

Madrasah Education in Secular, Modern and Multicultural Singapore: Challenges and Reforms

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Abstract

Madrasah education has become a major concern for secular, modern and pluralist Singapore due to government's deep-seated anxiety about whether the Islamic school graduates can contribute to the national economy and integrate into national cohesion. This article aims at exploring the challenges and reform of madrasah education within the secular, modern, and multicultural state. Data of this qualitative study were collected from official documents and websites, literature review, and interviews. Some data and relevant literature are then presented and analyzed. It is found that madrasah education has constantly been perceived in a negative nuance due to its insignificant contribution to the country's knowledge-based economy. The orthodox and conservative education system in madrasahs is also viewed as hindering Singapore's racial and religious cohesion. These challenges then force Singaporean Muslims to reform its madrasahs by changing the orientation, revamping the system, improving quality, instilling national cohesion and increasing the funding. This study implies that reformation in Islamic education would be successful when stakeholders innovatively negotiating the pressures brought by the politics and the national government and adjusting to the identity and aspiration of local society.

Keywords: Challenges, Islamic Education, Knowledge-based Economy, Madrasah Education, Singapore.

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Abstrak

Pendidikan madrasah telah menjadi perhatian utama pemerintah Singapura sebagai negara sekuler, modern dan pluralis. Perhatian itu terkait dengan kekhawatiran apakah lulusan sekolah Islam tersebut dapat berkontribusi pada perekonomian nasional dan menghadirkan kohesi nasional. Artikel ini bertujuan mengeksplorasi tantangan dan reformasi pendidikan madrasah di negara Singapura yang sekuler, modern dan multikultural. Data penelitian kualitatif didapatkan dari dokumen dan website resmi, tinjauan literatur, dan wawancara. Beberapa data dan literatur yang relevan kemudian disajikan dan dianalisis. Studi ini menemukan bahwa pendidikan madrasah selalu dipandang dalam nuansa negatif karena kontribusinya yang tidak efektif terhadap ekonomi berbasis pengetahuan. Sistem pendidikan ortodoks dan konservatif di madrasah juga dianggap menghalangi kohesi ras dan agama di Singapura. Hal ini kemudian memaksa umat Islam Singapura untuk mereformasi sekolah Muslim tersebut dengan mengubah orientasi, meningkatkan kualitas, memperbaiki sistem, menanamkan kohesi nasional dan meningkatkan penggalangan dana. Kajian ini mengimplikasikan bahwa reformasi dalam pendidikan Islam akan berhasil dengan menegosiasikan secara inovatif tekanan yang dihadirkan oleh politik dan pemerintahan nasional serta menyesuaikan dengan identitas dan aspirasi masyarakat lokal.

Kata Kunci: Tantangan, Pendidikan Islam, Ekonomi Berbasis Pengetahuan, Pendidikan Madrasah, Singapura.

Introduction

Singapore is constitutionally a secular state with a Muslim population of about 14%.¹ Religion including Islam is one primary social institution in this state that has been managed with much sensitivity.² However, religion is a recognized positive element in creating a national identity³ and providing its adherents the precious

¹ Department of Statistics Singapore, *Executive Summary*, 2015.

² Lily Zubaidah Rahim, "Governing Muslims in Singapore's Secular State", *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 66, No. 2, (Australia: Routledge, 2012), 169-185; Mohammad Alami Musa, "Engaging religion with pragmatism", *The RSIS Working Paper Series*, (Singapore: S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, 21 August 2017).

³ Kerstin Steiner, "Religion and Politics in Singapore -Matters of National Identity and Security? A Case Study of the Muslim Minority in a Secular State", *Osaka University Law Review*, Vol. 58, (Osaka: T.P, 2011), 107-134.

social ethos constructive to peaceful living.⁴ Every Singaporean has the right of profession and practice of his religion, for as long as this religious faith does not oppose the state ideological practices and management procedures, the state ideological hold on the citizens, nor do religions compete among themselves.⁵ To underline this point, religions are openly told to separate themselves from state politics.⁶ Precisely because of their ideological appeal, religions were never allowed to play an important role in education. Their inclusion in the national curriculum in 1982 was short-lived.⁷ Religious Knowledge was removed in 1990 after the release of government-instructed research finding that religious knowledge threatened religious harmony through promoting religious revivalism and polarization among students which, if not contained, could trigger inter-religious conflicts.⁸ Henceforth, the teaching of morality reverted to a secular-oriented type of moral education devoid of any religious basis.⁹ As a result, “government schools are secular in the sense that religious education is not allowed in the curriculum”.¹⁰

Madrasah as a part of Islamic education has constantly been perceived as traditional, incomprehensive, orthodox, and conservative. Muslim institutions worldwide, like Islamic boarding school and madrasah in Malaysia, Egypt, Indonesia, Nigeria and Pakistan¹¹ are

⁴ Tsun Hang Tey, “Excluding Religion from Politics and Enforcing Religious Harmony: Singapore Style”, *Singapore Journal of Legal Studies*, (Singapore: National University of Singapore, 2008), 118-142; Mohamed Nawab Mohamed Osman, “The Secular and the Religious in the Management of Islam in Singapore”, *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, Vol. 38, No. 2. (T.K: Routledge, 2018).

⁵ Beng Huat Chua, *Communitarian Ideology and Democracy in Singapore*, (London: Routledge, 1995).

⁶ Parliament of Singapore, *Maintenance of Religious Harmony Bill*, (Singapore: T.P, 1990); Kevin. Y.L. Tan, “Law, Religion, and the State in Singapore”, *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*, (T.K: Institute for Global Engagement, 2016), 66-67.

⁷ Joseph B. Tamney, “Conservative Government and Support for the Religious Institutions in Singapore: An Uneasy Alliance”, *Sociology of Religion*, No. 53, Issue 2, (Oxford: Oxford Academic, 1992), 203.

