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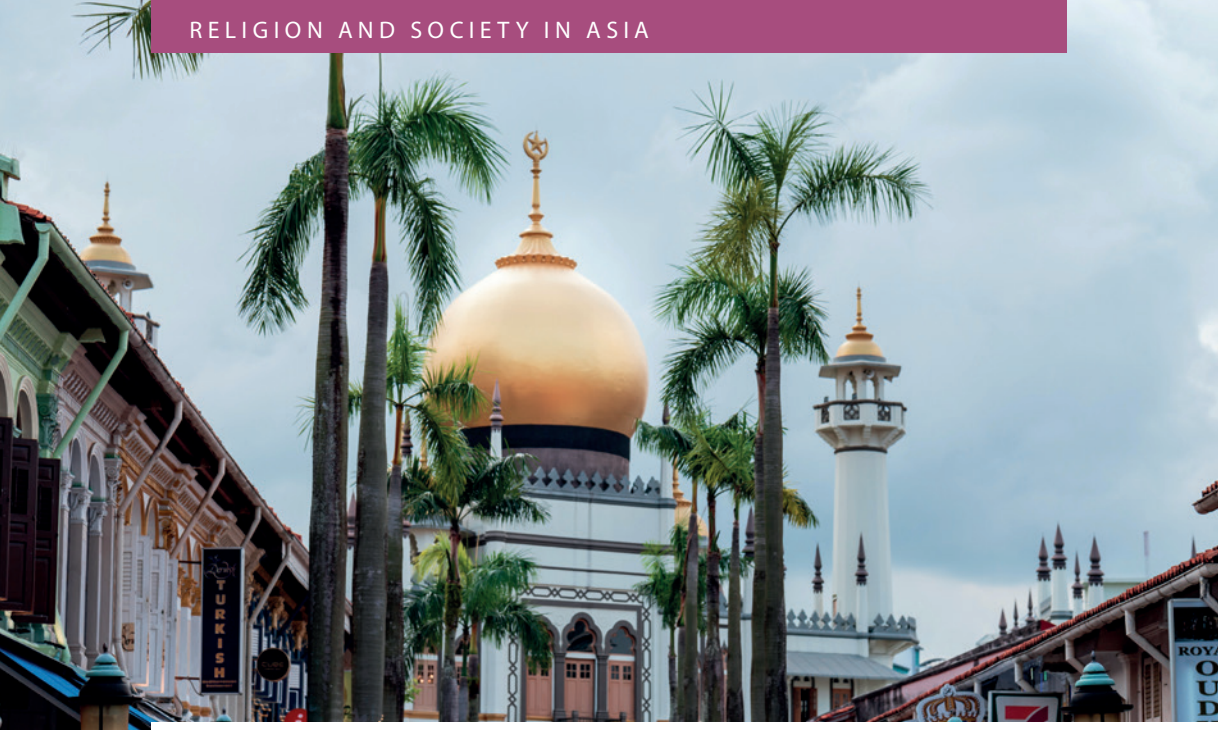

Walid Jumblatt Abdullah

Islam in a Secular State

Muslim Activism in Singapore

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Religion and Society in Asia

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Amsterdam University Press

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Table of Contents

1 Introduction: The State, Islam, and Muslim Activism in Singapore

Abstract
This chapter introduces the research questions the book tries to answer, its main arguments, and the scope of discussion. These questions include the following. How do Muslim activists navigate their way through politics in a secular, authoritarian state to maximize their influence? What are the different methods by which the varied categories of activists work to further their causes? What accounts for the differences in these approaches? Briefly, I postulate that many activists attempt to strategically align themselves with the state, and call upon the state to be an arbiter in their disagreements with other factions. Though there are activists who challenge the state, these are by far in the minority, and are typically unable to assert their influence in a sustained manner. The dominating nature of the state has largely resulted in activists refusing to defy the state on fundamental issues, regardless of their orientations. The chapter discusses Singapore's political context, and how Islam is managed. I further outline the case selection and methodology.

Keywords: Introduction, Islam, Muslims in Singapore, activists, People's Action Party, secular state

1.1 Background of Project and Wider Relevance

> Every community, when it presses for its own concerns, must bear in mind how that affects other communities and how others might see it. That is the reality of living in a multi-racial, multi-religious society that we all have to internalise.[1]

1 Kok Xing Hui, "Hijab Issue: Govt Must Balance Community Requirements," *Today*, 6 November 2013. https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/hijab-issue-govt-must-balance-community-requirements. Accessed 29 August 2018.

