RELIGION

STRATEGY AND RECOMMENDATIONS AT A GLANCE

The Next Decade:

Strengthening our Community's Architecture

Fostering an engaged and learned Muslim community

Development of a research consortium on Islam and Muslims in Singapore

Development of youth-centric programmes to encourage social responsibility and an in-depth knowledge of Islam and Muslim societies

BACKGROUND

Islam has played a major role in the lives of Muslims in Singapore, shaping various aspects of laws and cultures. With the heightened pace of globalisation, the onslaught of consumerism, liberalism and Westernisation, the position of Islam and Muslims and the Islamic identity are now in the face of many challenges. A case in point is the emergence of terrorism depicted as being inspired by Islam as a mobilising ideology. The events following 9/11 attacks in the United States and the discovery of the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) terror network in Southeast Asia have negatively altered the image of Islam as a peaceful religion.

Several issues have emerged in the realm of religiosity in Singapore. The Muslim community remain largely dogmatic in their approach to the faith and there has been little effort made at approaching Islam intellectually. The rise of more puritan approaches to Islam in the neighbouring countries has had the impact of enhancing this dogmatic approach to Islam. This trend is especially problematic in the context of a multi-racial, secular society like Singapore.

Moreover, the ethnic make-up and religious orientations of Singaporean Muslims are becoming less homogeneous. While most Singaporean Muslims subscribe to the Sunni sect with an adherence to the Shafie or Hanafie schools of jurisprudence, many others view themselves as Salafi, Sufi or liberal. It is likely that more fringe groups will emerge within the Muslim community. The heterogeneity of the Muslim community is further obfuscated with the inflow of Muslim expatriates from different parts of the Muslim world, as seen in Table 1 in the next page. This development is likely to change the shape and outlook of the Muslim community. This begs the question as to whether various authorities and Malay/Muslim organisations (MMOs) are prepared in confronting and shaping this new,

emerging Islamic religious fabric in the country.

Table 1: Resident population Aged 15 Years and Over by Religion and Residential Status

Religion	Total	Singapore Citizens	Permanent Residents
Islam	457,435	432,986	24,449
%	100%	94.6%	5.3%

Source: Department of Statistics, Census of Population 2010, 2011.

Above all, the culture of hedonism is beginning to impact the younger segments of the Muslim community in a significant way. This can be seen from several studies conducted, which shows the increase in the number of Muslim youths involved in socially unacceptable activities. The number of teenage pregnancies remain high at 10.6 per 1,000 births. While this number is a slight improvement when compared to figures in the 1980, this number is high compared to the national average of 3.5 per 1,000 births[1]. Such developments are cause for worry. Several studies have shown that there is a higher probability that these children are likely to encounter problems in school due to their weak economic background and lack of parental support. The risk of these Muslim children falling into delinquent behaviour is also higher.

With the above context in mind, two proposals are forwarded here to assist the community in dealing effectively with some of the challenges facing the community:

i)   Development of a research consortium on Islam and Muslims in Singapore

ii)   Development of youth-centric programmes to encourage social responsibility and an in-depth knowledge of Islam

These proposals are formulated with various challenges and issues plaguing the Malay/Muslim community in mind. Issues such as the

madrasah and the administration of Muslim laws had resulted in some tension between the Singaporean government and the Malay/Muslim community in the past. At the same time, however, the Malay/Muslim community and its leaders have been pro-active in tackling challenges related to terrorism and radicalism. While there have been improvements made in several areas, many problems remain largely unresolved.

Policy Challenges

The madrasah issue emerged when the government introduced a new Education Act in 1999 which made it mandatory for all Singaporean children to attend primary schools (as reported on The Straits Times, 20 November 1999). Given that madrasah education is considered private education, the implication was that children could only attend the madrasah at the secondary school level. The community opposed to the new policy. The issue worsened when the then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong remarked that the madrasah were churning out too many graduates who were not sufficiently trained in the modern sciences and hence could not find jobs in the competitive Singapore job market (as reported on The Straits Times, 2 May 2000). In essence, the Singapore government felt that the madrasah were churning out more graduates than needed by the Singaporean Muslim community. Thus, the six madrasah in Singapore are now restricted to a student intake of 400 students each. Madrasah students who are already enrolled in the system are exempted from the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE), a compulsory examination for all students before entering secondary school. Students admitted after the Act came into effect, that is the 2003 cohort onwards, are required to take the PSLE and achieve a certain benchmark set by the government.