⁸ Mukhlis Abu Bakar, “Islamic Religious Schools in Singapore: Recent Trends and Issues”, *4th ASEAN Inter-University Seminar on Social Development*, (Pattani, Thailand: T.P, 16-18 June 1999), 2.

⁹ Joy Chew Oon Ai, “Civics and Moral Education in Singapore: Lessons for Citizenship Education?”, *Journal of Moral Education*, Vol. 27, No. 4, (T.K: Routledge, 1998).

¹⁰ Charlene Tan & D. B Abbas, “Reform in Madrasah Education: The Singapore Experience”, in *Rethinking Madrasah Education in the Globalized World*, ed. by M. Abu Bakar. (New York: Routledge, 2017), 199.

¹¹ Rosnani Hashim, et al., “Traditional Islamic Education in Asia and Africa: A Comparative Study of Malaysia’s Pondok, Indonesia’s Pesantren and Nigeria’s Traditional

viewed as against secularism and irrelevant to modern needs. Islamic schools in Muslim minority or secular states face more challenges in this regard.¹² In several Muslim states, ruling elites are generally modern educated persons who had comfortably and affluently grown up with modern materialistic culture. Many policies on education were rested on preserving the secular systems of which they were an outcome in order to sustain their socio-political and economic benefit.

Talbani argues that traditionalism opposes modernization, as it advocates the value of consumerism and secularism. As Muslims encountered modernization during colonization, traditionalism has tended to stand in opposition to secularism, particularly in the system of education.¹³ Through secularization, the traditional approach to education appears to be irrelevant, and the secular instruction replaces the religious instruction in occupational skills. Thus, the feasibility of madrasah education in addressing modernization is surely in a challenging position.¹⁴ Transformation and reformation in education systems sometimes occur when the Islamic school is increasingly irrelevant with or failed to respond to the needs of national development. Ibrahim states that madrasahs in Asian states are different in their concept of reformation and curriculum structure. The madrasah in India, for instance, shows that its medieval curriculum and methods of teaching are no longer relevant to the modern demands and need to be seriously revised.¹⁵ The case of madrasahs in Indonesia demonstrates the necessity of streamlining its curriculum

Madrasah", *World Journal of Islamic History and Civilization*, Vol. 1, No. 2, (T.K: IDOSI, 2011), 94-107; Mohd Roslan Mohd Nor, et. al., "Revisiting Islamic Education: The Case of Indonesia", *Journal for Multicultural Education*, Vol. 8, No. 4, (T.K: Emerald Group Publishing Limited, 2014), 261-276.

¹² Saeeda Shah, "Muslim Schools in Secular Societies: Persistence or Resistance!", *British Journal of Religious Education*, Vol. 34, No. 1, (Philadelphia: Routledge, 2012), 51-65.

¹³ Aziz Talbani, "Pedagogy, Power, and Discourse: Transformation of Islamic Education", *Comparative Education Review*, Vol. 40, No. 1, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 66-82.

¹⁴ Saiful Akhyar Lubis, "Islamic Education towards the Era of Social Change: Effort in Enhancing the Quality", *Journal of Al-Tamaddun*, Vol. 7, No. 1, (Kuala Lumpur: Jabatan Sejarah dan Tamadun Islam, 2012), 107-113.

¹⁵ Azhar Ibrahim, "An Evaluation of Madrasah Education: Perspectives and Lessons from the Experiences of Some Muslim Societies", in *Secularism and Spirituality: Seeking Integrated Knowledge and Success in Madrasah Education in Singapore*, ed. by Noor Aisha Abdul Rahman & Lai Ah Eng, (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish, 2006), 94-95; Yoginder Sikand, "The Indian Madrasahs and the Agenda of Reform", *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, Vol. 25, No. 2, (T.K: Routledge, 2005), 219-248.

with modern and national aspirations.¹⁶ On the other hand, madrasah reform in Pakistan is further complicated, being involved with politics and encountering challenges from some conservative *ulama*.¹⁷ In Thailand, reform of madrasah education inspires government agenda in promoting nationalism, assimilation and integration of the Malay Muslim community into the national identity. Civic education (e.g. Thai language and cultural values) and academic subjects are installed into the madrasah curriculum in response to the modern and national demands.¹⁸ Similarly, Islamic schools in Malaysia are centralized and gain financial support from the government. Islamic subjects are even taught to Muslim students in governmental schools.¹⁹

In Singapore's case, madrasah education with its exclusive schooling for Muslims and religiously inclined courses has always been subjected to scrutiny and critique, and has become the constant talk of nation-building.²⁰ It was perceived negatively, in which common prejudice toward the Islamic school usually refers to the ineffectiveness of its learning system in contributing to the national development.²¹ It was also overstated by the phenomena of Islamophobia after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, given that the perpetrators studied in madrasahs which were considered to imbibe deviant religious teachings. Conservative madrasahs were viewed to impede the state's religious and ethnic cohesion, and judged as a center that advocates terrorism.²² Thus,

¹⁶ Abdullah Saeed, "Towards Religious Tolerance through Reform in Islamic Education: The Case of the State Institute of Islamic Studies of Indonesia", *Indonesia and the Malay World*, Vol. 27, No. 79, (T.K: Routledge, 1999), 177-191.

¹⁷ Ms Fatima Sajjad, "Reforming Madrasa Education in Pakistan; Post 9/11 Perspectives", *Journal of Islamic Thought and Civilization*, Vol. 3, Issue 1, (Pakistan: University of Management and Technology, 2013); Kaja Borchgrevink and Kristian Berg Harpviken, "Taking Stock: Madrasa Reform in Pakistan", *NOREF Policy Brief*, No. 4, (Oslo: Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre (NOREF), 2011).

¹⁸ Joseph Chimyong Liow, *Islam, Education and Reform in Southern Thailand*, (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2009).

