

GES1010 Essay 2: The Balance of Singaporean Politics and Religion

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Introduction

From the Maria Hertogh Riots in 1950 to the Catholic churches' alleged involvement in the Marxist Conspiracy of 1987 to the controversy of Amos Yee's viral videos criticising the Christian and Muslim faith in 2015, it is plain to see that religion has always been a major factor in Singaporean politics. Religion is a looming spectre, thoroughly suffusing the course of Singaporean history and has proven itself to be one of the defining aspects of society that has largely affected public policy.

This essay will provide an account of state-religion relations in Singapore from the 1950s to the late 2010s. It will present the case that while the Singaporean government has stressed the need for religion to be separate from politics, it has not only remained deeply intertwined with religion, but it is inevitable for it to remain so.

Background

Singapore in 2017 is a multicultural society comprising of multiple racial and cultural groups of which the Chinese, Malay, and Indian groups represent the bulk of the populace.¹ This translates not only into racial differences but also differences in religion, an aspect of society that is not easy to reason about or control. At times, religion can be contentious when pushed to fundamentalism. There have been events in Singapore's history in which religion has drawn blood.

Hence, religion cannot be ignored by the Singaporean government if a peaceful society is to be established in Singapore.

¹Lian, Kwen Fee. "Multiculturalism in Singapore: Concept and Practice." Multiculturalism, Migration, and the Politics of Identity in Singapore Asia in Transition, 2015, 11-29. doi:10.1007/978-981-287-676-8_2.

Religion and Politics in Malaya

On 11 December 1950, the custody battle for Maria Hertogh to be returned to her Catholic biological parents escalated into a riot that ran over two days and resulted in eighteen deaths after images were published showing Maria kneeling before the Virgin Mary in a Catholic convent. Maria was raised as a muslim by Che Aminah binte Mohamed through the Japanese Occupation while her mother was held in a Japanese internment camp. The images enraged the largely Malay and Muslim crowd protesting the custody hearings and the court's swift decision to throw out the appeal against returning Maria to her birth parents triggered a violent backlash. The incident was a painful lesson in Singapore's history and highlighted the dire need to prevent racial enclaves from forming and to ensure integration between the different races.²

Singapore's desire for secularism has always marked it as separate from the Malaysia. Article 160 of the Constitution of Malaysia defines a 'Malay' as a Muslim who conforms to the Malay custom. Article 153 accords Bumiputra privileges to such 'Malays'. Hence, religion is explicitly tied to the standing and the rights of a citizen under the Malaysian Constitution. Furthermore, Islam was declared as the official religion of Malaysia by Tunku Abdul Rahman in 1960. Singapore's merger with Malaysia in 1963 meant that these articles now applied to the citizens of Singapore.

However, PM Lee assured the public in a 1963 press statement that his government would not shift their stance on their existing 'policy of religious toleration in Singapore'. He further asserted that the government has no intention to introduce legislation preventing the 'propagation of faiths' to Malays, and in essence, Muslims as required by article 11(4) of the Federal Constitution of Malaysia.³ This was further emphasised in the Report of the Constitutional Commission published in 1966. Paragraph 38 of the report describes the original Article 11(4) as 'singling out a particular religion for special treatment' as 'inconsistent' with the 'democratic secular state'.⁴ The proposed amendments to the article are now incorporated as Article 15 of the Constitution of the Republic of Singapore, a fundamentally more liberal piece of legislature compared to the original Article 11(4).

Indeed, the differing political ideologies of the PAP and UMNO in Malaysia caused social tensions within Singapore and Malaysia. The PAP sought equality regardless of race, language, or religion while the UMNO sought elevated rights for the Bumiputras. The UMNO controlled press as well as other Malay groups stirred up anti-PAP sentiments by preying on racial and religious sensibilities by painting the Chinese as aggressors on the Malay race. This ultimately culminated in the violent racial riots of 1964 in July and September. The violence eventually led to Singapore's separation from Malaysia with PM Lee citing 'irreconcilable differences'. Singapore embarked on its own trajectory as a secular state and experienced no more racial riots after independence.

²Hermes. "Painful lesson." The Straits Times. January 19, 2016. Accessed October 31, 2017. <http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/painful-lesson>.

³Thio, Li-Ann. Between Eden and Armageddon: navigating religion and politics in Singapore. Singapore: Faculty of Law, National University of Singapore, 2009.

⁴Report of the constitutional commission 1966. Singapore: Gov. Print., 1967.

Singaporean Secularism

Singapore's approach to secularism⁵ is born from its desire for harmony between vastly diverse groups of people. Thus, instead of eradicating religion completely from its state or maintaining a stoic religion-free method of governance, it seeks a balanced stance whereby the religious peace can be maintained. Thus, the government has concluded through its actions that while religious freedom is accorded to its citizens, this freedom is held on a very tight, short leash.⁶

The Singapore government creates the concept of public and private spaces in which the citizen is free to practice and believe their preferred beliefs in the private space but limits the extent to which they are allowed to come out into the public arena. For example, administering a sermon to willing congregants in a Church is permissible but administering the same sermon on a street corner at Geylang Serai to the majority muslim crowd is not. Invisible boundaries are set by the government and the community. Crossing these boundaries is grounds for official legal and sometimes criminal action against transgressors.