Rooting out Terrorism in Singapore

The Malay/Muslim community's leadership has been forthcoming in responding to the government's call for the community to assist in

confronting the challenges posed by terrorism. MMOs responded collectively condemning the 9/11 attacks and supported the arrests of the JI terrorists (as reported on The Straits Times, 11 January 2002). Several prominent ulama (Muslim scholars) formed the Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG) and volunteered their services towards rehabilitating the JI detainees. The detainees were taught the correct teachings of Islam to dispel their hard line understanding of the religion. The RRG was also involved in educating members of the Muslim community against the rhetoric and ideology preached by terrorists through public forums and religious classes in mosques throughout Singapore (as reported on Straits Times, 25 November 2005). While the counter-radicalisation efforts of the RRG could be better enhanced, the group has been largely successful in ensuring that the JI detainees are reformed and integrated back into society[2].

Enhancing Islamic Education in Singapore

The last decade has also seen the proliferation of Islamic education providers. MUIS has developed a new approach to Islamic education in Singapore though the A.L.I.V.E. programme that was initiated in 2007. A year earlier, Simply Islam, an Islamic education company, started offering Islamic education courses and programmes in English. Simply Islam also brought Muslim scholars based in the West to give talks in Singapore. Various Islamic classes are also organised on a regular basis for adult Singaporeans. Such efforts have definitely enhanced the state of Islamic education in the country. Nevertheless there are limitations within the current programmes. The numbers of those attending these programmes are relatively small. Likewise, the quality of the teachers within these programmes is varied. A study on the perceptions of Muslim youths on community engagement programmes showed that the Teens A.L.I.V.E. programme was not as engaging as the Youth A.L.I.V.E. programme[3]. Interviews conducted with students of the programmes reveal the poor

standard of English used in the classes. These issues must thus be addressed in a more concrete fashion by the different service providers.

Muslim Youths and Islam

In the realm of Islamic education, there are some worrying signs that would be of concern to the Muslim community. Out of more than 136,000 Muslim youths between the ages of 10 and 24, less than 25% are attending formal Islamic educational classes. This assertion is made based on the estimated number of students who attended MUIS' A.L.I.V.E programme (est. 13,000)[4] and those organised by other major service providers such as Andalus Islamic Centre (est. 10,000)[5] (Andalus, 2012) and Simply Islam (est. 400)[6]. This number excludes young adults between the ages of 25 and 34 who are even less likely to attend formal Islamic classes. A case can be made that the lack of Islamic grounding is a contributive factor for the increasing social problems within the community. Immorality has a direct impact on family life. This could be seen from the high rate of divorce, teenage pregnancies and other social problems in which the Malay community is overly represented.

Another issue that would be of concern is the number of apostasy cases in Singapore. Between 2000 and 2010, the numbers of Malays who might have left Islam could have risen given that 99.6% of Malays in 2000 stated their religion as Islam while only 98.7% of Malays stated so in 2010. While this decrease is not large (0.9%), this issue should not be taken lightly and must be addressed by providing young Muslims with the right religious grounding to prevent a further increase in the number of apostates.

Table 2: Resident Population Aged 15 Years and Over by Religion & Ethnic Group

	Total		Chinese		Malays		Indians		Others	
Religion	2000	2010	2000	2010	2000	2010	2000	2010	2000	2010
Islam	14.9%	14.7%	0.3%	0.4%	99.6%	98.7%	25.6%	21.7%	22.3%	9.2%

Source: Department of Statistics, Census of Population 2010, 2011.

A perception survey commissioned by AMP found that 83% of Muslims interviewed support the strengthening of the Malay culture. A concern was expressed about the lack of role models within the Muslim community amongst Muslim youths. Given the context, new strategies must be devised to reach out to these youths.

