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## **Constructing Muslim Identity in a Secular State: The Strategic Role of Two Singapore Islamic Organizations**

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### **Abstract:**

In Singapore, Islamic identity matters mainly because Muslims and Malays have special constitutional status. However, state policies seem to contradict the status while the community is still dealing with the problem of backwardness in educational and economic development. This article examines the profile and strategic role of two Islamic organizations, MUIS (*Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura*, the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore) and Pergas (*Persatuan Ulama dan Guru-Guru Agama*

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*Islam Singapura*, Singapore Islamic Scholars, and Religious Teachers Association), in accommodating the expression and reconstructing Singaporean Muslim identity. Through intensive library research and using an interdisciplinary approach from social constructivist and *fiqh* of minorities' perspectives, this article found that both have played a very important role in the expression and construction of Singaporean Muslim identity. There have been dynamic contestation and cooperation between the state policies towards the Muslim community. However, the global effect of Islamist extremism and terrorism has united them in terms of religious thought, attitude, and the formulation of the ideal Singaporean Muslim identity. The changing process of their stances toward the government's policies was effective due to the function of *fiqh* of minorities in contextualizing Islamic teachings in the context of Singapore as a secular state.

**Keywords:**

Islamic Identity; MUIS; Pergas; Singapore; *Fiqh* of Minorities

**Introduction**

Identity, which is “our understanding of who we are and who other people are, and reciprocally, other people’s understanding of themselves and of others (which includes us),”<sup>1</sup> does matter, including for Singaporean Muslim identity which has exerted attention for many reasons. Malay and Muslims have a special status in the legal framework of the Republic of Singapore that gives special attention to the minority ethnic group’s interests as stated in Article 152 (2) of its Constitution<sup>2</sup> although the number of Muslims is only

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Jenkins, *Social Identity* (London & New York: Routledge, 2008), 18.

<sup>2</sup> “The Government shall exercise its functions in such manner as to recognize the special position of the Malays, who are the indigenous people of Singapore, and accordingly it shall be the responsibility of the government to protect, safeguard, support, foster and promote their political, educational, religious, economic, social and cultural interests and the Malay language”. “Singapore Statutes Online,” accessed April 4, 2023, <https://sso.agc.gov.sg/Act/CONS1963#pr152->.

about 14.9% of the total 5.637 million resident population in 2022.<sup>3</sup> Despite the presence of people of Indian, Arab, and other origins, as well as a small number of Chinese and European converts, the majority of Singaporean Muslims are Malay and the terms Muslim and Malay are often used interchangeably in the context of Singaporean society as they exist throughout Southeast Asia. In addition, Malay is sung as the national anthem and is the national language of Singapore.

Malay identity in Singapore has been articulated by Malays themselves which can be summed up as follows: "At its core, Malay in Singapore is understood in terms of the basic identifiers or attributes of what it means to be Malay, namely the Malay language, Malay culture and tradition, and Islamic religion, and of which Islam is an important attribute of Malay identity."<sup>4</sup> Singapore's Muslim community and the rising social, political, and religious concerns it raises, are marked by the confluence of Malay ethnicity and Islamic identity. As a result of its location and the widely held, yet incorrect, assumption of its homogeneity, the topic of integration into the state and nationality has arisen again.<sup>5</sup>

The special status of Malay in the Constitution of Singapore, however, does not reflect the social and economic realities of the indigenous minority group. Even though the socioeconomic profile of the Malay community tends to develop, the progress is still below the national average.<sup>6</sup> This has been admitted not only by Malay/Muslim leaders and scholars but also by state authorities that have a long concern with regard to the management of multi-ethnic and multi-

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<sup>3</sup>"Population and Population Structure; Statistics on Singapore's Population Are Compiled by the Singapore Department of Statistics," accessed April 4, 2023, <https://www.singstat.gov.sg/find-data/search-by-theme/population/population-and-population-structure/latest-data>.

<sup>4</sup>Noraslinda Mohamad Zuber, "Singapore Malay Identity: A Study of Dominant Perceptions of Islam in Post-Independence Singapore" (Singapore, National University of Singapore, 2010), 47.

<sup>5</sup>Suzaina Kadir, "Uniquely Singapore: The Management of Islam in a Small Island Republic," *Islam and Civilisatioan Renewal: A Journal Devoted to Contemporary Issues and Policy Research* 2, no. 1 (2010): 158.

<sup>6</sup>Kamaludeen Mohamed Nasir, AA Pereira, and BS Turner, *Muslims in Singapore: Piety, Politics and Policies* (London & New York: Routledge, 2010), 37-38.

cultural society. The backdrop of Malay/Muslim in Singapore has been popularly known as the Malay problem or Malay dilemma which is synonymous with economic backwardness and social problems.<sup>7</sup> Apart from the socioeconomic problems, the contemporary development of Muslims in Singapore has however been seen to have increased in religiosity. In addition, since the 1980s, Islamic institutions and activities in Singapore have been flourishing. There has been increasing interest in Islamic institutions/accessories among the Muslims, including middle-class Muslim professionals, like attending religious gatherings in mosques, Islamic education or *madrasah* (Islamic schools), and Islamic organizations as well as wearing Islamic attire.<sup>8</sup> In other words, despite living in a secular state, most Singaporean Muslims are quite religious.<sup>9</sup>

Another Article of the Constitution, namely 153, mentions that the state regulates Muslim religious affairs and establishes *Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura* or the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS) to advise the president on “matters relating to the Muslim’s religion.”<sup>10</sup> As a statutory body, MUIS itself is one of the unique characteristics of Islam in Singapore in relation to the state. Established in 1968, it plays a very important role in the development of Islam in Singapore because its constitutional function mainly deals with the management of Muslims in the country. The management of religion is of paramount concern of the Republic of Singapore albeit its claim to be a secular state. This is due to the multi-ethnic and religious nature of Singapore’s population, especially within the context of maintaining religious order and harmony.

