

**Twenty-Third Annual International Law and Religion Symposium
Brigham Young University, Utah, USA**

1-4 October 2016

**MINORITIES, MAJORITIES AND RELIGIOUS RIGHTS-
A NARRATIVE ON MUSLIM COMMUNITY IN SINGAPORE**

Dr. H. Mohamed Saleem
Vice President-I,
Jamiyah Singapore

Introduction

Singapore gained its independence from the British when it joined the Federation of Malaysia on 16th September 1963. On 9th August 1965 it separated from Malaysia and became known as the Republic of Singapore. Singapore is a multiracial city state, whose elected government is secular and practices a system of parliamentary democracy.

The official languages are Malay, Chinese (Mandarin) Tamil and English. English is the language of administration while Malay is the national language.

Singapore's strategic position, its excellent socio-economic and technological infrastructure, its image as the most connected city in the world, its position as a commercial , tourist and communication hub , its banking , political stability and security and the opportunities it offers to MNCs, students, scientists and researchers makes it a model post-modern nation.

Demography of Religions in Singapore

Singapore has an area of 719 square kilo metres and a total population 5.7 million. Religion in Singapore is characterized by a diversity of religious beliefs and practices due to its diverse ethnic mix of peoples originating from various countries. Singapore is considered to be the world's most religiously diverse nations.

83 percent of citizens and permanent residents profess some religious faith. Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Taoism and Hinduism make up 82.3 percent and the remainder is composed of atheists, agnostics, and other religions including Sikh, Jewish, Zoroastrian and Jain communities.

Adherents of all religious traditions in Singapore displayed a near-universal openness to having relationships with those of other religious faiths in the public sphere. Consistent state policy and action over the decades has ensured that Singaporeans of different faiths live in peaceful coexistence.

Freedom of Religion in Singapore

Article 15 of the Constitution of the Republic of Singapore guarantees freedom of religion in Singapore. Article 15(1) states: "Every person has the right to profess and practice his religion and to propagate it."

Freedom of religion under Article 15(1) is not absolute as it is qualified by Article 15(4) of the Constitution, which provides that the rights secured by Article 15 do not authorize any act contrary to any general law relating to public order, public health or morality.

These limitations upon the freedom of religion are an important aspect of Singapore's secularism. The Singapore Courts have interpreted the term public order to be equivalent to the concepts of "public peace, welfare and good order" referred to in section 24(1)(a) of the Societies Act rather than taking the narrower view that public order means freedom from unlawful physical violence. .

The Chinese who are mostly Taoist and some of whom also practice a blend of Taoism, Confucianism and Buddhism constitute 77 percent of the population. A substantial minority of them are either Christians or agnostic. The Indians are seven percent of the population the majority of whom are Hindus while the rest are either Christian or Muslims. The total population of Christians is 14%.

Malay/Muslims have been here since the 14th century either as local native, members of the royal family, or as sea-faring businessmen. They migrated from different parts of the Malay Archipelago while the other Muslims migrated in the late 18th, 19th and 20th centuries from West Asia and India. A small minority were Chinese Muslims with roots going back several hundred years.

.Religions of Singapore

The Constitution of Singapore allows every person the right to profess and practice his religion and to propagate it. The main religions are Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Christianity and Hinduism

Singapore practices a benign form of secularism. Propagation is allowed provided it is not defamatory, and does not create antagonism, ill-feelings or disharmony. The Penal Code has provisions with regard to this.

The Constitution provides that legislation passed by Parliament must be scrutinized by a Presidential Council for Minority Rights to ensure that there are no measures which discriminate against a minority community. Arising from the parliamentary Act for the Maintenance of Religious Harmony, a Presidential Council for Religious Harmony exists to look into this important issue. It consists of representatives from the government and religious representatives. Over and above such safeguards, there are many Inter Racial and Religious Confidence Circles (IRCCs) exist at grassroots levels. The IRCCs have worked hard over the years to build strong relationships amongst leaders of different racial and religious groups. This work is critical, because relationships are at the heart of building trust and understanding, which in turn are essential for maintaining racial and religious harmony. They complement the work of interfaith organizations such as the Inter-Religious Organisation, Singapore which was founded by the founder of Jamiyah, Maulana Muhd Abdul Aleem Siddique in 1949 enlisting the support and cooperation of other faith leaders.

