; 2) the rise of theology and the Islamisation of science; 3) the Salafi paradigm in modern Islamic studies; and 4) studies that are discursive, intellectually eclectic, and reforming. The historical context of these modes of thinking was also mentioned in this chapter.

The findings from the focus groups with recent religious studies graduates and the questionnaires are highlighted in the third chapter. It additionally became clear that they were unaware of the limited opportunities for employment in civil and public service after graduation when they decided to pursue religious education at the university level. The struggles encountered by graduates from nations including Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, and Indonesia were clearly addressed, as well as various

## Book Review:

# REACHING FOR THE CRESCENT

BY MUHAMAD SYAFIQ MARDI

learning experiences. They must continuously learn new skills in order to get employment. Unfortunately, currently, Islamic studies graduates join the gig economy by taking up odd jobs and teaching religion from house to house (Page 72). As the number of graduates in this field increases yearly, mosques and Malay/Muslim organisations in Singapore are unable to accommodate them all.

The fourth chapter's primary focus is the present-day undergraduate students studying Islamic studies. It offered additional details on the main driving force for madrasah graduates pursuing advanced education in Islamic studies. There are differences in the method that religion is imparted and acquired in different countries. In Jordan, students are more satisfied with the university's modern infrastructure than they are pleased with the standard of instruction, and opportunities for interaction with academics, such as online exams, while students at Al-Azhar University placed a strong emphasis on classical texts and enjoyed informal learning sessions such as the *halaqah* (study circles) culture. Overall, students in Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia expressed that they were solely exposed to the lecturers at their own universities and were not exposed to contemporary scholarship in their field of study. On the other hand, because of its lecture-tutorial and modular approach, Malaysian students believe that the Islamic International University Malaysia (IIUM) satisfies the requirements of a contemporary institution. Additionally, IIUM's promotion of the Islamisation of knowledge draws more students to the university. Regardless, a significant number of current Islamic studies undergraduates are unaware of progressive religious thinkers in the Middle East and Southeast Asia because they were not exposed to contemporary scholarship that might be relevant to the Singapore context, as well as global issues (Page 93). Students in the field of Islamic studies may have trouble integrating into Singapore society if they are unaware of current events in Singapore, and are not equipped with the knowledge and views of modern progressive religious thinkers.

In the fifth chapter, issues such as career prospects in Singapore for graduates of Islamic studies, as well as measures taken

by the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS) in order to ensure that graduates of Islamic studies get the skill sets necessary for job opportunities, are explored. Islamic studies graduates have fewer employment options since they are unaware of the certifications necessary to work in fields other than the religious sector. Furthermore, since Arabic or Malay is the primary language of teaching on Islamic college campuses, few graduates of these institutions have strong English language proficiency. The authors mentioned that generally, the religious education has always been increasingly traditionalistic, less objective, and less critical, which leaves graduates of Islamic education unprepared for comprehending the complexity of contemporary society (Page 136). MUIS created programmes like the *Asatizah* Recognition Scheme (ARS) and the Postgraduate Certificate in Islam in Contemporary Societies (PCICS) to tackle the employment issue and professionalise the *asatizah*. In relation to the creation of the Committee on Future *Asatizah* (COFA), it is believed that the *asatizah* could help the community in areas like estate planning and finance, in addition to the religious domain.

The sixth chapter centres on the religious discourse that the *asatizah* in Singapore actively promotes. Given that it will have an effect on society, it is crucial to evaluate the religious discourse that is being pushed. The religious discourse that is often pushed among *asatizah* in Singapore is divided into two distinct types. Firstly, *asatizah* who promote religious traditionalism, and secondly *asatizah* who promote religious revivalism. Both *asatizah* groups have had different effects on the surrounding communities. For instance, believers of religious traditionalism frequently hold on to beliefs and practices that were developed by earlier religious thinkers and then, disseminated to the general public without comprehending the social circumstances and historical context of that period. Secondly, *asatizah* who supported religious revivalism through a selected theological text and tradition tended to support a simple binary worldview, such as the Islamic versus non-Islamic or secular world. The Islamisation of knowledge paradigm continues to have an impact on *asatizah*, thus deciding between 'Islamic' and

'secular' education fosters suspicion of the objectivity of the education (Page 189).

The book's final chapter notes that stakeholders involved in religious education and *asatizah* training, as well as policymakers, may both benefit from it especially in addressing areas where the religious education sector could improve, such as the integration of social sciences and philosophy with religious education. This book also offers recommendations on how to improve Singapore's religious education through measures that are compatible with Singapore's demands by taking into consideration Singapore's multi-racial, multi-religious urban and global settings, and in exposing Islamic studies undergraduates to the contemporary realities of the world today. ■

Muhamad Syafiq Mardi was a Research Assistant at the National Library Board Singapore on Ottoman-Singapore relations. His role was to collect archives regarding Singapore and Southeast Asia in the Ottoman State Archives in Turkey. He holds a Master's degree from the Department of Islamic History and Arts at Cukurova University in Adana, Turkey. His area of interest involves issues concerning history, religious harmony, human development and arts. He is now a PhD candidate in the Malay Studies Department of the National University of Singapore (NUS).



# THE KARYAWAN FORUM

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We welcome civic debate and engagement, and will gladly publish your opinions in the next issue of *The Karyawan*.

Letters should be no longer than 300 words.

However, we will not publish letters that are potentially seditious or libellous, contain personal attacks, as well as those that threaten our racial and religious harmony.

Letters which potentially infringe on copyrighted material will not be included. Where possible, do provide links to your sources for our fact-checking purposes.

Please provide us with your real names and contact details (mobile number and email address). Published letters will state the contributor's name. Pseudonyms will not be accepted. Apart from your name, your personal details will remain confidential and will only be released with your permission.

The Editor of *The Karyawan* reserves the right to edit a letter.

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*The Karyawan* is dedicated to the publication of articles on issues of concern to the Malay/Muslim community and Singaporean society at large.

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