Long before the establishment of MUIS, there was Pergas (*Persatuan Ulama dan Guru-Guru Agama Islam Singapura*, Singapore Islamic Scholars, and Religious Teachers Association), founded in

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<sup>7</sup> Lili Zubaidah Rahim, *The Singapore Dilemma: The Political and Educational Marginality of the Malay Community* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

<sup>8</sup> Nasir, Pereira, and Turner, *Muslims in Singapore: Piety, Politics and Policies*, 43-47.

<sup>9</sup> Helmiati, “Muslim Religiosity in a Challenging Secular State of Singapore,” *QIJS* 9, no. 2 (2021): 351-86, <https://doi.org/http://dx.doi.org/10.21043/qijis.v9i2.8026>.

<sup>10</sup> “Constitution of the Republic of Singapore,” accessed April 4, 2023, <https://sso.agc.gov.sg/Act/CONS1963#pr153>.

1957, with the primary aim of “providing and producing credible Islamic leadership and promoting *asâtizah* (Islamic teacher) development.” Pergas is therefore the most important organized group or civil society in the growth of the Muslim community and the construction of Islamic identity in Singapore<sup>11</sup> besides MUIS. Thus, examining the role of both Islamic organizations in maintaining and constructing Islamic identity in Singapore is an important scholarly endeavor.

A considerable number of studies on Malay/Muslim identity in Singapore such as Rahim,<sup>12</sup> Tan,<sup>13</sup> Steiner,<sup>14</sup> Mutalib,<sup>15</sup> and Razak<sup>16</sup> emphasize the role of the state in the formation of identity. While Razak<sup>17</sup> focuses on the state’s discursive construction of Muslim identity through the lens of securitization and essentialization of Islam, Tan points to the failure of the Singapore government to imagine the Muslim identity based on the *Jemaah Islamiah* crises.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, Azeez<sup>19</sup> argues that MUIS’s Singaporean Muslim identity has failed as a state’s modernization project of modern Islam. Unlike the above studies and those emphasizing the political context of non-

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<sup>11</sup> Walid Jumblatt Abdullah, “Religious Representation in Secular Singapore: A Study of MUIS and Pergas,” (National University of Singapore, 2012), 73.

<sup>12</sup> Lili Zubaidah Rahim, *The Singapore Dilemma: The Political and Educational Marginality of the Malay Community* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

<sup>13</sup> Charlene Tan, “(Re)Imagining the Muslim Identity in Singapore,” *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 8, no. 1 (2008): 31-49, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1754-9469.2008.00002.x>.

<sup>14</sup> 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* 58 (2011): 107-34.

<sup>15</sup> Hussin Mutalib, *Singapore Malays: Being Ethnic Minority and Muslim in a Global City-State* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2012).

<sup>16</sup> Muneerah Ab Razak, “World-Class Muslims: Examining the Discursive Construction of a Singapore Muslim Identity,” *The Muslim World* 109, no. 3 (2019): 417-30, <https://doi.org/10.1111/muwo.12300>.

<sup>17</sup> Razak, “World-Class Muslims.”

<sup>18</sup> Tan, “(Re)Imagining the Muslim Identity in Singapore.”

<sup>19</sup> Rizwana Abdul Azeez, *Negotiating Muslim Malay Identity in Singapore* (Brighton: Sussex Academy Press, 2016).

Muslim majority countries such as Fleischmann and Phalet,<sup>20</sup> this article argues that Muslim identity should be viewed from within the Muslim community itself, particularly its religious authorities and organizations.

This article, therefore, examines the strategic roles played by MUIS (*Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura*) and Pergas (*Persatuan Ulama dan Guru-Guru Agama Islam Singapura*) in the expression and construction of Muslim identity in Singapore. Systematically, it tries to compare both Islamic organizations in responding to state policies on the religious expression of the Muslim community that exerted the attention of the public and became national issues and controversies then portrays the formulation of the ideal Singaporean Muslim identity by both Islamic organizations. Other than that, a brief description of both MUIS and Pergas's profiles will be provided beforehand.

### Method

This article employs a qualitative approach to gain a comprehensive explanation of the strategic role of Islamic organizations in maintaining and constructing Islamic identity in Singapore. It is deemed appropriate because it examines the topic deeply and comprehensively and then interprets it from a contextual and holistic perspective. Data were gained by intensive library research from both online and offline sources. We visited the website of both organizations in which many relevant important data such as programs, policies, *fatwa* (religious edict), annual reports, press releases, and publications are available. In addition, we visited official websites of relevant government institutions such as Singapore Statutes Online and the Department of Statistics to collect the official documents and data needed. Books, research reports, monographs, and journal articles were also collected to support our understanding of the topic. All collected data were processed and analyzed qualitatively.

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<sup>20</sup> Fenella Fleischmann and Karen Phalet, "Identity Conflict or Compatibility: A Comparison of Muslim Minorities in Five European Cities," *Political Psychology* 37, no. 4 (2016): 447-63, <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12278>.

In line with a qualitative approach, we utilized the social constructivist perspective on Islamic identity in Singapore, particularly from the ideas of Manuel Castells<sup>21</sup> and Richard Jenkins<sup>22</sup> in combination with the perspective of the jurisprudence of minorities (*fiqh al-aqalliyât*) which is also constructivist in nature. From a constructivist viewpoint, "...always negotiable, identification is not fixed."<sup>23</sup> By identifying themselves and others, people usually practice their everyday lives in terms of identity.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, there are interconnections between religious identity and religious practice. Identity is understood as constructed through social interactions and processes in a given context in which many agents participate and various factors are involved, while people tend to practice religion in accordance with their religious identity. Thus, identity formation is a very complex and never-ending process.