¹⁹ Azmil Tayeb, "Shaping Minds, Saving Souls: Managing Islamic Education in Indonesia and Malaysia", *Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D) (Dissertation)*, (Australia: Department of Political and Social Change of the Australian National University, 2016).

²⁰ Intan Azura Mokhtar, "Madrasahs in Singapore: Bridging between their Roles, Relevance and Resources", *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, Vol. 30, No. 1, (T.K: Routledge, 2010), 111; Dennis Kwek, *et al.*, "Bridges and Ladders: The Paradox of Equity in Excellence in Singapore Schools", in *Equity in Excellence: Experiences of East Asian High Performing Education Systems*, ed. by Siao See Teng, Maria Manzon, Kenneth K. Poon. (Singapore: Springer, 2019).

²¹ Hussin Mutalib, "Education and Singapore Muslims: An Overview of the Issues, Parameters and Prospects", *Fajar Islam*, Vol. 2 (T.K: TP, 1989), 1-19.

²² Mohd Roslan Mohd Nor, *et al.*, "Survival of Islamic Education in a Secular State:

madrasah education in secular and modern Singapore faces many problems and challenges for decades, which then calls for adaptation and reform in response to the state policies and modern demand. This article attempts to further explore madrasah challenges and to describe the extent to which it has reformed to meet the demands of secular, modern and multicultural Singapore.

This study is qualitative in nature in which the data are collected from official documents and websites (e.g. Islamic Religious Council of Singapore/MUIS at <https://www.muis.gov.sg/>, Singapore's government at <https://www.singstat.gov.sg/>, and madrasahs at <https://www.ourmadrasah.sg/>), literature review, and interviews. The interviews were conducted in January and February 2020 with seven teachers from different madrasahs and three graduates of the Islamic school who serve as MUIS employees. The entire interview was confidentially carried out in which interviewees are afforded anonymity by mutual agreement.

History of Madrasah Education in Singapore

Madrasahs are strongly embedded in Singapore's history and had experienced a 'golden era' in being the center of religious education before its independence by attracting and producing a lot of distinguished Muslim scholars. Historically, madrasahs as Islamic religious schools were established in Singapore by Muslim philanthropists to equip Muslim children with Islamic education. The first established institution was Madrasah As-Sibyan which was built in 1905. Its curriculum was mainly oriented towards Quranic recitation and basic knowledge of Islam.²³ Afterward, Al-Iqbal, the earliest modern madrasah was built in 1908 integrating both Islamic religious and academic knowledge.²⁴ However, the madrasah was operated only for a year because of its allegedly "westernized curriculum" and its expensive fees covering textbooks, medical expenses accommodation,

The Madrasah in Singapore", *Journal for Multicultural Education*, Vol. 11, No. 4, (T.K: Emerald Group Publishing Limited, 2017), 239.

²³ Chee Min Fui, "The historical evolution of madrasah education in Singapore", in *Secularism and spirituality: Seeking integrated knowledge and success in madrasah education in Singapore*, ed. by In Lai Ah Eng & Noor Aisha Abdul Rahman, (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Academic, 2006), 7; Intan Azura Mokhtar, "Madrasahs in Singapore...", 113.

²⁴ Syed Muhd Khairudin Aljunied, et al., "Estranged from the Ideal Past: Historical Evolution of Madrasahs in Singapore", *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, Vol. 25, No. 2, (T.K: Routledge, 2005), 253.

etc.²⁵ Madrasah Al-Sagoff was then built in 1912 and followed by Madrasah Aljunied in 1927. The latter was well-known as the most prestigious madrasah for religious leaders and educators as it also offered a postgraduate course.²⁶ To address the society's growing needs, "four madrasahs were then opened, namely Madrasah Almaarif in 1939, Madrasah Al-Arabiyah, Madrasah Al-Irsyad in 1947 and Madrasah Wak Tanjong in 1955".²⁷

The main goal of madrasahs was to provide comprehensive Islamic education for Muslim society. This has been shown historically where madrasahs have provided Islamic education with their own curriculum, administration and source of funding.²⁸ However, the expansion of the so-called secular institute of education had caused dichotomization of education: religious and secular knowledge. Madrasah's primary function as a comprehensive education system then became that of 'a religiously-inclined school' which separated secular and religious knowledge.²⁹ Then, the orientation of madrasah education in Singapore was generally restricted to the needs and circumstances surrounding the Islamic society at that moment. Traditionally, the objective of madrasah had been mainly to produce religious leaders, teachers, and officials of the Muslim community on religious matters. During British colonial rule and prior to Singapore's independence in 1965, the Islamic education entrusted to conventional religious teachers dominantly employed traditional approaches referring to Middle Eastern experiences and was confined to some degree to the learning of the basic component of education.³⁰

Madrasah in Contemporary Singapore

Madrasah in Singapore today is defined as an Islamic institute of education providing elementary, secondary and tertiary education. Madrasah education is categorized into formal and informal ones. The formal madrasahs either full-time or part-time provide formal

²⁵ Chee Min Fui, "The History of Madrasah Education in Singapore", *Master of Arts (Theses)*, (Singapore: National University of Singapore, 2000), 13.

²⁶ Kerstin Steiner, "Madrasah in Singapore: Tradition and Modernity in Religious Education", *Intellectual Discourse*, Vol. 19, (Malaysia: IIUM Press, 2011), 45.

²⁷ Mohd Roslan Mohd Nor, et al., "Survival of Islamic Education...", 243.

²⁸ Kerstin Steiner, "Madrasah in Singapore...", 42.

²⁹ Intan Azura Mokhtar, "Madrasahs in Singapore...", 111.

³⁰ Hussin Mutalib, "Islamic Education in Singapore: Present Trends and Challenges for the Future", *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, Vol. 16, No. 2, (T.K: Routledge, 1996), 233.

courses and certificates for Muslim learners. The part-time madrasah usually provides basic Islamic learning on weekends to Muslim pupils who attend regular schools on weekdays. On the contrary, full-time madrasahs offer weekdays schooling from primary until university level, though most provide up till the secondary level.