There are multiple laws that the government uses to enforce this but the most important of them is the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act of 1990. The act allows the Minister for Home Affairs to restrict the activities of any person deemed a threat to the religious peace. The act also restrains those who attempt to push a political agenda or stir up anti-government sentiments under the guise of religion. The proposed check for this power is the Presidential Council for Religious Harmony in which President approved religious leaders are appointed to represent the major religions.

Another similar law is the Sedition Act of 1948 in which publications and speech that threatens the social fabric of Singapore is criminalised and may be suppressed. Additionally, section 298A of the Penal code criminalises speech and acts intended to provoke on religious or racial grounds. While the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act aims at restricting a transgressor, the Internal Security Act of 1960 empowers the government to detain the individual without trial.

Christianity in Singapore

Christianity has been subject to legal action on the part of the government in the short history of Singapore. A prominent example is the restriction of the Jehovah's Witnesses in

⁵The separation of the Church and State is a common concept between modern nation-states in which the government maintains a political distance from any religious body. This is in opposition to the concept of a 'theocracy' in which the religious body forms the government of the nation-state. One example of a theocracy in which religion is tightly coupled to the politics is the Islamic Republic of Iran in which the laws of the country are shaped according to compatibility with Sharia Law. There are many different variants of secularism. In France, the concept of *Laïcité* is an application of secularism in which religious influence in government is actively prohibited. In Marxist ideology, religion is viewed as something to be purged and perhaps even replaced by the communist state. The Khmer Rouge sought to suppress all religion under Pol Pot's regime in Cambodia. The distinction between France's concept of secularism from the Khmer Rouge's can be described as the difference between irreligiosity versus anti-religion.

⁶Chia, Roland. "Religion and Politics in Singapore: A Christian Reflection." *Church & Society in Asia* Today 16, no. 1 (April 1, 2013).

1972. This is due to the incompatibilities between the conscription duties of the Singaporean male and the refusal of the adherents to bear arms.

In May 1987, Operation Spectrum saw 22 Catholic church members including Vincent Cheng, a church worker, detained without trial for the threat they posed to the nation as Marxist agents. The government invoked the Internal Security Act with the justification that were a danger to national security. They were accused of using the church as a cover for their subversive activities. Chong asserts that the PAP government detained these people because they were advancing their socialist political agenda through the religious institution and that the potential for the church to control the direction of public discourse was great.⁷

Islam in Singapore

As one of the major racial groups of Singapore, Malays are a great concern to how public policy is shaped. As discussed previously, the religion of Islam is very tightly coupled to the Malay race. As such, Islam must impact the laws of Singapore greatly as well regardless of the secularity of the nation state.

Islam is not merely a belief system but it is presented as a ‘complete way of life’. It comprises a full system of governance in the form of Sharia Law. The laws govern the ‘obligations, prohibitions, and recommended actions’ of the believer.⁸ As such, it even prescribes the judicial process and punishments for crimes. Many believes of Islam even go as far as to support a full theocratic Islamic State.

For the country to maintain its religious harmony, it must allow muslims to practice some form of Sharia Law to be suitable as a place of residence. The Administration of Muslim Law Act of 1968⁹ allows for the Sharia Court to govern matters relating to muslim marriages as well as certain Islam related matters such as Halal certifications and Madrasas.

Conclusions

Following Singapore’s history from its colonial beginnings to after its separation from Malaysia allows us to understand the PAP government’s decisions to handle the tumultuous topic of religion the way it has. Maintaining the peace within the social and religious fabric is the highest priority, held above the personal freedoms of the individual and agendas of religious institutions. The religions in Singapore co-exist in a stable state allowed by the government. Any slip in this precarious balance will spell disaster and is hence why the politics in Singapore has to be aware of and remain intertwined tightly with religion. The events of 1950 must not be allowed to repeat itself.

⁷Lim, Jason, Terence Lee, and Jack Tsen-Ta. Lee. Singapore: negotiating state and society, 1965-2015. London: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2016.

⁸Administrator. “ISCA.” Understanding Islamic Law. Accessed October 31, 2017. <http://www.islamicsupremecouncil.org/understanding-islam/legal-rulings/52-understanding-islamic-law.html>.

⁹Osman, Mohamed Nawab Mohamed. “The Religio-Political Activism Of Ulama In Singapore.” Indonesia and the Malay World 40, no. 116 (2012): 1-19. doi:10.1080/13639811.2011.648990.

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Declaration

I acknowledge that this research essay is the product of my own work and research. All materials consulted - including websites - have been duly cited and credited.

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