In this article, *fiqh* of minorities,<sup>25</sup> as promoted by, among others, Yusuf al-Qaradawi and Taha Jabir al-Alwani, is understood not merely as a legal paradigm but an internal discourse among Muslim authorities "that addresses Muslims' questions on the function of law in maintaining Muslim identities in the context of globalization."<sup>26</sup> One of its goals is to construct a Muslim identity based on the convergence and balance of law, context, and identity.<sup>27</sup> It is a discourse which negotiates the interrelations between rules, people's aspirations, and social and political realities. In the discourse of *fiqh al-aqalliyât*, it is argued that "law should be recontextualized to fit the current moment, with a view to affirming the identity of Muslims, in this context, as the minority."<sup>28</sup> Given the position of the Muslim minority in Singapore, the perspective of *fiqh* of minorities is applicable although the concept originally refers to Muslim

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<sup>21</sup> Manuel Castells, *The Power of Identity* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1997).

<sup>22</sup> Jenkins, *Social Identity*.

<sup>23</sup> Jenkins, 18.

<sup>24</sup> Jenkins, 111.

<sup>25</sup> Masykuri Abdillah, "Sharia and Politics in the Context of Globalization and Society 5.0," *Ahkam: Jurnal Ilmu Syariah* 22, no. 2 (2022).

<sup>26</sup> Said Fares Hassan, *Fiqh Al-Aqalliyat: History, Development, and Progress* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 13.

<sup>27</sup> Hassan, 13.

<sup>28</sup> Hassan, 14.

immigrants in the West. This interdisciplinary approach which combines social science and *fiqh* is used in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the Muslim minority in Singapore as a secular state.

## Results and Discussion

### A Brief Profile of MUIS and Pergas

MUIS was established as a state-sponsored religious bureaucracy charged with managing and administering Islam and Muslim affairs in Singapore in the framework of the implementation of AMLA (Administration of Muslim Law Act). In its earliest days, many Muslims believed that MUIS existed to serve the government's interests rather than to provide guidance on Islamic concerns. However, throughout the years, MUIS has positioned itself to play a significant role in the Islamic growth of the Malay community by guiding Muslims through its diverse Islamic policies,<sup>29</sup> including the prevention of the breeding of religious extremism of any kind. Therefore, it becomes a prominent religious organization and the highest official Islamic body in Singapore.

Six primary roles and tasks of MUIS are: 1) to advise the President of Singapore on matters pertaining to the Muslims in Singapore; 2) to manage the *hajj* (Islamic pilgrimage) and *halal* (lawful) certification; 3) to manage all Muslim endowments and funds; 4) to manage the collection of *zakât* (alms) and other charitable contributions for the support, promotion, or benefit of the Muslims; 5) to administer all mosques and Muslim religious schools; 6) to perform such additional tasks and duties as consulted upon the *majlis* (council) by or under this Act or any other written legislation.<sup>30</sup>

Based on those, MUIS' responsibilities for the Muslim community are nearly all-encompassing: religious instruction for Muslims, administration of the *hajj* and *zakât*, certification of *halâl* food, socioeconomic development of less fortunate Muslims, and interfaith relations. As part of its commitment to the development of

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<sup>29</sup> Noraslinda Mohamad Zuber, "Singapore Malay Identity: A Study of Dominant Perceptions of Islam in Post-Independence Singapore." (National University of Singapore, 2010), 22-23.

<sup>30</sup> "Administration of Muslim Law Act 1966," accessed January 17, 2020, <https://sso.agc.gov.sg/act/amla1966>."



Islamic religious leaders in Singapore, MUIS, via MUIS Academy and the Office of the *Mufti* (*fatwa* giver), conducted a variety of training and development programs for *asatizah*, mosque leaders, *madrrasah* teachers, and community leaders to increase their competence and capacity in addressing the community's emerging areas and needs. Apart of it, the issue of *fatwa* is one of MUIS' most vital functions.

According to AMLA, the President of Singapore may assign the *mufti* of Singapore and its members following consultation with MUIS. The *mufti* is the highest-ranking Islamic authority within the Muslim community appointed based on Islamic expertise and presiding over the *fatwa* committee. The *mufti* must be a member of the MUIS Council.<sup>31</sup> The current *mufti* of Singapore is Dr. Nazirudin Mohd Nasir who replaced Dr. Mohamed Patris Bakaram (2011-2020) succeeding Syaikh Isa Semait who served for thirty-eight years. He is aided by Mohamad Hasbi Hassan, Fathurrahman bin Hj M Dawoed, Dr. Rohana bte Ithnin, and Dr. Firdaus bin Yahya, who are all permanent members.<sup>32</sup>

Practically, the Fatwa Committee of MUIS has issued a number of *fatwas* and recommendations in response to rising social and religious challenges in society. In 2014, for instance, they included *fatwas* on the use of money from prohibited sources for public affairs, on the limits of modesty and *aurât* ('laws,' minimum body parts to be covered) between adopted children and their adoptive families, on Group Insurance, on religious alms (*zakât*), on Multi-Level Marketing, on *istisqâ'* (prayer for rain) prayer, on films depicting prophets, and on the calculation of the Hijri calendar during *'Īd al-Aḍḥâ*.<sup>33</sup> Other progressive *fatwas* include the minimum age of marriage, namely 18 years old (2018), mosques closing and obligatory Friday prayers due to Covid-19 (2020), and the characteristics of deviant teachings (2021).<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Nasir, Pereira, and Turner, *Muslims in Singapore: Piety, Politics and Policies*, 42.

<sup>32</sup>"Fatwa Committee," accessed April 5, 2023, <https://www.muis.gov.sg/About-MUIS/Fatwa-Committee>.

