Islam Nusantara: *Jurnal for the Study of Islamic History and Culture*, 04 (1), 2023: 1-21
E-ISSN: 2722-8975
DOI: https://doi.org/10.47776/islamnusantara.v4i1.680

Shi'i Communities in Southeast Asia: Religious Harmony Institutions and Peaceful Sunni-Shia

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Article history: Received: September 15, 2022; Accepted: December 04, 2022: Published: January 31, 2023

Abstract

This study examines the dynamics of Sunni–Shiʿi relations in Singapore, focusing on the Ismaili and Imami Shiʿi communities within a political culture that emphasizes religious harmony and pluralism. It challenges the assumption that Sunni–Shiʿi differences are inherently irreconcilable by situating sectarian relations within Singapore's specific socio-political context. The research employs a qualitative descriptive-comparative approach. Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews with religious leaders, academics, administrators of inter-madhhab dialogue institutions, and representatives of both Sunni and Shiʿi communities. Secondary data were gathered through a comprehensive review of scholarly publications, books, policy documents, and civil society reports addressing Sunni–Shiʿi relations. Data were analyzed thematically to identify patterns and variations in intra-faith harmony practices, with source triangulation applied to ensure validity. The findings indicate that Sunni–Shiʿi relations in Singapore have historically been peaceful within the country's secular-pluralistic political framework. The Ismaili community, as the oldest Shiʿi group, adapted during Singapore's nation-building phase, while the Imami community, which expanded after the Iranian Revolution, has operated within an already established legal and cultural framework of religious harmony.

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Episodes of tension are largely attributable to the intrusion of external political sentiments, particularly those linked to Middle Eastern conflicts, rather than domestic factors. These findings suggest that intra-faith harmony is strongly shaped by national institutional and political contexts. In a system that safeguards religious freedom and promotes interreligious harmony, sectarian differences can be constructively managed within a plural society.

Keywords:

Diversity, Shi'a, Singapore, Southeast Asia, Sunni

Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan menganalisis dinamika relasi antara komunitas Sunni dan Syiah (Ismailiyah dan Imamiyah) di Singapura dalam konteks budaya politik yang menekankan harmoni dan pluralisme keagamaan. Studi ini menantang asumsi bahwa perbedaan Sunni–Syiah bersifat inheren dan tidak dapat didamaikan, dengan menempatkannya dalam kerangka sosial-politik lokal Singapura. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif-komparatif. Data primer diperoleh melalui wawancara semi-terstruktur dengan tokoh agama, akademisi, pengelola lembaga dialog antar-mazhab, serta perwakilan komunitas Sunni dan Syiah. Data sekunder dikumpulkan melalui studi pustaka atas artikel ilmiah, buku, dokumen kebijakan, dan publikasi organisasi masyarakat sipil terkait relasi Sunni–Syiah. Analisis dilakukan secara tematik untuk mengidentifikasi pola serta perbedaan praktik harmoni intra-agama, dengan triangulasi sumber guna menjamin validitas data. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa relasi Sunni–Syiah di Singapura secara historis berlangsung damai dalam kerangka politik sekuler-pluralistik. Komunitas Ismailiyah sebagai kelompok Syiah tertua beradaptasi sejak masa nation-building, sementara komunitas Imamiyah yang berkembang pasca Revolusi Iran beroperasi dalam sistem hukum dan budaya harmoni yang telah mapan. Ketegangan yang muncul lebih dipengaruhi oleh penetrasi sentimen politik eksternal, khususnya isu Timur Tengah, daripada faktor lokal. Temuan ini mengimplikasikan bahwa harmoni intra-agama sangat ditentukan oleh konteks institusional dan budaya politik nasional. Dalam sistem yang menjamin kebebasan dan harmoni beragama, perbedaan mazhab dapat dikelola secara konstruktif dalam masyarakat plural.

Kata Kunci:

Asia Tenggara, Keragaman, Singapura, Sunni, Syi'ah

Introduction

A common trope in understanding the conflicts in the Middle East is that of the unwavering tension between Islam's major sects – Sunni and Shi'a (plural; Shi'i – singular or adjective). The misconceived irreconcilability between the two has often been used as an explanation of the region's turmoil, whenever both communities are involved. This is unsurprising as Sunni-Shi'a "hatred" manifested in the Syrian conflict that started in 2011, the Yemeni civil war that began in 2014, and not to forget the historical sectarian violence that had been going on in the region. However, acknowledging the schism between Sunni and Shi'i theology and historical narratives this paper argues that sectarian violence and tension between Sunnis and Shi'a is more of the product of politics, than it is inherent. In addition, this paper seeks to contribute to the literature on Shi'i communities in Southeast Asia by highlighting the Shi'i community in Singapore which has not received academic attention since 2006 (Marcinkowski, 2006).

Highlighting Singapore's Shi'i community allows us to isolate the political context that we argue causes the sectarian violence in the Middle East and look at how politics help build peaceful relations between Sunni and Shi'a followers. In other words, this paper provides a case contrary to the common chain of causality between theological difference and violence. This paper shows that political culture can mold communities with theological differences into peaceful relations.