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Such was Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean's response to Muslim activists who requested that the People's Action Party (PAP) government in Singapore reconsider its stance on disallowing the hijab or *tudung* (headscarves for female Muslims) in certain frontline positions. Teo's refrain was neither unexpected nor unfamiliar; it has been a recurrent trope for the government to invoke the importance of maintaining racial and religious harmony (Sinha, 2005) – and the possibility of upsetting the delicate amity which had painstakingly been achieved – when dealing with activism from religious groups. The subtle message which was communicated was that if Muslims were to press for their rights, not only would other communities do the same, and thus, national interests might be jeopardized at the expense of particular groups, but they would also be perceived less favourably by other communities for being too demanding.

The hijab issue is then emblematic of the conundrum facing Muslim activists in Singapore. The secular, competitive authoritarian state in Singapore jealously protects its rule; while it is wary of any perceived challenges to its authority, it is particularly attentive to the potential of religion to be a source of mobilization. The self-avowed secular state does not take incursions into the public sphere by any religion lightly; but for historical, geo-political and practical reasons which will be elucidated later, the Muslim community and Islam is given special focus. Religious activists then have to make calculations on navigating the political system. On one hand, if Muslim activists make vociferous demands in the public arena, they are unlikely to induce the state to change course on a particular policy. The paternalistic state does not wish to be seen as capitulating to the demands of a particular community. On the other hand, if there is not enough public emphasis on the matter, there would be no incentive for the state to embark on a different path. An important point which needs to be emphasized is that this is a dilemma facing all activists in Singapore, regardless of their faiths or the causes they wish to pursue. Nevertheless, Muslims face additional complexities, due to the securitization of Muslim expressions of religiosity. This is a point which will be returned to later.

The hijab issue in Singapore, though much discussed in academic writings and public discourse (Nasir, Pereira, & Turner, 2009; Abdullah, 2016c; Zainal & Wong, 2017; Osman, 2018), is only one facet of variegated Muslim activism. Though the issue was most visible and pronounced, it is by no means the only, or even most important, form of activism in Singapore. In fact, the hijab was championed by a particular group of Muslim activists, which I refer to as the *conservatives*. Other groups within the community exist. For instance, *liberal* Muslims assign greater importance to other

causes. They are more interested in challenging existing norms within the Muslim community which they deem to be outdated, regressive and responsible for the community's lack of progress. There is another group of actors which I deem to be extremely crucial in any endeavour to understand Muslim societies: the *ulama* (Islamic religious scholars or clerics). By virtue of their self-understanding as the 'heirs of the Prophets' (Chittick, 2005),[2] and general deference to the authority of the *ulama* in interpreting scripture by Muslims – though it must be stated that this authority is by no means unchallenged – the *ulama* constitute a vital bloc in Muslim communities. The *ulama* are traditionally expected to act in the religion's best interests, and in accordance with Prophetic duty, provide guidance to Muslims and at the same time, mount robust defences against threats to the integrity of Islam, regardless of whether the pressures exist from within or outside the faith (Zaman, 2002).

Given the multi-faceted nature of Muslim activism, and the nature of the constricted political system in Singapore, this study attempts to provide answers to the following questions. How do Muslim activists navigate their way through politics in a secular, authoritarian state to maximize their influence? What are the different methods which the varied categories of activists undertake to further their causes? What accounts for the differences in these approaches? Briefly, I postulate that many activists attempt to strategically align themselves with the state, and call upon the state to be an arbiter in their disagreements with other factions. Though there are activists who challenge the state, these are by far in the minority, and are typically unable to assert their influence in a sustained manner. The dominant nature of the state has largely resulted in activists refusing to defy the state on fundamental issues, regardless of their orientations.

A few points should be made clear from the outset. First, while this is a study about Singapore, the book draws on theories of comparative politics and sociology to make this project relevant to a broader audience. Scholars, students, and observers interested in authoritarian politics, the nature of civil society movements, and religious actors should find this book useful, even if they do not study Singapore. The book does not adopt a 'Singapore exceptionalism' approach whereby explanations which are

2 This understanding comes from a Prophetic tradition which states that 'The *ulama* are the heirs of the Prophets.' This saying is recorded in Tirmidhi and Ibn Majah, two of the six most authoritative books on hadith. See Sunnah.com, https://sunnah.com/search/?q=ulama+are+heirs+of+the+prophet. Accessed 31 August 2018. Indeed, many of the *ulama* interviewed repeat this phrase when speaking on what the responsibilities of the *ulama* are.