There are currently six full-time madrasahs that provide courses from elementary to secondary levels, the three of which provide courses up to the pre-university level. The six madrasahs are Alsagoff, Aljunied, Al-Ma'arif, Al-Arabiah, Al-Irsyad, and Wak Tanjong.³¹ All madrasahs have approximately 220 teachers and 4.400 students³² and are allowed to receive a total annual intake of only 400 pupils.³³ Of these six madrasahs, Al-Ma'arif and Alsagoff provide education exclusively for females, while the rest are for both genders. Interestingly, the number of female students exceeds male students in most of the madrasahs in Singapore, as Muslim parents prefer their girl attend madrasahs to public schools. This is due to the fact that madrasahs allow their female students to wear their religious dress code such as hijab – a dress code which is prohibited in all government schools in Singapore.³⁴

Each madrasah has its administrative board whose personnels are designated by the government after consulting with the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS),³⁵ a statutory body and the highest bureaucracy to advise to the President of the Republic on all matters concerning Muslims. Based on the Administration of Muslim Law Act (AMLA), the development and administration of all the Muslim schools are under the control of MUIS. Even though they are not under the MOE's jurisdiction, madrasahs remain subjects to the provision of the Education Act and under supervisory of MOE as they are categorized as private schools.³⁶

³¹ MUIS, *Our 6 Madrasahs*, Retrieved on February 22, 2021, from <https://www.muis.gov.sg/madrasah/About/Our-6-Madrasahs>

³² Interview with a teacher in madrasah Al-Sagoff whose name can not be revealed here, February 5, 2020.

³³ Education Statistic Digest: Ministry of Education, (2016).

³⁴ Charlene Tan and Amnah Kasmuri, "Islamic Religious Education: Case Study of a Madrasah in Singapore", in *Critical Perspectives on Values Education in Asia* ed. by Charlene Tan & K.C. Chong, (Singapore: Prentice-Hall, 2007), 111.

³⁵ Hussin Mutalib, "Islamic Education in Singapore..."

³⁶ Charlene Tan, and Amnah Kasmuri. "Islamic Religious Education...", 110.

The Challenges and Reform of Madrasah Education

Madrasah education in Singapore, particularly the full-time madrasahs that is being the focus of this study, has faced many problems and challenges for decades related to its orientation, quality, teaching methodology, risk of radicalization, and financing. In response to the need of Singapore, these Islamic religious schools have in several instances been reformed in line with the country's top priorities: national economic growth and national cohesion within a secular, modern and multicultural state. Some of these challenges and reforms are outlined below;

Changing Orientation

Among the challenges of the full-time madrasahs in Singapore is whether their graduates can provide an effective contribution to the 'knowledge-based economy', as the state advocates modernity and has educational policies that are driven by the demands of 'a modern knowledge-based society and economic development'.³⁷ The growth of the world economy has increased the urgency of demands toward upgrading education as a key source of domestic economic competitiveness. The Singapore government arguably has taken these very seriously and recommended the education of every person and the development of skills and creativity to maintain the state's global competitiveness in the international economy.³⁸

The government puts a greater emphasis on human resources in national economic development as the state has a strategic location for import and export, but lacks natural resources. This has placed 'sciences of technology and medicines in the front-runner of other knowledge including religious knowledge' in the state's educational policy.³⁹ This policy has proven to be economically successful, as seen by Singapore sustained growth since 1965 and its rapid industrialization.⁴⁰ With this secular worldview, Singapore puts challenges in madrasah education

³⁷ Committee on Compulsory Education in Singapore, *Report of the Committee on Compulsory Education in Singapore*, (Singapore: National Library Board, 2000); Hussin Mutalib, "Singapore Muslims: The Quest for Identity in a Modern City-State", *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, Vol. 25, No. 1, (T.K: Routledge, 2005), 55.

³⁸ Ministry of Trade & Industry, *The Singapore Economy: New Directions*, Singapore: Report of the Economic Committee, (Singapore: Ministry of Trade and Industry, 1986).

³⁹ Mohd Roslan Mohd Nor, et al., "Survival of Islamic Education...", 241.

⁴⁰ Kamaludeen Mohamed Nasir, et. al., *Muslims in Singapore: Piety, Politics and Policies*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), 71.

whose Islamic worldview takes into account both worldly life and the hereafter, physic and metaphysic.⁴¹ The state's pursuit of modernity also challenges madrasah education that seems holding on tradition and old-fashion.⁴²

With these challenges, madrasahs were being urged to reform their educational orientation, since their curriculum had been considered to be the primary cause of its unsustainability toward the state's economic growth. Madrasahs were forced to make Islamic education more relevant within the frame of modern society. Consequently, madrasahs had taken measures like revising the curriculum and revamping the syllabus structure that shifts from its traditional goal to contemporary one. The earlier goal refers to a function of madrasahs as an institution for preparing Islamic religious scholars to teach at religious schools. Meanwhile, the latter relates to madrasahs' aim to prepare Muslim students to be good Muslims and increase their economic prospect through incorporating both academic and religious subjects in its curriculum.⁴³

Due to such economic reforms and modernization, the madrasah curriculum in contemporary Singapore has significantly been revised and emphasized the learning of both Islamic religious subjects and academic secular subjects taught in the mainstream schools, such as science, Mathematics, Humanities, and English which are useful in obtaining employment.⁴⁴ However, the weightage given to the so-called secular subjects still varies, ranging from 30% to 60%, depending on the vision and manager of each madrasah.⁴⁵ In some madrasahs, they do not exceed the religious subjects, which have been kept as the main focus of learning. For instance, Madrasah Aljunied has offers a pathway for students who intend to pursue religious studies at a university level, such as entry to Al-Azhar University and International Islamic University in Malaysia.⁴⁶ However, most madrasahs have added the proportion of academic subjects to fulfill the benchmark provided by

⁴¹ Hafas Furqani, "Worldview and the Construction of Economic: Secular and Islamic Tradition", *Tsaqafah*, Vol. 14, No. 1, (Gontor: Institut Studi Islam Darussalam, 2018), 6.