Firstly, this paper shall elaborate on the major Shi'i communities in Singapore – the Imamis and the Ismailis – to understand their unique existence in Singapore. Next, this paper shall portray the political culture that promotes peaceful relations between Sunni and Shi'i communities in Singapore – inter-religious harmony. Lastly, we shall look at some of the challenges towards maintaining harmonious co-existence within and between these communities to understand the political dimension behind tension between groups of different theological stances.

Methods

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive-comparative approach to examine the dynamics of Shiʿi communities in Southeast Asia, as well as the role of religious harmony institutions in fostering peaceful relations between Sunni and Shiʿi groups. This approach is chosen in order to capture the religious, social, and institutional contexts that shape inter-madhhab relations across various Southeast Asian countries.

The data consist of primary materials obtained through semi-structured interviews with religious leaders, academics, administrators of inter-madhhab dialogue institutions, and representatives of both Sunni and

Shiʿi communities. Secondary data were gathered through a comprehensive literature review, including scholarly articles, books, policy documents, and publications produced by civil society organizations addressing Sunni–Shiʿi relations.

Data analysis was conducted thematically by identifying patterns as well as divergences in practices of inter-sectarian harmony across different national settings. Source triangulation was employed to ensure data validity. The study ultimately aims to contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the factors that sustain and promote Sunni–Shiʿi peacebuilding in Southeast Asia.

Result and Discussion

Shi'i Communities in Singapore

Compared to the sectarian communities in the Middle East, Singapore's Shi'i communities are relatively new. The two main Shi'i branches in Singapore are the Ismailis and the Imamis. The Ismailis in Singapore consist mainly of the Dawoodi Bohras while the Imamis – also known as Ithna 'Asyaris (Twelvers) or Ja'afaris in Singapore – are mainly represented by the members of the Himpunan Belia Islam (HBI) or the Islamic Youth Association. There may be other Shi'a communities or individuals of other Shi'a sects. However, the Ismailis and the Imamis are the most prominent. Being historically new, the Shi'a in Singapore are imbued with the local political culture of striving towards religious harmony. The Ismailis, being the oldest Shi'i community in Singapore, had to go through Singapore's nation-building phase while the Imamis who precipitated after the Iranian revolution already had the building blocks of peaceful relations and may benefit from contemporary laws regarding religious harmony that will be discussed in the later section.

Ismaili Shi'a – the Dawoodi Bohras

Dawoodi Bohras have been in Singapore since the 19th century when Dawoodi Bohra traders arrived in Southeast Asia in the early 1850s for barter trading, passing through Singapore and establishing businesses on the island by the 1890s2. The first few families include those from the houses of Essabhai Motabhi, Abbasbhai Nakhoda, Sheikh Abdullahbhai, Esufallybhai Jafferbhai Motiwala and Tyebalibhai Sithawala. In 1895, Essabhai Motabhi donated a parcel of land for a small mosque to be built – the Al-Burhani mosque of the Dawoodi Bohra community. The community only started to take form after World War 1, particularly in the 1920s (Anjuman, n.d.), when more Dawoodi Bohras had arrived in Singapore to become members of existing Dawoodi

Bohra-owned business or started their own firms. The Dawoodi Bohras increased in numbers over the years as Singapore attracted more immigrants with the opportunities available from its economic growth. In 1997, Al Muqaddas Syedna Mohammed Burhanuddin, the 52nd Da'i al-Mutlaq of the Dawoodi Bohras, arrived in Singapore from India to lay the foundations for the current Dawoodi Bohra mosque of the same name at 39 Hill Street, which is also known as the Anjuman-e-Burhani. The mosque was officially opened Al Muqaddas on 14th May 2000.

In 2011, the Dawoodi Bohras started a free food delivery initiative, the Faiz Al Mawaid Al- Burhaniyah, to some of its members and to the public, with at least 21 delivery starting points from the homes of its members all over Singapore and an address in Malaysia. The Dawoodi Bohra community is headed by 15 members who manage activities in the premise of the Al-Burhani mosque complex as well as the administration and management of the Dawoodi Bohra community in Singapore.

Table 1. Board Members of the Burhani Masjid complex

No.	Name	Role
1	Shk Moezbhai Abbas Nomanbhoy	Chairman
2	Shk Ezzuddinbhai Taherally Ezzy	Vice-Chairman
3	Shk Yahyabhai Mohammed Moochala	Secretary
4	Shk Azizbhai Jabir Shakir	Assistant Secretary
5	Mulla Shabbirbhai Rehmatali Zakir	Treasurer
6	Mulla Murtazabhai Nuruddin Balasinorwala	Assistant Treasurer
7	Shk Huzaifabhai Moez Nomanbhoy	Member
8	Shk Abbasbhai Hatim Bhavnagarwala	Member
9	Shk Husainbhai Khanali Ratlamwala	Member
10	Mulla Abbasbhai Akbarhusain Hamid	Member
11	Mulla Ibrahimbhai Shiraz	Member
12	Mulla Murtazabhai Mustafa Basrai	Member
13	Safdarbhai Shk Abidally Abdulhusain	Member
14	Mustafabhai Ozair Heera	Member
15	HuzaifabhaiMohammedHusain Topiwala	Member