Muslims in Singapore Today

Since early 20th Century there have been Advisory Councils recognized by the authorities as representative of the Muslim community. Today by virtue of the Administration of Muslim Law Act , passed by Parliament, the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore widely known as MUIS as the logical development of the earlier advisory councils , came into being together with a revamped Syariah Court- which deals with Islamic Family Law- and the Registry of Muslim Marriages. These institutions are under the broad aegis of the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth and are also directly responsible to the Minister in Charge of Muslims Affairs who is presently also the Minister for Communication and Information and Minister in charge of Cyber Security namely Dr Yaacob Ibrahim.

MUIS oversees the running of endowments, madrasahs, and 70 mosques including several purpose-built modern mosques in public housing estates where the majority of Singaporeans live. MUIS also collects and administers zakat funds. The Mosque Building and Mendaki Fund also comes within its ambit. It collects computerized monthly contributions from all Muslim workers and employers.

Today out of 101 Members of Parliament, 14 are Muslims of whom four are female Members. Also among the Muslim Parliamentarians some are holding key positions in Government such as Speaker of Parliament, two cabinet Ministers, One Senior Minister of State and two Parliamentary Secretaries.

Muslim Non-Governmental organizations play active role in Singapore catering for various objectives such as social welfare, cultural, literary, credit benefits, youth, women, elder and health care, education and inter-faith and inter-racial harmony work, education and Islamic research and activities. The oldest and probably the largest Muslim NGO was the Muslim Missionary Society which was formed in 1932 and which created several branches in Singapore as well as peninsular Malaya. When the island republic gained its full independence upon separation from Malaysia on 9th August 1965 The All Malaya Muslim Missionary Society became known as The Muslim Missionary Society Singapore also known as Jamiyah Singapore.

Religious and Secular education:

Madrasahs represent a different pathway with a long history but share the need of mainstream schools to ensure all students have a sound grip of subjects like mathematics and science to equip them for life in a fast-changing world. Madrasahs fulfil a vital function by helping to develop a core of Singaporeans capable of leading the Muslim community in religious matters. Realising that an isolation of madrasahs would not be in the best interests of the community and the nation and the importance of having the need to produce madrasah educated youth rooted in Singapore perspectives who will, also contribute to the strengthening of the national identity Government has consequently encouraged madrasah students take the nationally-benchmarked Primary School Leaving Examination within the purview of the Compulsory Education Act. A renewed emphasis placed on achieving excellence in secular subjects to ensure that madrasah graduates do not lose out in a globalised workplace that is becoming increasingly competitive for young people.

Muslims of Singapore are by and large faithful to their Islamic roots, and persevering in their endeavour to relate Islamic values to the realities on the ground and as extrapolated for the future. This is made easier by the fact of the industriousness of its leaders, the benign secularism of its government which does not tolerate religious extremism and which condemned extremism in any form.

Interfaith Harmony

One of the biggest tasks is to enhance the peace and harmony in Singapore which is never taken for granted by the Government and the community leaders of all faiths and races.

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, however, other laws and policies restricted this right in some circumstances. Publications and public discussions of religious issues are generally censored, along with negative or inflammatory portrayals of religion. The government does not tolerate speech or actions that it deems could adversely affect racial or religious harmony.

Under Article 15(4) of the Constitution, a person's freedom of religion can be restricted by a general law relating to public order, public health or morality. The restriction on freedom of religion are an important reflection of Singapore's secularism.