given are wholly Singapore-centric; it has been a common theme amongst observers of Singapore to attribute seemingly idiosyncratic occurrences in the country to its exceptionalism (Pei, 1994; Thompson, 2006). While there are obviously particularities in the Singapore case which will be explained throughout, the claim made here is that lessons from the Singapore example are applicable to the broader studies on Muslim activism, and to civil society movements in other competitive authoritarian regimes. Second, this is a study on politics. It is a central assumption – and claim – of this book that (almost) every phenomenon is 'political' in nature. Religion – and concomitantly, its interpretation, manifestation, contestation and application – are most definitely 'political'. Thus, actions by religious actors (and others such as the state) are analyzed through the lens of politics. Politics is, at its core, about power and the distribution of resources. Power here, as Sartori argues, must be understood in a broad, encompassing sense, which includes military, coercive, economic, religious and other capacities (Sartori, 1973, p. 19). As a corollary, politics is also about the 'making of collective decisions' (Parsons, 2017, p. 3). The process of making collective decisions involves some form of bargaining between those who govern and the governed (Dahl, 1961). The decisions made by actors within a polity are ultimately to further the goals which they have, and pertain directly to how power is distributed in a system. Religious actors are no different in this regard. In attempting to maximize their influence (or power) within a polity, they would have to make decisions to pursue certain actions, and prioritize specific causes over others (Zald & Ash, 1966). Third, Muslims and activists can be categorized in an innumerable number of ways. They could be classified along ideological (Sufi-Salafi, Sunni-Shia), partisan (pro-government/anti-government), educational (school/place of study), socio-economic (lower-upper class), and many other lines. Any choice of classification would involve some arbitrariness. This book has decided to categorize Muslim activists under three groups: the *ulama*, conservatives, and liberals. The reasons behind this choice will be explained in Section 1.5. For now, it is important to note a few matters about these groups. The groups themselves are not monolithic; for instance, not all conservatives, liberals or *ulama* align themselves with the state, and some are in fact vehement critics of the state. Moreover, similar actors could behave differently under dissimilar circumstances: an activist who is largely associated with the state may still display disagreements with it on some issues. This book calls for an extremely nuanced understanding of these categories, and the actions of various sets of actors within those groupings. Finally, this study focuses on the actions of the Muslim activists themselves. There has been

a tendency in political science to adopt statist approaches in explaining political phenomena (Almond, 1988; Geddes, 1990; Evans, 1995; Johnson, 1995; Doner, Ritchie, & Slater, 2005; Stepan, 2015). In Southeast Asia especially, where states are typically authoritarian and try to dictate outcomes in their favour as much as possible, this tendency is amplified (Slater, 2003; George, 2012; Rajah, 2012). Previous studies on Muslims in Singapore too have given much emphasis to the state (Rahim, 1998; Mutalib, 2012a). To be sure, this is not an invalid approach: the state indeed does have significant authority and influence in affecting political outcomes, especially in countries with (competitive) authoritarian regimes like Singapore. Yet, this study chooses to highlight the role of other actors. It is important to treat Muslim activists – as is the case with other non-state entities – as actors with agency. Migdal critiques the propensity of scholars to excessively concentrate on the state: not only is the 'state' itself not monolithic, but it is not always possible for state elites to execute their will and impose their beliefs on the people (Migdal, 2001). Similarly, Scott argues that even seemingly unimportant and disenfranchised actors like peasants display agency and resist a powerful state via minute acts of resistance such as foot-dragging, in what he terms as the 'weapons of the weak' (Scott, 1985). Bratton's study of sub-Saharan Africa led him to conclude that the scholarly preoccupation with the state obfuscates more than it illuminates, since civil society actually plays a vital role in effecting political change (Bratton, 1989). This is not to say that the state is unimportant, or in the case of Singapore, the least important actor. Indeed, the reach of the state is far and wide in the small city-state, but the point to be made here is that no state, no matter how authoritarian, is completely insulated from society. Even if agents decide to cooperate with the state, that is still a conscious choice by those agents, since other alternatives, however costly, are still available (Abdullah, 2013). The very fact that there are divergent paths taken by the activists in Singapore demonstrates that these actors do possess agency.