⁴² Kerstin Steiner, "Madrasah in Singapore...", 4.

⁴³ Mohd Roslan Mohd Nor, et al., "Survival of Islamic Education...", 240.

⁴⁴ Alexander Evan, "Understanding Madrasahs", *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 85, No. 1, (T.K: Council on Foreign Relation, 2006), 9-16.

⁴⁵ Charlene Tan, and Amnah Kasmuri. "Islamic Religious Education...", 110.

⁴⁶ Interview with a teacher of Madrasah Aljunied: February 4, 2020.

the state official, as the Compulsory Education Act was implemented.⁴⁷ Apart from Aljunied, other madrasahs place equal weight on academic subjects and religious ones. Academic subjects include Mathematics, Pure Science, Combined Sciences (Biology, Chemistry & Physics), Humanities (Geography/History) and English, while religious ones include Quranic Study, Quranic exegesis, Hadith, Tauhid, Fiqh, Arabic language, Islamic History, and Malay Language.⁴⁸ Such classification does not mean that madrasah dichotomize the knowledge. In fact, madrasah teachers seek to integrate both academic and religious subjects in the process of learning through various approaches.⁴⁹

The educational reform of madrasahs has been an attempt to meet one of the twin objectives of national education that is 'to give students a common core of knowledge which will provide a strong foundation for further education and training to prepare them for a knowledge-based economy'.⁵⁰ This goal is in line with what Singaporean government desires to achieve through various reforms of education. In response to the state policies, the madrasahs that previously aimed at producing religious teachers, officials and leaders, now shifted to aim at nurturing Muslim professionals who are competent and skillful for the job market.⁵¹ It can be seen from the vision and mission of Madrasah Wak Tanjung: 'to build a community of progressive learners who not only uphold Islamic values but are also able to contribute to our country's nation-building and success'.⁵²

Revamping Madrasah System

The government limits the total number of seats in the full-time madrasahs due to their deep anxiety if madrasah graduates would be qualified to proceed to the higher secular institution and employment. Consequently, there is not adequate number of enrolled students in madrasah each year to serve for elementary, secondary or even tertiary education. Therefore, through the introduction and implementation of the Joint-Madrasah System (JMS) since 2009 aiming at the quality

⁴⁷ Mohd Roslan Mohd Nor, et al., "Survival of Islamic Education...", 244.

⁴⁸ Almaarif official website, Secondary Programme, Retrieved on February 25, 2021, from <https://almaarif.edu.sg/secondary-programme/>.

⁴⁹ Interview with a teacher of Madrasah Wak Tanjong, February 5, 2020.

⁵⁰ Committee on Compulsory Education in Singapore, *Report...*

⁵¹ Charlene Tan and A. Kasmuri, "Islamic Religious Education...", 110.

⁵² Our Madrasah, "Madrasah Wak Tanjong Al-Islamiah", Retrieved on February 2, 2021 from <https://www.ourmadrasah.sg/madrasah-wak-tanjong-al-islamiah/>

improvement of madrasah education, madrasah Irsyad has provided only primary education, while Al-Arabiah and Aljunied have only offered secondary and pre-university classes. In other words, Madrasah Irsyad serves as a feeder to Al-Arabiah and Aljunied. The other three madrasahs: Madrasah Alsagoff, Almaarif and Wak Tanjong have remained to provide education for the primary, secondary and pre-university classes.⁵³ Under the JMS, madrasahs have focused on a distinct educational pathway (e.g. Aljunied has specialized in religious education, Al-Arabiah has specialized in secular academic education while providing Islamic environment). The system has afforded students more options to be streamed according to their interest, ability and aptitude, be it in academic studies or religious learning.⁵⁴

This new system has challenged the madrasahs to revamp their curriculum and syllabus structure, develop textbooks and equip the teachers with the critical pedagogical skills to implement the new curriculum effectively. Therefore, under the MUIS administration, the madrasahs have developed a new JMS curriculum and learning approach with features including contextualized and contemporary, broad-based and authentic learning experiences, integrated, multi-disciplinary Islamic learning, advanced pedagogical approaches like inquiry-based and collaborative learning methods. At the same time, non-JMS madrasahs have also developed their curriculum to make it relevant with the rapidly globalizing Singapore.⁵⁵ Textbook development, teacher training and development were conducted in supporting the new revamped curriculum in 2015. At the same time, “facilities at the three madrasahs under the JMS were upgraded”.⁵⁶ Madrasah Al-Irsyad also moved to an eight-storey building at the Singapore Islamic Hub on Braddell Road.⁵⁷

⁵³ Interview with a Madrasah graduate who serves as MUIS employee: February 3, 2020.

⁵⁴ Charlene Tan and D. B. Abbas, “Reform in Madrasah Education...”, 201.

⁵⁵ MUIS, “Serving the Community Transforming Lives”, *MUIS Annual Report*, (2012), 11.

⁵⁶ MUIS, “Strengthening Institutions empowering Community”, *MUIS Annual Report* (2015), 25.

⁵⁷ Maryam Mokhtar, “The Revamped Madrasah Education System”, *The Straits Times*, Wednesday, January 16, (2013).