<sup>33</sup>MUIS, *Annual Report 2014* (Singapore, 2014).

<sup>34</sup>"Fatwa," accessed April 13, 2023, <https://www.muis.gov.sg/officeofthemufti/Fatwa>.

In the context of our discussion, MUIS' strategic priority includes "to set the Islamic agenda, shape religious life, and forge the Singaporean Muslim identity".<sup>35</sup> In 2003, MUIS created the SMI (Singapore Muslim Identity) initiative, which essentially formulates the correct type of Islam that Singapore Muslims should adopt. It aims to design the Islamic attitude and practice of Singapore's Muslims while building an exemplary Singaporean Muslim community. Excellence, as described in the *Risalah for Building a Singapore Muslim Community of Excellence*, includes both religious and social connotations.<sup>36</sup> From the religious perspective, it means "the ability to perform Islamic rituals while appreciating their significance and internalizing the values embedded within. By doing so, we are able to manifest the beauty of this religion. This beauty, when shared with humanity, will bring goodness to everyone".<sup>37</sup> From the social perspective, it refers to "our ability to partake in nation-building and to position ourselves as full members of the Singaporean society."<sup>38</sup>

Pergas differs from MUIS because it is a self-funded and formally independent organization that relies mostly on its own investments and donations from the Muslim community. Its mission statement reads, "improving the quality of Islamic education and the welfare of Islamic *asâtizah*." The program's goal is to foster *asâtizah* who will go on to become scholars, preachers, and community leaders who will actively contribute to improving the spiritual health of the Muslim community. Kiai Hj Zohri Mutamim was the inaugural president of the association as well as the founder along with Ustaz Hj Daud Ali, Ustaz Hj Idris Ahmad, Tuan Guru Hj Said Ibrahim, and Ustaz Hj Amin Muslim.<sup>39</sup>

As a non-governmental organization (NGO), Pergas' structural position is not governed by any government ministry or official. Its structure consists of a fourteen-member Executive

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<sup>35</sup> MUIS, "Vision & Mission," accessed January 17, 2020, <https://www.muis.gov.sg/About-MUIS/Vision-Mission>.

<sup>36</sup>MUIS, *Risalah for Building a Singapore Muslim Community of Excellence* (Singapore, 2006).

<sup>37</sup> MUIS, iii.

<sup>38</sup> MUIS, iii.

<sup>39</sup> "Milestone," *Pergas* (blog), accessed January 16, 2020, <https://www.pergas.org.sg/about/milestone/>.

Committee with five distinct positions: president, vice president, treasurer, secretary, and assistant secretary. The members of Pergas elect the committee members at the Biennial General Meeting (BGM). The President elected at the BGM has the discretion to select the remaining four officeholders.<sup>40</sup> The current president of Pergas is Ustaz Mohammad Hasbi Hassan who is also a member of the fatwa committee of MUIS while the vice-president is Ustazah Kalthom binte Muhammad Isa.<sup>41</sup>

Pergas oversees five primary initiatives: the cultivation of *asatizah*, the dissemination of Islamic education, the distribution of *zakât* and other forms of charity, the promotion of *dakwah* in local communities, and the advancement of scholarly inquiry. The administration of the so-called *Asatizah Recognition Scheme* (ARS), created in 2005 to give a roster of trained and recognized religious teachers and to eradicate aberrant religious teachings in Singapore, is part of the *asatizah* development and training. Those qualified to do so are the only ones who can legally teach Islamic teachings to members of the Muslim community in the country. Although MUIS is the one who established the ARS and then entrusted its management to an ARB (*Asatizah* Recognition Board) made up of respected religious educators and academics, Pergas is in charge and has the final decision over who becomes certified as a religious teacher. This shows a mutually beneficial partnership between MUIS and Pergas.<sup>42</sup>

The organization has grown to become pivotal in shaping Singapore's Muslim population. Through its work as a civil society organization, Pergas has sought to actively engage the public on issues affecting the Muslim community in Singapore and the Muslim world more broadly, including compulsory education (2000), the ban on the *hijab* in Singaporean public schools (2002), Jemaah Islamiyah (2002)/2003, casino and gambling proposals (2004), Danish caricature (2007), Israeli aggression against Palestine (2008), homosexual and gay rights (2008), the Gaza crisis (2012), and the Rohingya genocide (2015).

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<sup>40</sup>Abdullah, "Religious Representation in Secular Singapore: A Study of MUIS and Pergas", 75.

<sup>41</sup> "Council Members | Pergas," accessed January 16, 2020, <https://www.pergas.org.sg/about/council-members/>.

<sup>42</sup> Abdullah, "Religious Representation in Secular Singapore: A Study of MUIS and Pergas", 75.

To adapt to the rising expectations of the Muslim community and the shifting *dakwah* landscape in the country, Pergas has claimed to expand its function beyond the conventional leadership type confined to the religious sphere.<sup>43</sup>

As Singapore has seen the effects of extreme Islamist ideology and terrorism with the arrest of 36 persons by ISD (the Internal Security Department) in 2001 and 2002,<sup>44</sup> the *ulema* and *asatizah* gathering in Pergas have been combating these tendencies. The Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG), established on April 23, 2003, was one of Pergas' initiatives. It was established to rehabilitate terrorists and to counter the ideology of Islamist violent extremism in Singapore.<sup>45</sup> The RRG provides counter-ideological materials on religious subjects, public education for the Muslim community on religious extremism, and counseling services to Jamaah Islamiyah inmates, supervisees, and their families.<sup>46</sup> In addition, in 2003, Pergas held a convention of *ulema* with the intention of rallying Muslim scholars to define and combat extremism. The following year, the compilation of convention papers was published as a book titled *Moderation in Islam in the Context of the Muslim Community in Singapore* aiming "to guide the Muslim community towards a moderate and contextual practice of Islam in Singapore. It was a response to the discovery of the JI terror plot in the country and the 9/11 attacks that wreaked havoc on the world."<sup>47</sup> In short word, in the war against

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<sup>43</sup>"About Us," *Pergas* (blog), accessed January 17, 2020, <https://www.pergas.org.sg/about/>.