More broadly, this study can provide useful insights into the politics of Muslim societies, and the politics of civil society groups in general. Many of these Muslim activists proclaim theological motivations, if not justifications, behind their actions. Yet, in spite of claiming inspiration from the same (Islamic) sources, they act in a myriad of ways. It is thus abundantly clear that 'Islam' itself cannot account for these divergent outcomes. The quietist activist may invoke Prophetic traditions (*hadith*) which call for obedience to the ruler, and passages from the Quran which point toward the importance of maintaining public order above all else. A liberal Muslim could discuss the need for reform and interpret the same scripture in a radically different

way from how a conservative would understand that very passage. As such, the practice and manifestation of Islam are dependent on a particular individual's orientation and inclination (Waardenburg, 1985). Scripture by itself is not always uncontentious or explicit, and its interpretation depends on who is doing the interpreting. This is a straightforward, uncontroversial proposition. What is more interesting is the following claim: I postulate that the practice of Islam itself is dependent on political realities. Theology and jurisprudence do not exist, and have never existed, in a vacuum, separate from realpolitik. Political realities do affect theological positions. Actors often take into account the socio-political situation before embarking on a course which considers, if not appropriates, religion. This is not to say that every single religious actor adopts a Machiavellian approach toward faith, and uses it insofar as it achieves a particular goal. That is not the claim here. Rather, what is being put forth is that theological understandings are themselves affected by politics. Political opportunities could determine how a religion is manifested in the real world, as will be discussed later.

1.2 Singapore's Political Context

Singapore can best be described as a 'competitive authoritarian' regime. Competitive authoritarian regimes are not fully authoritarian, yet at the same time, they fall short of the standard requirements to be classified as democracies. In such regimes, violations of democratic standards such as free and fair elections and the guarantee of individual freedoms such as freedom of speech occur so often to the point that they create an 'uneven playing field between government and opposition' (Levitsky & Way, 2002, p. 53). At the same time, there exist opportunities for the presence of genuine contestations for power by the opposition, such that even if the playing field is not level, the opposition can and does win in certain electoral contests. Levitsky and Way classified Singapore as a fully authoritarian regime, even though they admitted that it is a borderline case which could have been included in the sample of competitive authoritarian regimes (Levitsky & Way, 2010, p. 34). Such a view is not uncommon amongst Western scholars who study the city-state. Singapore has been referred to as a 'dictatorship' which has remained wealthy by other scholars (Przeworski, Alvarez, Cheibub, & Limongi, 2000, p. 94; Slater, 2012, p. 19). To be sure, the views of these scholars are not without any basis: there exist severe restrictions to individual freedoms in Singapore. Singapore has only been governed by one party in its history. The state has maintained an interventionist

approach toward managing affairs in the country, and personal liberties are required to be sacrificed in the pursuit of the greater good (Chua, 2017). The justification given by PAP leaders is that Singapore is a small country with a diverse, multiracial population, and if freedoms of speech and assembly were not curbed, communal tensions or even riots could ensue from the insensitivities of one's careless remarks, or from the sinister intentions of political entrepreneurs (Thio, 2017). Furthermore, even though elections are free, regular and not fraudulent, they are not entirely fair either. Numerous obstacles exist to impede opposition growth. These include the introduction of the Party Block Vote or Group Representation Constituency (GRC) system – ostensibly created to ensure ethnic minority representation – which increases the barriers to entry for the opposition since the system favours parties with enormous resources (Tan & Grofman, 2018), the implementation of electoral engineering measures such as the Nominated Member of Parliament (NMP) and Non-Constituency Member of Parliament (NCMP) which could produce the effect of discouraging voters from electing opposition Members of Parliament (MPs) (Rodan, 2009; Abdullah, 2016b), short campaigning periods, gerrymandering (which is made possible by the placement of the Electoral Department of Singapore under the purview of the Prime Minister's Office), the absence of a free press and hence the lack of positive coverage given to opposition candidates (Mutalib, 2003), defamation suits against opposition politicians such as JB Jeyaretnam and Chee Soon Juan in the past which have resulted in their bankruptcy (Rodan, 2003), the public chiding of intellectuals who challenge the state (Tan K. P., 2009), and so on. The first Prime Minister of Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew, who practically shaped Singapore in his image, was forthright in this regard. He declared that there 'is no level playing-field of any government helping opposition to win votes.'[3] Thus, the opposition is severely disadvantaged in Singapore. At the same time, it would not be true to suggest that the opposition does not have any space to operate in Singapore. For almost two decades, two opposition MPs, Low Thia Khiang and Chiam See Tong, defeated PAP candidates in the Hougang and Potong Pasir electoral wards in successive elections, proving that opposition candidates do stand a chance to win. Criticisms of the state are tolerated as long as they do not cross the Out-of-Bounds (OB) markers set by the state. These include criticisms towards the integrity of PAP leaders, especially on allegations of corruption; racial and religious matters; and questioning the independence of the judiciary. For the government, these