Improving Quality

As private educational institutions, madrasahs are not fully aided and led by the Singapore government and are only under the government's supervisory as well as 'loosely regulated' by the Ministry of Education. The religious schools are independently managed by government-appointed management committees who allow broad independence in developing and selecting madrasahs' own educational materials, teachers, teaching methodology, curriculum time, and financial support. Consequently, the madrasahs' structure and pedagogy are often significantly different from the system of Singapore conventional education, and are even different from each other. However, madrasahs are being strongly urged to improve their quality in nurturing innovation and creativity to raise the economic prospect of their graduate.⁵⁸

The early twenty-first century is a crucial moment for Singapore's education. There was an endless talk about a demand to reevaluate the quality of education including madrasahs. In 2003, a Compulsory Education Act that requires all children to complete the mandatory six years of primary education in national secular schools has come into implementation. Accordingly, all students including those of Madrasahs should sit for the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) at the end of the primary school, and the Cambridge Board General Certificate of Education (GCE) examinations for secondary and pre-university students.⁵⁹ All six madrasahs were challenged to guarantee that their pupils are able to obtain a minimum standard of the PSLE and GCE to stay being recognized as educational institutions.

It was the government's reform agenda to revamp madrasah system and raise the academic standards of the Muslim schools. As a response to this policy, madrasahs have worked hard to train and develop their teachers, create conducive learning environment, and provide adequate resources for its students, in addition to the revamping of curriculum and syllabus structure.⁶⁰ There are

⁵⁸ Interview with a teacher of madrasah Irsyad: February 4, 2020.

⁵⁹ Charlene Tan, "Islam and Citizenship Education in Singapore: Challenges and Implication", *Education, Citizenship and Social Justice*, Vol. 2, Issue 1, (T.K: SAGE, 2007), 1; Hussin Mutalib, "Islamic Education in Singapore...", 23.

⁶⁰ Interview with a teacher of Madrasah Wak Tanjong, February 5, 2020; Our Madrasah "Equipping New Skills for Madrasah Students for Future Challenges" Dec 2, 2020, Retrieved on February 25, 2021, from <https://www.ourmadrasah.sg/equipping-new-skills-for-madrasah-students-for-future-challenges/>.

also programs to enhance the leadership capabilities of madrasah management".⁶¹ The madrasahs are also well-equipped with the learning tools and facilities required for effective Islamic education. Although the proportion of the secular subjects is smaller than religious subjects, all students attending these Islamic schools have taken both institutional examinations held by the Islamic institutes and national examinations held by the MOE.⁶² Today, almost 100% of the madrasah students who sit for the PSLE are successfully managed to pass the exams and to move on to the higher level.⁶³ In 2016, MUIS also reported that madrasah continue to perform well, 98% of its students attained pass in the PSLE.⁶⁴ MUIS also reported that madrasah students make a significant improvement in Science, Mathematics, and English subjects. Some madrasah graduates who have passed the GCE 'O' level, does not choose to continue in Islamic institutions and rather enroll themselves in secular institutions such as polytechnics and universities.⁶⁵

Empowering Teacher in Teaching Methodology

Historically, regular teaching methods at madrasahs were memorization and rote learning which heavily focused on traditional Islamic studies in which most of its content considered unchangeable. These methods are, however, for many reasons, in opposition to modern learning methods emphasizing on critical thinking and creative learning with a focus on competencies, skills, and abilities required in modern Singapore.⁶⁶ Several studies indicated that Singaporean Muslims are lagging behind in educational achievement. The issue of job opportunities is frequently referred in the context of madrasah education.⁶⁷ Poor academic performance, limited skills acquired and high drop-out numbers of madrasah students caused them harder to find a job.

⁶¹ MUIS, "Serving Our Community, Better, *MUIS Annual Report 2013*, 12.

⁶² Interview with a teacher of Madrasah Wak Tanjong, February 5, 2020.

⁶³ Our Madrasah, "98.5% of Madrasah Students Moving on to Secondary School", Dec 2, 2020, Retrieved on February 25, 2021, from <https://www.ourmadrasah.sg/98-5-percent-of-madrasah-students-moving-on-to-secondary-school/>

⁶⁴ MUIS, "Strengthening Our Institutions Harnessing Our Assets", *MUIS Annual Report 2016*, 5.

⁶⁵ Charlene Tan and Amnah Kasmuri., "Islamic Religious Education...", 115.

⁶⁶ Azhar Ibrahim, "An Evaluation of Madrasah...", 95-96.

⁶⁷ Charlene Tan, "Narrowing the Gap: The Educational Achievements of the Malay Community in Singapore", *Intercultural Education*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (T.K: Routledge, 2007), 53-64.

In line with the state vision to remain economically competitive amid the transition to a knowledge economy, the government has launched three major initiatives since 1997. The first initiative is “Thinking Schools, Learning Nation” launched by the government in June 1997. Tan maintains:

“It emphasizes on developing all students into active learners with critical thinking skills and on developing a creative and critical thinking culture within schools. Its key strategies include (1) the explicit teaching of critical and creative thinking skills; (2) the reduction of subject content; (3) the revision of assessment modes; and; (4) a greater emphasis on processes instead of on outcomes when appraising schools”.⁶⁸

To help the madrasahs enhance their academic standard, MUIS had supported some teachers to continue their studies at Edith Cowan University in Australia and the National Institute of Education in Singapore.⁶⁹ MUIS had sponsored 193 teachers to pursue their academic qualification in education in both universities from 2003 until 2014.⁷⁰ Besides, MUIS has also put in much effort to empower teachers and equip them with the necessary pedagogical skills through continuous trainings, workshops, seminars, and round-table discussions throughout the years.⁷¹ In 2012, MUIS reported that 700 teachers have been trained in pedagogy.⁷² In 2013, 94% of madrasahs teachers from all six madrasahs have received formal teacher training.⁷³ Today, madrasahs in Singapore have changed their learning processes and strategies toward problem-based learning, cooperative learning, observing, reasoning, critical thinking, communicating, applying, modeling-experiential learning, and e-learning.⁷⁴ At the same time, as madrasahs have begun to teach secular subjects such as science and Mathematics, the government has also provided financial support in upgrading its teachers of these subjects.⁷⁵

⁶⁸ Jason Tan and Saravanan Gopinathan, “Education Reform in Singapore: towards Greater Creativity and Innovation?”, *National Institute for Research Advancement (NIRA) Review*, Vol. 7. No.3, (T.K: T.P, 2000), 7.