The Dawoodi Bohra community in Singapore also has a women's association and the structure of the committee is as follows:

Table 2. Committee Members of the Burhani Women's Association (Anjuman, 2016)

No.	Name	Role
1	Bensaheba Zainab AS Sughra Aliasghar BS Zakiuddin	President
2	Nafisabai Shk.Abbasbhai Bhavnagarwala	Secretary
3	Sherebanubai Shk. Shabbirbhai Basrai	Joint Secretary
4	Yasmeenbai Huzaifabhai Topiwala	Treasurer
5	Tasneembai Mulla Khuzaimabhai Basrai	Joint Treasurer
6	Asmabai Mulla Mohammedbhai Jadliwala	Member
7	Faridabai Shabbarbhai Jambugodhwala.	Member
8	Faridabai Shk. Hakimuddinbhai Khomoshi	Member
9	Fatemabai Shabbarbhai kharullah.	Member
10	Jumanabai Saifuddinbhai Rajkotwala.	Member
11	Mariyahbai Shk. Abizerbhai Patanwala	Member
12	Munirabai Shk. Yusufbhai Rajkotwala	Member
13	Munirabai Azharbhai Katib	Member
14	Rashidabai Joharbhai Jinia	Member
15	Rumanabai Shk. Quaid Joharbhai Chechatwala	Member
16	Sarrahbai Mulla Abuturabhai Kothawala	Member

Ithna 'Asyari Shi'a

Ithna-'Asyaris, also known as Twelvers, Jaafaris or Imamis, have been in Singapore before the 1st World War, but they were predominantly of Indian ethnicity, from the Namazie, Khoja and Jumabhoy families (Imam Reza Network, 2016). Malay Ithna-'Asyari Shi'as in Singapore only surfaced in the 1970s and are distributed among 3 organizations: Himpunan Belia Islam (HBI), also known as the Muslim Youth Assembly; Jaafari Muslim Association (JMAS) and the Persatuan Islam Al-Hikmah Singapura (PIAS). JMAS essentially consist of the same members as HBI and is used as a separate face to conduct niche activities such as religious education and events. HBI functions as the "corporate" face of the congregation, managing matters such as events spaces and the Hussainiyah Az-Zahra premise on Guillemard Road. The difference between HBI and JMAS is in administration and nomenclature.

PIAS were originally members of the HBI congregation who split from HBI over trivial matters without any major difference in theology or practice. It was implied that PIAS leaders disagreed with HBI leaders and decided to hold congregatory meetings separately.

HBI was formed in 1972 (Himpunan Belia Islam, 2010). However, according to the recollections of their members, they were part of an earlier Islamic movement in Singapore – the Persatuan Muhammadiyah Singapura (PMS) or the Muhammadiyah Association of Singapore. Accounts of their split from PMS put the nascent formation of HBI in the year 1971, led by the likes of Djamal Tukimin, Zain Ahmad, Osman Nasir and Hasan Ghani. Often, senior members would reminisce of their days with the Muhammadiyah movement, labeling them as Wahabbi. They embrace their Wahabbi past because, according to them, the spirit of "searching for the truth" and "returning to the Qur'an and sunnah" gave them a critical outlook that drove their doctrinal shifts. The original HBI members claim to have made an initial "jump" from the Muhammadiyah movement to the Ikhwan Al-Muslimin (Muslim Brotherhood) movement, adopting practices such as the usrah (directly translated as 'family' but carrying the meaning of critical discussion and sharing of religious ideas and opinions). I use the word "jump" loosely here because the accounts of the senior members suggest that they might have already toyed with Ikhwan ideas and practices while they were in the Muhammadiyah movement.

The senior members claimed to have met up with other Ikhwanis in Malaysia, where members of the international Ikhwanul Muslimin would gather for "meetings" and "conferences". They continued until a point where they were curious as to who the leaders of the Ikhwani movement in Malaysia are, a fact that was kept secret from them. The secrecy of the identity of the Ikhwani movement leaders led them to believe that their foray could lead to misadventure as they believed that Muslim leaders must make their identity known, as with their experience in the Muhammadiyah movement. According to them, it is a widely-held belief that Muslim leaders and scholars must make their identity known so that they may be held accountable for their opinions and instructions by their own followers. Senior members claim that the conspicuous nature of the Ikhwani movement was what led them to look for other Islamic movements to learn from, satisfied with whatever they were able to gather from the Ikhwanis.