Perceptions of Islamic Institutions, *Asatizah* and Islamic Education in Singapore

Another issue that has become a cause for concern is the mixed perceptions that the Muslim community have on Muslim institutions in Singapore. The same perception survey suggested that up to 93% respondents supported a stricter interpretation and following of the Islamic faith. However, many express their lack of confidence in Islamic institutions within Singapore. The survey suggests that Muslims are likely to adhere more strongly to Islam in the near future. There are several other factors that the Muslim community saw as problematic in the religious realm. First, there is a perception that religious institutions here have not performed their due tasks in accordance to public expectations. Second, a concern was expressed about the duplication in the activities and programms organised by different institutions. Third, many Muslims believed that the Muslim religious scholars in Singapore could do more to reach out to the Muslim populace such as through the use of the internet. The views expressed in the survey seem to be at a disjuncture with the views expressed by some *asatizahs* who believe that the asatizah fraternity is doing enough to reach out to the Muslim populace. This situation must also be addressed to ensure that the Muslim communities

reach out to the different groups.

STRATEGY

Fostering an engaged and learned Muslim community

The key strategy proposed is Fostering an Engaged and Learned Muslim Community. This strategy is aimed at creating a Muslim community that is learned about Islam while ensuring that Muslim religious leaders are engaged with the larger community, providing them with the right Islamic guidance and values. This strategy will ensure a symbiotic relationship between the religious leadership and the larger community is established.

Within this strategy, two recommendations were forwarded namely the Development of a Research Consortium on Islam and Muslims in Singapore and the Development of Youth-centric Programmes to encourage social responsibility and an in-depth knowledge of Islam and Muslim societies. The second recommendation coordinates Muslim youth activities and organises new programmes to engage certain segments of the Muslim youth population.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1: Development of a research consortium on Islam and Muslims in Singapore

The first proposal is an attempt to understand trends within the development of Islam in Singapore as well as to assess the current religious programmes being undertaken by various Islamic institutions and groups. To achieve this objective, a working committee comprising the *asatizah* and professional groups will be formed. It is proposed that organisations such as PERGAS, Darul Arqam and AMP lead such a consortium. Other like-minded groups, organisations and individuals are

welcomed to assist the consortium in their programmes at a later stage. As a start, two concrete projects have been identified as being viable initiatives that could be undertaken by the consortium.

The first project would be to identify issues of concerns within Malay/ Muslim community in the area of religion. This could be done through an annual survey conducted by the working group. This annual survey would allow the community to reflect on the current programmes that are being conducted by MUIS, PERGAS, mosques, Islamic education providers and other religious stakeholders in Singapore. This would allow for these institutions to better understand the strengths and weaknesses of their respective programmes. At the same time, these institutions would be in a better position to modify or enhance their current programmes if needed and introduce new programmes that could better cater to the needs of the Muslim community in Singapore.

A second project that the consortium can embark on is research assessing the emerging trends within Islam in Singapore and the world. As highlighted earlier, with the changing shape of the Malay/Muslim community, it is pertinent that the religious institutions are aware of new trends of religiosity, sectarian beliefs and inter-faith relations. Likewise, trends in neighbouring Muslim countries or that in the Middle East and South Asia are likely to have a bearing on the Muslim community in Singapore. For instance, the religio-political trends in the Middle East are likely to have an impact, be it direct or indirect, on the socio-religious thinking of Muslims here. These trends must be studied, understood and, if need be, addressed by the different Muslim community stakeholders.

Recommendation 2: Development of youth-centric programmes to encourage social responsibility and an in-depth knowledge of Islam and Muslim societies

The recommendation for the development of youth-centric programmes to encourage social responsibility and an in-depth knowledge of Islam stems from the low number of Muslim youths attending formal Islamic educational programmes. Similarly, the survey that was commissioned by AMP showed that 37% of those surveyed felt that the religious teachers or *asatizahs* may need to do more to improve their engagement with youths. In the same survey, a majority of respondents would like the *asatizahs* to collaborate with Malay/Muslim organisations to better understand youths (96%) as well as adopt more progressive attitudes to connect with them (92%).