⁶⁹ The Strait Times “Specialist Course for Madrasah Teachers”, *The Strait Times*, Thursday, September 20, 2007, 6.

⁷⁰ MUIS, “Moving Forward with the Community”, *MUIS Annual Report 2014*, 20.

⁷¹ MUIS, *MUIS Annual Report 2016*, 3.

⁷² MUIS, “Serving the Community Transforming Lives”, *MUIS Annual Report 2012*, 3, 11.

⁷³ MUIS, *MUIS Annual Report 2013*, 12.

⁷⁴ Aljunied Official Website, Retrieved on February 24, 2021, from <https://www.aljunied.edu.sg/copy-of-curriculum>

⁷⁵ Nur Asyiqin Mohamad Salleh, “National Day Rally 2015: Malay/Muslim Community Has Made Huge Progress: Madrasahs to Get Help in Teaching of Secular

Instilling Social Cohesion

Singapore is a multi-religious and multiracial country that has been enjoying relatively religious and racial harmony for many years.⁷⁶ Owing to the diverse religious and ethnic mix of its citizens, the government considers that it 'must have core values to bond the various ethnic groups'⁷⁷ For these reasons, the state authority government has long viewed education as an instrument to guarantee racial, religious, and social cohesion and to build a national identity.⁷⁸ Accordingly, the government has set one of its educational objectives as 'giving students a common educational experience which will help to build national identity and cohesion'.⁷⁹

However, relating to madrasah education, a stereotype has developed that madrasah education foster narrow-minded and intolerant thinking through its rote-learning and the use of polemic. Even, madrasahs were not exempted from being dichotomized as a center which advocates terrorism. Mokhtar notes:

"Post-September 11th, 2001 saw an increased interest in Islam and madrasah education. Islamic insurgents in Southeast Asia and globally became the focus of attention, mainly due to the fact that a number of them were schooled in madrasahs, where they were believed to have been imbibed with deviant Islamic teachings. Consequently, madrasah education was placed in the spotlight".⁸⁰

Thus, it can be seen that the challenge that madrasahs have faced is to respond to the question of whether the madrasah graduates can assimilate and integrate into the wider society away from extremism and conservatism that has always been characterized to their students.⁸¹

In response to such challenge, MUIS has developed several programs for madrasah teachers as they play an important role in equipping students with proper Islamic guidance amidst an increasingly vibrant and diverse socio-religious landscape. In 2013, MUIS developed an agenda and programs that promote diversity

Subjects", *The Straits Times*, Tuesday, 19 January 2016.

⁷⁶ Chan Sek Keong, "Multiculturalism in Singapore: The Way to a Harmonious Society", *Singapore Academy of Law Journal*, (Singapore: Singapore Academy of Law, 2013).

⁷⁷ Chan Sek Keong, "Cultural Issues and Crime", *Singapore Academy of Law Journal*, No. 12, (Singapore: Singapore Academy of Law, 2000), 23.

⁷⁸ Kerstin Steiner, "Madrasah in Singapore...", 49.

⁷⁹ Committee on Compulsory Education in Singapore, *Report...*

⁸⁰ Intan Azura Mokhtar, "Madrasahs in Singapore...", 115.

⁸¹ Mohd Roslan Mohd Nor, et al., "Survival of Islamic Education...", 238-239.

and pro-humanity values such as MUIS *Asatizah* Attachment Program (MAAP) to increase teachers' awareness of the complexity of managing religious life and diversity in Singapore. MUIS also conducted interfaith *ifthâr* (breakfasting) to celebrate diversity with different religious adherents.⁸² There were also some seminars, round-table discussions, workshops, and courses throughout the years to prepare the teachers to be able to guide the community dealing with diversity and shaping a progressive socio-religious life. For instance, MUIS conducted several courses during 2016 which taught the madrasah teachers to understand about radical ideologies, moderation in religion, and diversity management within Islamic thought, contextualization and adaptation of specific Islamic doctrines and practices in social life, and adaptation of multi-disciplinary and critical approaches to religious discourse.⁸³ Another program included discourse focused on issues concerning diversity, contextualization of Islam and counter-narrative to extremist ideologies.⁸⁴ One of study participants who teaches Tauhid, Hadith, and Tasawuf at Madrasah Wak Tanjong also shares some results of teachers' professional development program in madrasahs, such as the development of three main skills; the contextual understanding of religious text, and cross-cultural sensitivity and society.⁸⁵

On the other hand, madrasah graduates and students are frequently reminded to contextualize their knowledge to Singapore's multi-religious and multiracial context, guided by the Singaporean Muslim identity ethos.⁸⁶ The students were also engaged in interfaith efforts such as Harmony Games organized by the National Council of Churches in Singapore (NCCS), involving 400 youths of different faiths and non-faiths.⁸⁷

⁸² MUIS, *MUIS, Annual Report 2013*, 10, 29,

⁸³ MUIS, *MUIS Annual Report 2016*, 21, 22, 25.

⁸⁴ MUIS, *MUIS Annual Report 2016*, 22; MUIS, *MUIS Annual Report 2012*, 3.

⁸⁵ Our Madrasah "Equipping New Skills for Madrasah Students for Future Challenges" Dec 2, 2020, Retrieved on February 25, 2021, from <https://www.ourmadrasah.sg/equipping-new-skills-for-madrasah-students-for-future-challenges/>,

⁸⁶ Interview with Madrasah teachers and a Madrasah graduate who serves as MUIS employee: February 3, 2020.

⁸⁷ MUIS, *MUIS Annual Report 2019*, 19.