Subsequently, the Iranian Revolution provided another learning opportunity for HBI. Astounded by the revolution in January 1979, they travelled to Iran to learn how an Islamic movement became successful at such a scale. Among those who made the trip was Ma'rof Salleh. Salleh was said to have been a staunch Sunni, just like the other PMS/HBI members who made

the same trip. However, they were given enough access to observe Shi'a practices and learn from local scholars that by the end of the trip, Salleh was "an expert" in explaining Shi'ism. They returned and shared what they learnt in Iran with HBI/PMS members through usrah sessions, convinced that they have found "the truth". The first Malay Imamis who accepted the Shi'a faith were Muhammad Ithnin Kasmin, and members known only as Farok, Habib, Hizbullah, Ithnin, Jahari, Rahim and Shaaban (mam Reza Network, 2016). By 1982, more than a dozen youth members of PMS had become Imami Shi'as, abandoning the movement to join HBI and attempting to spread doubts within PMS of the validity of the Sunni version of Islam (Aljuneid, 2009). PMS had to publish booklets explaining the "falsehood" of Shi'i doctrines to respond to their Shi'i members who were spreading doubts while remaining in PMS, having yet to join HBI. The new Malay Imamis did not have a premise to conduct Shi'i-related activities and attended the gatherings held by the ethnic Indian families from 1985 onwards. Their actual "conversion" may not have been very clear and some of them may have been sympathizers although they were labeled as Shi'a by their PMS/HBI counterparts. HBI senior members insist that upon return from Iran any by the time they started attending Shi'a gatherings, HBI had been converted into a fully Shi'a organization. This conversion also benefitted from Sunni members who left HBI because they could not bear with the new Shi'a identity that the organization had.

As of 20 (Shahid, and Ali, 2013), HBI claims to propagate "the Ahlul-Bayt school of thought", but the manner in which they do so – providing religious classes, organizing leadership or educational camps – is inherited from their Muhammadiyah past. Some legacies of their Wahabbi and Ikhwani history include their assertion that certain Shi'a practices have been tainted by local cultures – a statement of Wahabbi spirit taken positively. For instance, they report that the Matam, or chest-beating, is part of the Shi'a faith but excessiveness and zealotry in practice – such as using swords and metal-edged lashes which tear at the skin – are cultural contributions and were they exposed to such controversial aspects of Shi'ism, they would not have converted.

The Ithna 'Asyari community is estimated to have 500 to 1000 followers, including immigrants and visitors from India, Pakistan, Indonesia and Iran. While they may be united under a common theology, there are a small number of Shirazis who are considered to be deviant based on religious interpretations as well as their political position regarding the recognition of Ayatollah Khomenei. For instance, the radical elements of the Shirazi path is believed to be mainly from the influence of Yasser Al-Habib, whose opinions are explicitly provocative to the Sunnis and is considered offensive and illegal in many Islamic countries. Al-Habib opposed Hezbollah, and Khamenei and

his supporters10. There are several Shirazi linkages to Singapore, the closest is the Organisation of Ahlulbayt for Social Support and Education (OASE), a Shia-women non- governmental organisation (NGO), based in Indonesia. The organisation is headed by Emilia Renita, ex-wife of Jalaluddin Rahmat . Another organisation is Zainabiyah Hawza of Indonesia established in 2015 by Mohammad Tawhidi, an Australian Shiite Muslim. Tawhidi also established the Zainabiyah Hawza of Australia in the year 2016. Tawhidi is the founder and director of the Islamic Association of South Australia, established on 1 January 2016. It is worth highlighting that the Shirazis are also considered deviant because the extreme and vulgar extent of their hatred towards Sunnis does not sit well with leaders of the Imami community in Singapore.

Political Culture and Inter/Intra-Faith Harmony

Political culture has often been used as a way to explain why a particular political setting has a particular type of politics because of its political culture:

> "setting A has x-type politics because it has an x-type political culture, setting B has found it hard to adopt x-type politics because it has a y-type political culture, or, in a more dynamic implementation, the politics of setting C has changed from x-type to y-type because its political culture first made that change" (Welch, 2013).

While the political culture explanation has been criticised for being a "just so story" (Welch, 2013), critics nevertheless acknowledge that instead of brushing the explanation aside, it should be improved upon. This paper shall not dwell upon those criticisms, but rather build upon a theory of political culture by recognizing that political culture informs political action, just as political action is an expression of political culture. Furthermore, the phenomenon to be explained is not a general interpretation of politics and political culture. Rather, this paper focuses on politics of faith – the management of faith by the state and the political behaviour of faith groups.

In the context of this paper, we can understand our political setting, type and culture as follows: (1) Singapore has a unique religio-political setting of religious freedom and harmony, expressed in the laws detailed below, (2) The type of faith-politics that Singapore has is pluralistic to the extent that the laws allow for it and, (3) This is because Singapore's political culture of faith is free and harmony-seeking.

Singapore's Nation-Building Experience: Political Culture

Even before Singapore had to address precarious political security as a Chinese island in a Malay ocean after its separation from Malaysia, the historical lead-up to the birth of the multi- religious state already necessitated a conscious effort to manage both racial and religious diversity. The manner in which Singapore responded to the historical memory of violent episodes such as the 1915 Sepoy Mutiny, the Maria Hertogh riots and the 1964 Race Riots illustrates that Singapore's nation-building phase contributed to a free and harmony-seeking political culture of faith among the elite and the masses. To demonstrate this political culture, we need only look at the cusp of nation-building, while legislations were still being written and elections were free and fair, to understand what the matters of concurrence or contestation were, if any.