In trying to implement this strategy, a working committee comprising representatives of different Muslim youth groups will be formed. This committee will act as a coordinating body, which collates the different Islamic youth programmes that are currently conducted to identify the gaps within the current programmes. At a more concrete level, the committee will begin introducing new programmes aimed at reaching out to young Muslims who are currently not given any sort of Islamic education. These youths are also not likely to attend any activities organised by the mosques or Muslim organisations. As such, the working committee will galvanise volunteers to go to the streets to interact with these youths by organising programmes related to sports, arts and music.

Rethinking Youth Programmes

The current approaches used by religious providers to reach out to Muslim youths are traditional and has little appeal among some segments of the group. Many of the youths who are attending the current programmes might be doing so due to parental pressure rather than the real desire or thirst for knowledge. This means that newer approaches must be devised to ensure that these youths are engaged and not left to their own devices. In many Western countries where Muslims are the minority, the Muslim

community has pioneered some unique programmes aimed at reaching out to youths. A group that has embarked on one such programme is the Inner-City Muslim Action Network (IMAN) in the US. IMAN was formed in 1995 to respond to the issues of inner-city poverty and abandonment. Through a range of different programmes, IMAN sought to create a community organisation driven by the spiritual ideals of community service, social justice and human compassion. Although led by Muslims, IMAN sought to provide its services to people of all ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds. One of IMAN's flagship events is *Takin' it to the Streets*. The event is a week-long event which includes musical performances, art performances, film festival, graffiti art workshops, food festival, religious talks, panel discussion and sermons as well as motivational workshops. The musical segment of the festival is not unlike the internationally renowned WOMAD (World of Music, Arts and Dance) event where musical talents from various parts of the world are brought in to perform. The film festival segment of *Takin' it to the Streets* entitled, *Salaam Film Festival*, is a three-day festival highlighting the power of film as a tool for peace and social change. While such events are likely to be deemed controversial by some segments of the Singaporean Muslim community, the example of IMAN has shown positive results in ensuring that American Muslim youths hold dear to their Islamic faith and has been crucial in attracting many non-Muslim youths to Islam. In Singapore, one group that has been able to attract some segments of the targeted audience is Simply Islam. Through musical events and unconventional styled Islamic talks and events, Simply Islam has brought a small number of Muslim youths closer to Islam. However, the current outreach is small. With the involvement of more partners, an event like Takin' it to the Streets is likely to be achievable.

Muslim Role Models

Another issue that the perception survey identified is the lack of Muslim

role models within the Muslim community especially amongst the asatizah. In the West, scholars such as Sheikh Hamza Yusuf, Dr Zakir Naik and Sheikh Suhail Webb have a large following among youths due to their highly intellectual and innovative ways of engagements. Zakir Naik's ground-breaking use of Peace TV[7], as an "edutainment" (a term used by Dr Naik to describe his network) television network started to promote inter-faith dialogues and debates have found resonance with millions of Muslims with a large number being youths. Similarly, several Malaysian Muslim scholars such as Dato' Asri Zainal Abidin and Ustaz Azhar Idrus have created a large following amongst youth through their willingness to engage in sensitive, controversial topics and widespread use of the online medium. As a result, these scholars have been a point of reference and role model for many young Muslims. In Singapore, the working group aimed at tackling youth issues must identify young asatizahs or preachers who are highly intellectual, charismatic and engaging. Such role models will be able to reach out to youths who are not likely to be impacted by the traditional groups of asatizah within the Muslim community in Singapore.

Sources:

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[2] Mohamed Nawab Mohamed Osman and Farhan Ali (eds), Igniting Thought, Unleashing Youth: Analysis and Reflections on Muslim Youth and Activism in Singapore, 2009.

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[4] Islamic Religious Council of Singapore, accessed on 1 May 2012, http://www.muis.gov.sg/cms/services/Islamic.aspx?id=117

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