<sup>44</sup> Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA), "The White Paper on 'the Jemaah Islamiyah Arrests and the Threat of Terrorism'," 2023, [https://www.mha.gov.sg/docs/librariesprovider3/default-document-library/ji-white-paper\\_english0eb936fc72de4ab1a0da64c798905535.pdf](https://www.mha.gov.sg/docs/librariesprovider3/default-document-library/ji-white-paper_english0eb936fc72de4ab1a0da64c798905535.pdf) accessed May 1.

<sup>45</sup> Walid Jumblat Abdullah, *Islam in a Secular State: Muslim Activism in Singapore* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021), 138.

<sup>46</sup> Muhammad Haniff Hassan, "Singapore's Muslim Community-Based Initiatives against JI," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 1, no. 5 (2007): 4.

<sup>47</sup> Muhammad Haniff Hassan and Sharifah Thuraiya Alhabsi, "Contemporary Fiqh in Singapore: Some Observations," *Islam and Civilisatioan Renewal: A Journal Devoted to Contemporary Issues and Policy Research* 2, no. 4 (2011): 696.

terrorism and extremism, Pergas has positioned itself as an ally of the state.<sup>48</sup>

### **The Expression of Islamic Identity in Singapore and the Response of Two Organizations.**

As indicated previously, there has been a growing religiosity among Muslim community in Singapore. On the other side, the global project war on terror following the 9/11 attacks has inevitably led the Singapore government to observe the rising religiosity of Muslim life. Among other aspects, the issues of *madrasah* – precisely the future of Islamic schools and *hijab* – no-*hijab* policy in public schools – emerged in the public. Both issues and controversies involving the two largest Islamic organizations are as follow:

#### *Madrasah*

Islamic education, particularly *madrasah*, has been a crucial component of Islamic identity in Singapore because the history and growth of the Muslim community in Singapore are intimately tied to its history and development. After the independence, Malay parents tended to send their children to national schools, diminishing *madrasah's* popularity. With the advent of worldwide Islamization trends in the mid-1980s, however, the number of parents sending their children, particularly young females, to *madrasah* expanded substantially. In 2000, it was reported that 800 people applied for 400 positions at the Madrasah Aljunied; in 2004, the number grew to more than 1,000 applicants for the same 400 positions at the same *madrasah*. Today, Singapore has six full-time *madrasahs* along with 27 part-time mosque *madrasahs*.

A full-time *madrasah's* primary goal is to produce the Islamic specialists, academics, instructors, and administrators that the country requires, especially for the Shariah Courts. They provide instruction at the elementary, secondary, and preparatory university levels. After finishing their 'O' (Ordinary) and 'A' (Advanced) levels in a *madrasah*, some students may go on to local polytechnics and universities. To meet the requirements, they study not only Islamic studies (part of

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<sup>48</sup> Abdullah, "Religious Representation in Secular Singapore: A Study of MUIS and Pergas", 151.

which are taught in Arabic) but also English, mathematics, science, and the local Malay language.<sup>49</sup> For this reason, every full-time *madrrasah* incorporates both religious and secular subjects within their curricula, allocating 30% to 60% of class time to the latter. Since *madrrasahs* are considered private schools and are therefore subject to the laws of the Education Act, they fall within the purview of MUIS rather than the Ministry of Education (as stated in sections 87 and 88 of the AMLA).<sup>50</sup>

In particular, once the Singaporean government passed the Compulsory Education Act in 1999, the status of *madrrasah* became a pressing issue on a national scale. The employability of *madrrasah* graduates is often brought up due to concerns about narrow curriculum, low test scores, and high attrition rates that characterize *madrrasah* education. As a consequence, its students face more difficulties in finding employment. The government's anxiety is clearly expressed in statements by the former Minister of Education: "Those who drop out (referring to those not attending national schools such as the *madrrasah* children) would not receive the quality education necessary for good jobs and therefore would not be able to integrate well into the social and economic system".<sup>51</sup>

Unlike MUIS, Pergas showed its negative response to Compulsory Education for various reasons, particularly its impact on *madrrasah*. "Pergas rejects the proposal to implement this CE if it causes the closure of schooling in primary *madrrasah* even if it is not intended to do so".<sup>52</sup> It insists that the government needs to understand the Islamic perspective of education aiming at transforming man's fullest potential, physical and spiritual, towards worldly life and the hereafter. The main concern of CE, according to Pergas, is only the economic viability of the workforce and social

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<sup>49</sup> Nasir, Pereira, and Turner, *Muslims in Singapore: Piety, Politics and Policies*, 72.

<sup>50</sup> "Administration of Muslim Law Act 1966," accessed April 14, 2023, <https://sso.agc.gov.sg/act/amla1966#pr87->.

<sup>51</sup> Kamaludeen Mohamed Nasir and Syed Muhd Khairudin Aljuneid, *Muslims as Minorities: History and Social Realities of Muslims in Singapore* (Bangi: Penerbit University Kebangsaan Malaysia, 2009), 37.