Pre-independence, Singapore's self-governing legislative assembly sat on 13 December 1959 to debate the Ministry of Culture's budget. The newly-elected Prime Minister (PM) Lee Kuan Yew highlighted a reality so mundane to the legislators but so demonstrative for our purposes. With a backdrop of religious sensitivities, such as the issue of polygamy and racial tensions with religious overtones, legislators were in fact "sitting on a Sunday – a day of rest for the Christians" without protest by the Speaker of Parliament who was of Christian faith, nor the Muslim and Hindu legislators (Thio, 2009).

Singapore's nation-building experience led to people working together to build a country regardless of race, language, religion or faith. A disagreement, up to the point of a riot breaking out, may occur between groups of different ethnic or religious identities, but there is no contest over what the ideal condition of the multi-religious society should be, that is, a society where there is religious freedom and one which seeks peaceful and harmonious relations between all faith groups. Before Singapore became independent, PM Lee declared that there will be "religious freedom for all in Singapore" and promised that Singapore will have a "policy of religious toleration" (Lee, 1964). After Singapore separated from Malaysia and gained independence, despite already having a common consciousness of the type of political culture of faith in Singapore, a constitutional commission convened in 1966 to deal specifically with matters of race and religion, giving birth to a revised Singapore Constitution with a guarantee on religious freedom, removing the power for legislators to have any form of "special treatment" to "a particular religion" which would have been inconsistent with being a "democratic secular state" (Thio, 1997).

In summary, what this paper means by asserting that Singapore's political culture of faith is free and harmony-seeking, is that it is understood by the elites and the masses that there is constitutional and practical religious

freedom in Singapore and that tolerance is sought for the purpose of maintaining peace and harmony in society. The only religious groups banned in Singapore are the Jehovah's Witnesses who were de-registered in 1972 and banned on the grounds of the refusal to perform the obligatory national military service, salute the flag or swear oaths of allegiance to the state as well as the Unification Church which was deemed to be a potential cult and disruptive to public welfare in 1982 (U.S Dept. of State, 2016).

Singapore's Political Culture: Reinforcing the Political Setting

Uniquely, the legislations detailed below, some of which were enacted later in Singapore's history, could be used as a manner of understanding how Singapore's political culture of faith is practiced by the political elite. Singapore has a number of legal institutions that minimizes tension between and within communities of different faiths and beliefs and seeks to maintain a status quo of harmonious relations. These include the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act, Section 298 and 298A of the Penal Code, the Sedition Act and the Undesirable Publications Act.

Section 298 and 298A of the Penal Code

Originally enacted on 16 September 1872 as the Straits Settlements Penal Code, Singapore carried forward or re-enacted the colonial consciousness of the state management of religious tolerance. Section 298 and 298A of Singapore's Penal Code exemplifies what we described earlier as the pre-independence political setting and culture of faith, regardless of which produced which other. Although imperial and colonial interest may differ in intention, these sections are nevertheless tools meant for whatever purposes Singapore's political elite may choose.

The abovementioned sections are self-explanatory:

> "Whoever, with deliberate intention of wounding the religious or racial feelings of any person, utters any word or makes any sound in the hearing of that person, or makes any gesture in the sight of that person, or places any object in the sight of that person, or causes any matter however represented to be seen or heard by that person, shall be punished with imprisonment for a term which may extend to 3 years, or with fine, or with both. (Section 298of the Penal Code)"
> And:
>
> "Whoever —

(a) by words, either spoken or written, or by signs or by visible representations or otherwise, knowingly promotes or attempts to promote, on grounds of religion or race, disharmony or feelings of enmity, hatred or ill-will between different religious or racial groups; or
(b) commits any act which he knows is prejudicial to the maintenance of harmony between different religious or racial groups and which disturbs or is likely to disturb the public tranquility, shall be punished with imprisonment for a term which may extend to 3 years, or with fine, or with both."

Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act

Passed in 1990, the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act (MRHA) allows the government to make a restraining order against any person, official or member of a religious group or institution when such a person is found to have done any of the following:

"(a) causing feelings of enmity, hatred, ill-will or hostility between different religious groups;
(b) carrying out activities to promote a political cause, or a cause of any political party while, or under the guise of, propagating or practising any religious belief;
(c) carrying out subversive activities under the guise of propagating or practising any religious belief; or
(d) exciting disaffection against the President or the Government of Singapore while, or under the guise of, propagating or practising any religious belief"

The restraining order is intended to:

"(a) restrain him from addressing orally or in writing any congregation, parish or group of worshippers or members of any religious group or institution on any subject, topic or theme as may be specified in the order without the prior permission of the Minister;
(b) restrain him from printing, publishing, editing, distributing or in any way assisting or contributing to any publication produced by any religious group without the prior permission of the Minister;
(c) restrain him from holding office in an editorial board or a committee of a publication of any religious group without the prior permission of the Minister."