The Singapore government can also influence religious practice through the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act. The Act was passed in 1990 and revised in 2001 in response to actions that the government viewed as threats to religious harmony. This includes aggressive and "insensitive" proselytizing and "the mixing of religion and politics."

The Act established the Presidential Council on Religious Harmony, which reports to the Minister for Home Affairs and is empowered to issue restraining orders against leaders and members of religious groups to prevent them from carrying out political activities, "creating "ill will" between religious groups, or carrying out subversive activities.

Other Constitutional Provisions in Singapore

In addition to Article 15, there are other provisions in the Constitution that protect religious freedom. Article 12(2) prohibits discrimination against Singapore citizens on the ground of, among others, religion in any law, in the appointment to any office or employment under a public authority, or in the administration of any law relating to the acquisition, holding or disposition of property, or the establishing or carrying on of any trade, business, profession, vocation or employment.

Related to this is Article 16(1) of which prohibits discrimination against citizens on the ground only of, among others, religion in the administration of public educational institutions, and in providing financial aid from public funds for the maintenance or education of students in any educational institution. The Constitution declares that religious groups have the right to establish and maintain institutions for the education of children and to provide them religious instruction in those institutions. Nevertheless, no person may be compelled to receive instruction in or take part in any ceremony or act of worship of a religion apart from his or her own.¹

In being secular, the Government of Singapore does not reject religion. Instead, it has been said to practice “accommodative and co-operative secularism”.¹

For example, the Central Provident Fund system facilitates the collection of Mosque Building Fund contributions by Singaporean Muslims, a co-operationist move, and the number of religious holidays are officially recognized, an accommodationist one.

A strict separationist model would not allow followers of a particular religion to be exempted from general law. The Singapore Constitution, on the other hand, mandates special religious and personal laws and syariah courts for Muslims.

The Last 50 Years

Muslim NGOs in Singapore also play a significant role in promoting inter-racial and inter-faith harmony in the multi-racial society of Singapore. These organizations, such as Jamiyah Singapore are bonded through adherence to Islamic values, beliefs, history or identity. They engage in a range of activities across the humanitarian spectrum. They take active part in the shaping and implementation of appropriate service strategy to reach out to the needy and disadvantaged section of society, regardless of race or faith and thus instils confidence and trust among other communities. They play a strategic role in strengthening bonding reinforcing the processes of identity and connection that comprise the social fabric of communities. There is increasing recognition of the role of Muslim NGOs in Singapore by various stake holders such as Government Ministries, Self-help groups and other professional agencies. The numerous programmes managed by organizations such as Jamiyah Singapore which is geared towards serving all needy Singaporeans, Muslims and others, is endorsed by the strong support that the organization is receiving from across all Singaporeans, businessmen, philanthropists and individuals. Thus Muslim NGOs also play a very important role, not only in meeting the dire needs of the disadvantaged sections of the society, but in the process enhances mutual good will, trust and confidence of every one and thus enhances the image of Islam and Muslims in Singapore.

Conclusions

The constitutional right of religious freedom in Singapore operates within the structure of public order. Laws like the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act aim to preserve social order. Singapore’s secularism provides a framework to promote for the peaceful co-existence of different religions and belief systems, towards which the government is neutral and even-handed.

References

1. Singapore Department of Statistics (12 January 2011). "Census of population 2010: Statistical Release 1 on Demographic Characteristics, Education, Language and Religion" (<http://www.singstat.gov.sg/pubn/popn/C2010sr1/cop2010sr1.pdf>). Retrieved 16 August 2014.
2. K. Kesavapany (30 September 2009), "Secularism in S'pore a work in progress", *The Straits Times*: 22.
3. Lai Ah Eng: Religious Diversity in Singapore: Institute of South East Asian Studies: Singapore: 2008
4. Bernhard Platzdasch and Johan Saravanamuttu: Religious Diversity in Muslim-majority States in Southeast Asia : Areas of Toleration and Conflict : Institute of Southeast Asian Studies; Singapore 2014