Fundraising

Since madrasahs are private schools, they are not fully funded by the government⁸⁸ but depend heavily on the support of public or Muslim-based organizations. Nowadays, the issue of financing constitutes one of the extremely serious and perennial challenges faced by religious schools. The insufficient funds hinder madrasahs from obtaining the required upgrades to human resources especially teachers, infrastructure, and facilities. While educators at government schools are among the highest incentivized public employees, madrasahs often encounter problems in attracting professional teachers owing to their shortage of funding. Besides, as lots of madrasah educators gain minor training in pedagogy, standards become rather problematic. As to one madrasah, almost S\$1million was needed to pay its annual operating cost, but only half of this was fulfilled through numerous grants and fees endowed by MUIS. Other valuable resources were necessary to be diverted to meet the other half by way of fundraising.⁸⁹

The issue of financing has been a long-standing discussion and has not been adequately resolved. Madrasah Fund launched in 1994 aimed at improving the quality of full-time Madrasahs in Singapore, allowing these institutions to address existing financing problems with voluntary contributions from community and organizations, and giving a breathing space to a certain extent.⁹⁰ Besides, an endowment fund was established by MUIS in 2012 to secure further funding for religious institutions. Then in 2013, Edusave Grant that provides annual financial contributions to every Singaporean student for their comprehensive development was set by the government to grant to madrasah students. It was only after 20 years from its inception that students received it as parents sent a petition to the government to extend the grant to their children.

Today, madrasahs are co-funded by Muslim philanthropists and Muslim-based organizations through various sources. For instance, madrasah income sourced from Mosque Building and Mendaki Fund (33%), school fees (29%), fundraising (24%), philanthropy (5%),

⁸⁸ Nur Asyiqin Mohamad Salleh, "Parliament: Edusave Awards will not be Extended to Private Schools, Including Madrasahs", *The Straits Times*, Monday, 13 April 2015.

⁸⁹ Interview with a Madrasah graduate who serves as MUIS employee: February 3, 2020.

⁹⁰ Interview with a Madrasah graduate who serves as MUIS employee: February 3, 2020.

Baitulmal (1%), and *Wakaf Ilmu* and government funding (Edusave) and Teacher Development & Trainings for secular subjects (5%),⁹¹ There were also some fundraising and donation, including those from Friday prayer *jamaah* under MUIS management.⁹² As of 2018, a total of \$5.8 million was disbursed by MUIS for madrasah and teachers' development and assistance, as well as \$7.9 million for Islamic education and religious guidance.⁹³ The funds were used to pay operational costs, staff development and student programs. Also, \$2.17 million of it were disbursed in 2019 to incentivize and support madrasah teachers to continually improve the quality and professionalism in madrasahs and \$189,000 to support madrasah students in their studies through the Madrasah Student Awards. In the same year, a total of 6.1 million was distributed to madrasah, religious teacher's development and assistance.⁹⁴ In 2020, MUIS allocated a total of \$500,000 to six full-time madrasahs to assist student programs during the ongoing pandemic.⁹⁵ MUIS has continually supported the madrasahs, students and teachers through financial support and grants. Among the grants available to the religious schools is the Government-MUIS Assistance Grant consisting of 3 schemes namely the Madrasah Student Awards (MSA), Financial Incentives for the Madrasah teachers (FI) and Teachers Training Support Grant (TTSG), Madrasah fund and *Wakaf Ilmu*.⁹⁶ This year (2021), the six madrasahs will also obtain up to \$1.5million grant to improve the quality of their education.⁹⁷ Despite the various sources for madrasah funding from MUIS and Muslim organizations, madrasahs still need more fund to be sufficient.⁹⁸

⁹¹ Our Madrasah, "Sources of Funding", Retrieved January 6, 2021.

⁹² Luqmanul Hakim Ismail, "MUIS Launches Public Education and Fund-Raising Portal to Support Madrasahs", *The Straits Times*, Friday, 4 December 2020.

⁹³ MUIS, "Striving with Confidence Serving with Compassion", *MUIS Annual Report 2018*, 53.

⁹⁴ MUIS, "Building a Resilient Community of Success Together", *MUIS Annual Report 2019*, 32, 44.

⁹⁵ Jolene Ang, "3,500 Madrasah Students to Benefit from \$500,000 Covid-19 Disbursement by Muis", *The Strait Times*, Tuesday, 29 December 2020.

⁹⁶ MUIS, "Strengthening Madrasah" <https://www.muis.gov.sg/madrasah/About/Strengthening-Madrasahs>, Retrieved on February 24, 2021.

⁹⁷ MUIS, "Madrasah to Get \$1.5Million in Grants", <https://www.muis.gov.sg/madrasah/>, Retrieved on February 24, 2021.

⁹⁸ Interview with a Madrasah graduate who serves as MUIS employee: February 5, 2020.

Conclusion

Full-time madrasah education has encountered various difficulties which increasingly challenged its essential identity and function. It has constantly been perceived in a negative nuance due to its ineffective contribution to the knowledge-based economy. The orthodox and conservative education system in the Islamic educational institutions as in madrasahs is also viewed to hinder Singapore's racial and religious cohesion. The religiously based curriculum, the traditional learning strategy and exclusive Muslim enrolment in madrasahs are considered to imbibe deviant religious teachings that encourage intolerance, exclusivism, extremisms and radicalism.

The greatly competitive environment of modern Singapore, the capitalistic, pluralistic and secular vision and culture have forced Singaporean Muslims to adapt to a fast-changing society and meet the demands of the modern and multicultural state. Therefore, the religious institutions of education have strived to address the myriad challenges through education reforms. Due to its crucial role in supporting government goals while providing quality religious education, madrasahs need to be managed properly, otherwise it possibly be undermined for its characteristics and role. The education reform for madrasahs includes changing its orientation, revamping its educational system, improving its standard, empowering teachers in teaching methodology, and instilling social cohesion, and fundraising. This study implies that reformation in Islamic education could be created by innovatively negotiating the pressures of national politics and rule while maintaining the identity and aspiration of local Muslim society.[]

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