The White Paper that led up to the passing of the Bill was annexed with a report by the Internal Security Department which lay out the social and political conditions that Singapore faced in the 1980s (Maintenance of Religious Harmony,1989). Particularly, Singapore experienced inter-religious tensions largely attributed to "aggressive and intensive proselytization" by Protestant churches and organizations as well as incidents such as disputes over the funeral rights of those who have converted to Islam, intra- or sub-faith tensions among Hindu and Christian sects, the usage of Catholic religious gatherings and publications as platforms for political activism and the banning of Muslim theologians who had incited the Muslim community against the government (Maintenance of Religious Harmony,1989). The political elite duely demonstrated Singapore's political culture of faith by intervening at a moment when the masses had begun to shed the tolerance and harmony-building aspects of it due to a worldwide increase in religious fervour.

Sedition Act

Post "9/11", and with the advent of the internet, Islam became susceptible to rhetorical attacks by anyone who sought to express hatred, most commonly recognized as "Islamophobia". Originally enacted in 1948, the Sedition Act was first used in the context of the type of Singapore's politics of faith in 2005, when a local blogger vulgarly assaulted the Malay-Muslim community and its customs, compared Islam to Satanism and parodied the halal logo and placed in next to a pig's head (Public Prosecutor v. Koh Song Huat Benjamin, 2005). The relevant portion of the Act that was operationalized was that it is considered seditious to "promote feelings of ill-will and hostility between different races or classes of the population."

Undesirable Publications Act

Again, with the backdrop of "Islamophobia", this act was first used in the context of the political culture of faith in 2009, when 2 bloggers were charged under both the Sedition Act and Undesirable Publications Act for allegedly distributing an evangelistic publication titled The Little Bride that cast the Prophet Muhammad in a negative light (Public Prosecutor v. Ong Kian Cheong, 2009). The relevant portion of the Act is that a publication is deemed objectionable if it deals with "matters of race or religion in such a manner that the availability of the publication is likely to cause feelings of enmity, hatred, ill-will or hostility between different racial or religious groups."

With the exception of those who supposedly champion the freedom of speech, it is clear, that with the enactment, sustenance and operationalization of the above legislations, the political elite was informed by a political culture imbued in the nation-state since its nation-building phase and reproduced this

political culture through the legislation, which manifests as both the political setting and the type of faith politics observed in Singapore; that of the firm guarantee of freedom and the resounding desire for peaceful and harmonious relations among all faith groups, horizontally and vertically.

Singapore's Political Culture and the Shi'i Community

Having understood what Singapore's political culture is and how it has surfaced and is reproduced, we can now investigate how it has affected the Shi'a in Singapore. For the Ithna 'Asyari Shi'a who professed their change in faith after having been from the puritanical sect of Wahabbism, they found the freedom to pursue such a change and the necessary level of tolerance and harmony in order for them to sustain their faith. The Ismailis, having been part of the nation-building program since the First World War, found not just the freedom of faith, but also acceptance, recognition and political capital only possible, in view of being a minority, in a political setting and culture of freedom and harmony.

Firstly, Ithna 'Asyari Shi'a in Singapore, through their conversion from Wahabbism to Shi'ism demonstrate the level of religious freedom accorded to Singaporeans not just by the law, but also by the society. This paper highlights, as with another author (Marcinkowski, 2006.), that it is "remarkable" for a Sunni organization to have wholly converted into being Shi'i, although it was not popularly accepted by the Sunni community and was opposed through literature that sought to discredit the Shi'a (Aljuneid, 2009). Mr. Rosli, also known as Ustaz Rosli, who has served the HBI for 15 years as its President and JMAS for 7 years as its Vice-President as well as studied in Qum, Iran in the 1980s for 5 years, also detailed that since the conversion of HBI, the Malay-Ithna 'Asyari community in Singapore has grown to about 2,000 to 3,000 members that include businessmen, university graduates and a Deputy Public Prosecutor. The amount of freedom the Shi'a community are accorded, despite their controversial conversion, is such that there is no need for the Singapore Shi'a to "resort to taqiyyah (prudent dissimulation) when interacting with non-Shi'a as Singapore is an open and multi-religious society (Marcinowski, 2006)". This is despite having neighbour states such as Malaysia, where one may be arrested for being Shi'i or Indonesia, where Shi'a communities have experienced the burning of their religious places of worship and houses by Sunni communities. The Imamis, as they are also referred to, "consider themselves loyal citizens and do not face persecution, as they are able to congregate freely in order to fulfil their religious obligations and to acquire landed property (Marcinowski, 2006)". Through the planned acquisition of the landed property, Mr. Rosli also demonstrated that

Singapore's Ithna 'Asyari Shi'a are themselves constrained by the political setting and culture of Singapore, considering that the Imami community have been planning to build a Cultural Centre, which, rather than being a "mere mosque", is intended to "be open to other Muslims as well as non-Muslim Singaporeans", echoing Singapore's political culture of faith and multiculturalism (Marcinowski, 2006). As of the writing of this paper, the Imamis are still in the process of purchasing the land they require, having to negotiate the price of the space with various potential leasers.