<sup>52</sup> Pergas, *Moderation in Islam in the Context of Muslim Community in Singapore* (Singapore: Pergas, 2004), 360.

integration of the citizens. Another argument is that Singaporean Muslims need *madrrasah* education not only because it has been part of the Muslim community but also because it is their self-esteem and confidence to integrate with fellow Muslims in the secular state. In addition, *madrrasah* has provided them with teaching the proper Islamic values to ensure their living in tolerance and harmony. Pergas also emphasizes that it fully supports the concern for the integration of Muslim citizens without abolishing Muslim religious and cultural characteristics.<sup>53</sup>

### *Hijab*

Historically, the *hijab* or *tudung* (headscarf) has played a significant role in the development of Singaporean Muslim identity just like Muslims all over the world. Accordingly, it has become a hot topic of debate in Singapore just as it has in the West. Despite the clear religious standing of wearing *hijab*—after all, MUIS has issued the *fatwa* on the obligation of Muslim women to wear *hijab*—the problem becomes complicated by the state’s policy of not allowing the wearing of the *hijab* in public schools. In 2002, four Muslim schoolgirls were expelled for wearing the *tudung*. Their parents insisted that the children, all of whom are seven years old, were allowed to wear the *tudung* in addition to the uniform while citing the ban on the Islamic dress code as a disadvantage of public schools. However, schools’ responses were limited to expulsion until they returned wearing the required national uniform.<sup>54</sup>

Interestingly, the parents’ action was opposed by Muslim individuals and groups assuming that attending public schools without wearing headscarves for Muslim girls of young age is religiously acceptable. The former *mufti*, Syed Isa Semait, the foremost authority on Islam in Singapore, also opposed the parent’s opinion along with Malay Muslim members of parliament and several Muslim groups including MUIS and the Muslim Fellowship Association (PERDAUS). This religious stance may be seen as an implementation of the *fiqh* of minorities. On the *tudung* controversy, the *fatwa* issued

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<sup>53</sup> Pergas, 355–61.

<sup>54</sup> Nasir, Pereira, and Turner, *Muslims in Singapore: Piety, Politics and Policies*, 78.

by the former *mufti* reads: “The *mufti*’s position is that if Muslims have to make a choice, they should give their higher priority to education than wearing the *tudung*... The no-*tudung* rule lasts only for a few hours when the students are in school. Education is more important”.<sup>55</sup>

In contrast to MUIS, Pergas allows students to wear the *tudung* despite the ban on it being worn in public schools. According to its press release, the Islamic teaching on *aurât* for Muslims is unambiguous and indisputable, while efforts to allow students to wear headscarves at schools “stems from a true commitment to preserving moral values and the inculcation of modesty”<sup>56</sup> instead of distancing themselves from other communities or refusing national integration. “At this present moment, much feedback coming from the general community indicates that many do not see *hijab* as an obstacle towards national integration. Pergas likewise affirms the view that *hijab* is not an obstacle to national integration”.<sup>57</sup>

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Regarding the *madrasah* and *hijab* issues, the responses of MUIS and Pergas clearly differed from one another. As a statutory body being formally and informally co-opted by the state,<sup>58</sup> MUIS tends to have an accommodative attitude towards the government’s policy while attempting to participate in its implementation. By contrast, as a civil society, Pergas tends to take sides with the needs of the Muslim community, particularly the importance of Islamic education for Muslim children and the wearing of *hijab* for female students. What both have decided is actually a contextualization of

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<sup>55</sup> Kamaludeen Mohamed Nasir and Syed Muhd Khairudin Aljuneid, *Muslims as Minorities: History and Social Realities of Muslims in Singapore*. (Bangi: Penerbit University Kebangsaan Malaysia, 2009), 104.

<sup>56</sup> PERGAS, *Moderation in Islam in the Context of Muslim Community in Singapore* (Singapore, 2004), 343.

<sup>57</sup> PERGAS, 346..

<sup>58</sup> Walid Jumblatt Abdullah, “Religious Representation in Secular Singapore A Case Study of MUIS and Pergas,” *Asian Survey* 53, no. 6 (December 1, 2013): 1182–1204, <https://doi.org/10.1525/as.2013.53.6.1182>.



Islamic principles<sup>59</sup> within the socio-political life of Muslims under Singapore as a secular state.<sup>60</sup>

The above explanation clearly reveals the internal dynamic among Muslim organizations. There has been growing pluralism within the Singaporean Muslim community which has led to a fragmentation of Islamic authority even though there have been “attempts at centralization of religious authority and careful administration,”<sup>61</sup> particularly in the context of the state-society relationship. Kadir points out that Muslim politics in Singapore can therefore be characterized by the horizontal contestations of meanings and a vertical contest for legitimate representation of the Islamic society to the state as a consequence of the growing complexities within Muslim society itself.”<sup>62</sup>

### **The Construction of Islamic Identity of Singaporean Muslims according to MUIS and Pergas**

There is a dynamic role that MUIS and Pergas tend to participate in the construction of Muslim identity. To further propagate modern Islamic-centered ideas to Singaporean Muslims, MUIS launched the Singapore Muslim Identity (SMI) project in 2003. The ten Islamic qualities are based on establishing a community of excellence and advancement based on Islamic ideals that Singaporean Muslims should uphold. *First*, maintaining a firm commitment to Islamic ideals while adjusting to shifting conditions; *Second*, being morally and spiritually strong to be on top of the challenges of modern society; *Third*, being progressive in practicing Islam beyond forms/rituals and rides of modernization wave; *Fourth*, appreciating Islamic culture and history while having a solid grasp of contemporary

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<sup>59</sup> Maretha Dellarosa, “Conceptualizing Muslim Identity in the US, Post-9/11,” *Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies*, 2022, 386, <https://doi.org/10.18326/ijims.v12i2.369-392>.

<sup>60</sup> Muhammad Haniff Hassan and Walid Jumblatt Abdullah, “The Contextualisation of Islam in A Secular State: A Study of Singapore,” *Islam and Civilisational Renewal Journal* 12, no. 1 (2021): 133–35, <https://doi.org/10.52282/icr.v12i1.821>.

<sup>61</sup> Suzaina Kadir, “Islam, State and Society in Singapore,” *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 5, no. 3 (December 1, 2004): 369, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1464937042000288660>.

<sup>62</sup> Suzaina Kadir, “Islam, State and Society in Singapore,” 369.

issues; *Fifth*, appreciating different cultures and feeling comfortable talking with and learning from those of other communities; *Sixth*, considering decent Muslims as good citizens; *Seventh*, being well-adjusted as a contributing member of a multi-religious society and secular state; *Eighth*, being a blessing to all and promoting universal principles and values; *Nineth*, being inclusive and practicing pluralism without contradicting Islam;<sup>63</sup> and *tenth*, being a model and inspiration to all.<sup>64</sup>

In short words, those ten points of the ideal Singaporean Muslim identity's characteristic can be simplified to inclusive, embracing pluralism and multiculturalism in a secular state as well as adaptive and progressive in the modern context of Singapore society. The arranged identity was "an autonomous response from the religious authorities in consultation with the local *asatizah*."<sup>65</sup> It is emphasized that it is MUIS' "outcomes of our attempt to harmonise different elements of Islam, namely principles, values, law and tradition with Singapore's context."<sup>66</sup>

Like MUIS, Pergas has been the vocal point involved in the construction of Islamic identity in Singapore. The Islamic characters formulated in the SMI project are basically the same as moderate Islam promoted by Pergas. Islam commands Muslims to be moderate in practicing religious teachings. The teachings of Islam, as outlined in the Holy Quran and the Sunah, advocate moderation in life. Extremism is actually the result of ignoring or going against the tenets of the religion.<sup>67</sup> The characteristics of moderation in Islam, for Pergas, include: *First*, Islam is a religion that is easy to practice by preferring simplicity; *Second*, tolerance is an important characteristic of Islam; *Third*, Islam favors gentleness, promotes noble etiquette, and

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<sup>63</sup> Harisudin and Maimun, "Multi-Track Diplomacy Fiqh of Nahdlatul Ulama in Countering Islamophobia in Netherlands," *Ahkam: Jurnal Ilmu Syariah* 22, no. 2 (2022).

<sup>64</sup> MUIS, *Risalah for Building a Singapore Muslim Community of Excellence*.

<sup>65</sup> Razak, "World-Class Muslims': Examining the Discursive Construction of a Singapore Muslim Identity," 417-18.

<sup>66</sup> MUIS, *Risalah for Building a Singapore Muslim Community of Excellence*, vii.

<sup>67</sup> PERGAS, *Moderation in Islam in the Context of Muslim Community in Singapore*, 19.

denounces character bashing; and *fourth*, Islam prefers peaceful approaches.<sup>68</sup>

Singaporean Muslims are, therefore, expected to practice their religion in line with the Code of Religious Harmony, such as accepting a secular state, promoting tolerance, respect, understanding, and trust. The detailed expected characteristics of moderate Muslims in Singapore may be summed up as rejecting political Islam and radicalism, extremism, terrorism, and militant Islam besides rigid and narrow interpretation of Islam; having the right stand on the implementation of *shariah*; being flexible, free and open in social interaction and ready to adapt to the current lifestyle; and loyal to the country. In addition, moderate Muslims are required to avoid the misinterpretation of Islamic teachings such as *jihad* and *dakwah*. They are also required to reject the Wahhabi style of Islam and Shiite of Iran, Arab, and Middle East styles.<sup>69</sup> Therefore, many scholars see the formulation of moderate Islam promoted by Pergas as an “antithesis to the aggressive potential of the Islamic religion”<sup>70</sup> in the framework of responding to the global war on terrorism.

Interestingly, although Pergas has a strong disagreement with the ideology of secularism, it agrees to accept Singapore as a secular state due to the fact that Singapore is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society in which the Muslim community enjoys reasonable freedom in practicing religion guaranteed by the government. “Secularism in the Singapore context is in a form of non-partisan (neutral) government that does not take the side of any religion in order to ensure inter-racial harmony”, it said.<sup>71</sup> Pergas goes on to state as follows: “We are willing to co-exist and accept this situation as long as the freedom of religion is guaranteed in line with the Singapore Constitution and international conventions”.<sup>72</sup> Pergas also stresses its full integration into the Singapore state and society. This has clearly revealed its national and Islamic identity as stated below:

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<sup>68</sup> PERGAS, 4-17.

<sup>69</sup> PERGAS, 86-87.

<sup>70</sup> Zuber, “Singapore Malay Identity: A Study of Dominant Perceptions of Islam in Post-Independence Singapore.” 225.

<sup>71</sup> PERGAS, *Moderation in Islam in the Context of Muslim Community in Singapore*, 111.

<sup>72</sup> PERGAS, 111-12.

Singapore is our nation and birthplace. Compared to the Muslim minorities in America or Europe, we are not immigrants who moved here from other countries. Aside from being the majority group among Muslims here, the Malay community is the indigenous people of Singapore. This is recorded in the Singapore Constitution. Hence, it is not far-fetched for us to say that we have an emotional attachment to this land beyond that to any other. We will not hesitate to defend this land from any threat, and we share the aspiration to develop it and ensure its progress and prosperity. We do not think that there are any contradictions between our Muslim and Singaporean identities. We are Muslim citizens of Singapore.<sup>73</sup>

The above explanation shows that both MUIS and Pergas have been actively engaged in the construction of Muslim identity in Singapore. They are likely to have the same formulation pertaining to the ideal Singaporean Muslim identity. MUIS' attributes of Islamic identity emphasize knowledge, principle-centeredness, progressiveness, and inclusiveness, while Pergas formulates practicality, tolerance, nobleness, and peacefulness as characteristics of moderation that Singaporean Muslims should uphold. In the context of social and political life, both fully accept nationalism, democracy, and secularism in Singapore. Realizing the minority position of the Muslim community in Singapore, both emphasize that good Muslims and citizens should not only have full loyalty to the country but also participate in and contribute to the social, economic, and political development despite the fact that Singapore is a secular state.