The Ismailis, who like the early non-Malay Imamis were in Singapore since the First World War, not only lived in a political setting and culture of freedom, tolerance and harmony, but are considered a community that has significant economic, social and political capital as a minority, having contributed to Singapore's nation-building, producing many prominent individuals. For instance, Haider Sithwalla (1994-2008), a businessman and former senior public servant, was Singapore's non-resident high commissioner to Mauritius, Tanzania and Zimbabwe and was the director of light industries services at the Economic Development Board before becoming the deputy secretary of the Economic Development Division in the Ministry of Finance. Another example is Shabbir Hassanbhai who was appointed Singapore's non-resident High Commissioner to Nigeria in 2007. Yet another, Izzudin Taherally, was awarded the Excellent Service aware by the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS) for his contributions in the field of social services. The Imamis also had a prominent individual from the Namazies, a prominent family of the Ithna 'Asyari community in Singapore, Mr. Mohamed Javad Namazie, who was considerably involved in the formulation of the Administratin of Muslim Law Act of 1966 (AMLA) (Marcinowski, 2006).

The Malay Shi'a conversions up to the recognition of prominent Shi'i individuals demonstrate a pluralistic type of faith politics informed by both the political setting of religious freedom and harmony outlined by the legislation which are themselves manifestations and reiterations of the political culture in Singapore which seeks to ensure that every faith group is free to practice their faith and that all faith groups tolerate and work towards peaceful and harmonious relationship where possible. Where global changes have affected the golden balance of inter and intra-faith relations in Singapore, the political elite of a secular government demonstrate that they do not favour any particular group and are committed to a peaceful and harmonious society. Some critics (Neo, 2011) have argued that Muslims have been receiving favouritism by the state, but this is only seen through the lens of the use of the law against those who have irrefutably acted against legislative measures meant to produce and re-produce the ideal political culture for the imagined ideal type of faith politics in Singapore. The secular government, learning from

its lessons in the nation-building phase of Singapore and unburdened by the geo-politics strangling the Middle East and setting Sunni and Shi'a communities at odds with each other, has certainly created a stable foundation of religious freedom and a strong desire for peace and harmony. Of course, other factors and dimensions include the primacy of the rule of law in Singapore where legislations matter and will be used suitably and not just when it is necessary, a parliamentary democracy that is essential for the ease of the making of relevant and up to date policy and legislation, an apolitical civil service, meritocracy and secular democracy itself, which produces unbiased political leaders which must uphold values such as the freedom of belief and of non-belief.

Challenges: Political Intrusions from Middle East

Having a political culture of faith that has been constructive and effective in securing peaceful and harmonious relations between Sunnis and Shi'a in Singapore comes with certain challenges. Just as an increase in religiosity in the 1980s resulted in the shedding away of elements of this political culture, there are impediments to wholesomely harmonious relations between Sunnis and Shi'a in Singapore. In particular, connected to the 1980s rise in global religiosity and globalisation, Muslims in Singapore interacted with trends such as Arabisation, Islamisation, Wahhabism and Salafism. These trends affected the local Muslim worldview, political culture and behaviour. Of interest to this paper is that the manner in which this affectation occurs is such that religious ideas and ideologies are adopted by the Singaporean Muslim community without the consciousness of the political contexts that underscore them. After the Iranian Revolution and the subsequent geo-political competition between Iran and petro-hegemon Saudi Arabia, religious ideas became encumbered by political intrusions. Either a political goal was expressed through religious resources – such as the militant struggle against an invading force being expressed through language of "jihad" – or the interpretation of religious resources was framed by political interest – such as the definition of a kafir or disbeliever being restricted by Saudi geo-political interest resulting in Salafi takfirism. Despite a political tradition – setting, type and culture – of peace between Sunnis and Shi'a, Muslims in Singapore, as we will demonstrate below, face the challenge of upholding a peaceful political culture of peace against the intrusion of external politics into their religious worldview.

Firstly, external politics have intruded Muslim ideas and sentiments about "the other". Despite countless declarations by international ulama, a persistent Sunni idea about the Shi'a effervesced, framing them as the deviant "other". Shi'i Muslims in Singapore became considered as a deviant

community by the Sunni Muslims who believed that the Sunnis are superior and true. One recent case was during the Shia annual Ashura procession in October 2015 that was conducted at the Singapore Silat Federation, also known as Persekutuan Silat Singapura (PERSISI). A video excerpt of the event became viral and sparked controversy, with Sunnis hounding PERSISI for its alleged support for the Shi'i community. The demonisation of Shi'a in Singapore stands counter to the historical tradition of the Sunni behaviour and perception towards Singaporean Shi'a since both communities have been co-existing peacefully.