From *fiqh* of minorities' perspective, as Hassan confirms, the viewpoint and attitude of both MUIS and Pergas towards the state are as follows:

There is agreement that appointing a non-Muslim as a state leader is permissible for minority Muslims in

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<sup>73</sup> PERGAS, 174-75.

Singapore and it is in line with the fundamentals of faith in Islam as long as the leader is capable, just, and does not have a hostile attitude towards Islam, and implementing policies compatible with Islamic principles.<sup>74</sup>

Referring to Castell's classification of identity,<sup>75</sup> the construction of Islamic identity by MUIS and Pergas can be included in the legitimizing identity. In this context, it attempts to endorse the Islamic identity in the state and society. As a result, it is evident that the Malays and Muslims in Singapore would certainly acquire a triadic-interdependent identity at the same time: Singaporean, Malay, and Muslim. Due to the sensitivity of the topic in multiracial Singapore, they play down their constitutionally indigenous status while emphasizing their strong patriotism and unwavering allegiance to the country. This should not be interpreted as placing undue pressure on Muslims to strike a balance between their religious and civic duties<sup>76</sup> because, in their eyes, Islam and Singaporean nationality are mutually supportive and they become proud to be both.

To have their government acknowledge and respect their unique needs and goals as Malays and Muslims, it is crucial that their Muslim identity be legitimated.<sup>77</sup> While the state's duty is to recognize the Muslim identity, this legitimizing identity is established by Muslims themselves, particularly through their religious authorities.<sup>78</sup> "Our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its

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<sup>74</sup>Muhammad Haniff Hassan, "Al-Wala' (Loyalty) to Government in the Context of Muslim Minority in Singapore," in *Countering Islamic State Ideology: Voices of Singapore Religious Scholars*, ed. Muhammad Haniff Hassan and Rohan Gunaratna (Singapore: Pergas, 2021), 108.

<sup>75</sup>Castells, *The Power of Identity*, 8.

<sup>76</sup>Steiner, "Religion and Politics," 107-134.

<sup>77</sup> Hussin Mutalib, "Singapore Muslims: The Quest for Identity in a Modern City-State," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 25, no. 1 (April 1, 2005): 58, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13602000500114116>.

<sup>78</sup> Zulkifli Zulkifli, "Education, Identity, and Recognition: The Shi'i Islamic Education in Indonesia," *Studia Islamika* 21, no. 1 (April 30, 2014): 77-104, <https://doi.org/10.15408/sdi.v21i1.879>.

absence.”<sup>79</sup> Thus, the role of MUIS and Pergas in the construction of legitimizing Islamic identity in Singapore is in accordance with “the discourse of *fiqh al-aqalliyât*, in which the advocate of this *fiqh* argues that law should be recontextualized to fit the current moment to affirming the identity of Muslims.”<sup>80</sup>

Since identity is socially and historically constructed,<sup>81</sup> Islamic identity in Singapore has been formulated, contested, and negotiated throughout history. The construction of Islamic identity is a product of interrelated factors: internal and external as well as local, national, and global forces. The internal dynamic of the Muslim community is a necessary condition in the production of Islamic identity. In this talk, both major Islamic organizations have been active agents in the process of identity construction in which change takes place. They differed on the issue of *madrasah* and *hijab* for students but then they cooperated in the program of RRG in support of the government to fight against religious extremism and terrorism.

While the state continues to exert influence through rhetorics, media, and policies, the global effect on Castell’s conception of network society particularly regarding religious extremism and terrorism has united MUIS and Pergas in the identity formulation in terms of religious viewpoint and attitude towards the state. This becomes effective with the function of *fiqh* of minorities. Thus, this supports Razak’s view that the construction of Singaporean Muslim identity is “an ongoing process of meaning-making done by and for Muslims themselves.”<sup>82</sup> While removing a single form of Islamic discourse, the constructive process will inevitably produce diverse narratives of Islamic identity and create open spaces for alternative forms of religious attitude and practice in the context of modern society.

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<sup>79</sup> Charles Taylor, *The Politics of Recognition. Multiculturalism: Explaining the Politics of Recognition*, ed. Amy Gutman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 25.

<sup>80</sup> Hassan, *Fiqh Al-Aqalliyat: History, Development, and Progress*, 14.

<sup>81</sup> Jenkins, *Social Identity*.

<sup>82</sup> Razak, “World-Class Muslims’: Examining the Discursive Construction of a Singapore Muslim Identity,” 430.

## **Conclusion**

This study has revealed that the dynamic contestation and cooperation between MUIS as the statutory organization and Pergas as a civil society have been crucial in legitimizing Singaporean Muslim identity. While MUIS plays a dual role in implementing the state's policies pertaining to Muslims as well as in guiding Muslim lives, Pergas tends to take sides with the interest of the Muslim community and be critical to MUIS and the state. However, with the effect of global Islamist extremism and terrorism on network society, MUIS and Pergas become united in religious viewpoint and attitude including the formulation of an ideal Singaporean Muslim identity; Pergas has then even declared itself as the government's ally. Here, with the function of *fiqh* of minorities, the changing process of Islamic identity construction became effective because the universality and adaptability of Islamic teachings such as acceptance of secularism and the full loyalty to the secular government are contextualized in Singapore as a strong secular state with modern society. This dialectic relationship between religious authorities and the state might become a lesson learned and a model for other minority Muslim communities in the West or other secular states. With the limited data from this library research, we recommend that future research could be conducted using an ethnographic method or a survey on Singaporean Muslim's religious life or a critical study of aspects of *fiqh* of minorities.

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