A search for political intrusions highlights the factors that led to this change. Chiefly, geo- politics in the Middle East affected the way in which loud – not prominent or "guided" – Sunni and Shi'a scholars viewed each other's societies. After the 1979 Iranian Revolution, only enmity can describe the Saudi-Iran relationship. The geo-political competition between the two states resulted in "soft"-diplomacy, expressed through hate-spreading envoys of religio-politics. The most obvious manifestation of this was the increase in the global popularity of Wahabism, a puritanical strain of Islam that managed to secure the Saudi monarchy's domestic and international primacy in the Sunni world. This resulted in Sunni communities in Southeast Asia adopting the Wahabbi stance towards the Shi'a sect, and other essentially non-Sunni sects – considering them as kafir. Thus, Malaysia (Musa, n.d.) and Indonesia, Sunni-majority countries in Southeast Asia changed their stance towards the Shi'a, considering them as deviant and a threat to Sunni Islam, vehemently recognising only Sunni Islam, enabling persecution and oppression. Since the popularity of Wahabbism, online writings about "Bahaya Syiah" (the danger of Shi'a), claiming the falsehood and threat of the Shi'a, became easily available. It did not help that HBI, a Wahabbi-Muhammadiyah affiliate, wholly converted into Ithna 'Asyari Shi'a.

Aside from the intrusion of politics into religious matters, Singapore was beset with being neighbours with Malaysia, where the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) and the Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS) compete against each other politically through religious outbidding. By attempting to out-Islamise the other, religio-political leaders narrow the definition of Islam and inculcate the super-sensitivity towards deviance from a politically-defined normal. Through the religious committee and authority, religious rulings are published from time to time, de-legitimising other sects, not just the Shi'a, making Malaysia the first country, ahead of Wahabbi-Saudi, to arrest Shi'a on the basis of their faith alone, and not over crimes of subversion.

Hence, global and regional political developments since the 1980s have caused distrust between the two sects and have led the Shi'a community

to require the application of "taqiyah" only towards the Sunnis, and not to non-Muslims in Singapore in general. Although we mentioned earlier about the freedom of religion, both communities remain sceptical and wary of each other, due to the sectarian political schism.

Conclusion

The only impediment to intra-faith harmony between the Sunnis and Shi'a in Singapore is the intrusion of external political sentiments into the local political culture of faith, through the globalisation of religious ideas and ideology. The type of relations between Sunnis and Shi'a in Singapore has been historically peaceful, situated in the larger secular-pluralistic type of politics of faith in Singapore. We have argued that this is largely due to the duality of the political setting and political culture with regards to the management of religion in Singapore. The pre-independence political culture of faith persuaded the political elite to design legislation that ensured the freedom of religion and the management of expression that emphasises toleration and the desire for peace and harmony. This political setting both engendered and reproduced a free and tolerant-harmonious political culture of faith. Thus far, there have been minimal infractions of this trend:

> "A survey on Racial and Religious Harmony conducted by the Institute of Policy Studies in 2013 showed that approximately 80% of Singaporeans are open to building close relations with people of another race or religion. However, the same study also revealed that 40% of Singaporeans are of the opinion that racial tensions have yet to be eliminated, and 31% of Singaporeans have had experienced unpleasant interactions with people of another racial group. (Ipscommons.sg., 2015)"

This survey shows that although interfaith tolerance is considerably high, there are several factors that can cause the relationship between faiths and sects to decay. We argue that in the case of Sunni-Shia relations, it is the intrusion of decontextualized religious ideas and ideologies harbouring hatred produced by the Middle Eastern political turmoil. Isolating the influence further may require efforts from the Muslim communities to address the discord wisely and tactfully. Using the political culture explanation has allowed us to understand that Singapore cannot rely merely on legislation to prevent the decay of its highly prized racial and religious harmony.

Shi'a in Singapore have been partaking and living in the Muslim community for long time as mentioned earlier. Some family from the Shia community sent their kids to Sunni madaris (plural of madrasah – religious

schools) and participated in activities conducted by the Sunnis as well. Dawoodi Bohra, for instance, is sharing similar rulings for its Wakaf36 properties; "the Chancery Residence, an exclusive cluster housing in a prime district (Wakaf Shia Dawoodi Bohra)"37. The Imamis have also taken part in the celebrations of the birth of Prophet Muhammad together with other Singaporeans and are planning to revive their participation in an annual march that has usually been dominated by non- Salafi Sunni Muslims. The National University of Singapore Muslim Society (NUSMS) even had a Shi'a President for its 47th Executive Council, which was not seen as problematic on campus, considering he was nominated by a fully Sunni Muslim student body, but faced criticism from narrow-minded Muslim organisations who continued to assume that NUSMS was a Shi'a-led student organisation up until the 49th Executive Council was nominated and elected. These examples show that, when political matters of the Middle East are set aside or have no relevance, Sunnis and Shi'a in Singapore are able to live not just in tolerance of each other, but also harmoniously participating in the larger Singapore society.

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