3 "Late Singapore Leader Lee Kuan Yew Had Opinions on Everything," *Time*, 22 March 2015. http://time.com/3748654/singapore-lee-kuan-yews-opinions/. Accessed 6 September 2018.

are matters which would affect the very functioning of key institutions and the societal fabric upon which the country is built. Elections, as stated earlier, are free and not fraudulent. Singapore is definitely not the Soviet Union, and when it is characterized as a dictatorship together with other autocratic regimes, one may lose sight of these realities. Hussin Mutalib, a reputable political scientist in Singapore, regards Singapore as an 'illiberal democracy' (Mutalib, 2000). Ortmann argues that following the 2011 elections, during which PAP's vote share reduced to 60% and it lost a GRC to the opposition Workers' Party (WP) team led by Low Thia Khiang, Singapore could be regarded as a competitive authoritarian state (Ortmann, 2011). I concur with such an assessment. Understanding Singapore as a competitive authoritarian regime is vital toward comprehending the argument I make about Muslim activism in Singapore. Activists have far more space to operate under a competitive authoritarian regime than a dictatorship, even though that room is still constricted as compared to a democracy. Additionally, in competitive authoritarian regimes, not all forms of opposition are met with the full force of the law: the state employs a defter array of strategies, ranging from persuasion to co-optation – without fully dispensing with draconian measures of course – to achieve its goals.

Singapore achieved independence under unceremonious circumstances. After having been a British colony since 1819, Singapore merged with Malaya (to become Malaysia) in 1963. The union was short-lived as ideological and personal differences became too magnified to be ignored, and Singapore was asked to leave the Malaysian Federation in 1965 (Lau, 1998). Apart from Lee Kuan Yew's personal clashes with Tunku Abdul Rahman, the then-Prime Minister of Malaysia, the two entities disagreed on a fundamental ideological basis. Malaysia practised Malay-led multiracialism, whereby Malays were given preferential treatment in certain areas whereas Lee wanted a form of multiracialism which did not discriminate between the different ethnicities, or in Lee's words, a 'Malaysian Malaysia' (Josey, 2012, p. 84). Upon separation, Lee became the first Prime Minister of independent Singapore and quickly moved to consolidate his party's power. The powers of trade unions and students' associations were curbed, strikes were banned, the Internal Security Act (ISA) – a law which allows detention without trial – was used on individuals who were deemed to be threats to national security, and intra-party dissent was stifled (Barr, 2000). Lee and the PAP managed to facilitate remarkable levels of economic growth, turning Singapore into one of the Asian tigers whose success was admired by developing countries (Low, 2001). When Lee stepped down in 1990, his successor Goh Chok Tong promised a more consultative approach toward governance where the

voices of citizens were heard more. Lee Hsien Loong, son of Kuan Yew, succeeded Goh in 2004, and promised even more openness, and is still the premier today. Modern Singapore is one of the most remarkable stories of financial and material success, and this spectacular growth has been one of the main reasons for the durability of PAP rule (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2006). In 2017, Singapore's GDP per capita stood at US$57 714.30, easily falling under the World Bank's classification of a high-income country.[4] The PAP has capitalized on this success and has perpetuated a narrative that it was the PAP – and its ruling style and foundational ideologies – which led Singapore from the 'third world to first' (Lee, 2000).

While it is true that both Goh and Hsien Loong did adopt more open attitudes toward criticisms, in general, the core ideologies and mode of governance remained the same for PAP throughout the tenures of the three Prime Ministers. The PAP still considers its core ideologies – survival, meritocracy, multiracialism, and (economic) pragmatism – sacred and immutable. Survival is the defining feature of the PAP psyche: in the eyes of PAP leaders, Singapore is a vulnerable city-state whose existence is never secure. Externally, its existence is threatened by its geo-political environment. Being a 'Chinese nut in a Malay nutcracker', which means that it is a Chinese-majority nation surrounded by its larger Malay-Muslim neighbours, Indonesia and Malaysia, connotes a perennial sense of insecurity (Chan, 1971). Internally, its racial make-up is potentially problematic since in the event of communal tensions, the social fabric of the nation may be hurt beyond repair (Chua, 2009). No other theme dominates Singapore politics more than survival and vulnerability, encapsulated in the maxim 'no one owes us a living' (Abdullah, 2018c). Meritocracy, multiracialism and economic pragmatism are core ideologies precisely because they are attendant with the ideology of survival. Meritocracy, where every individual is able to succeed as long as he/she works hard, is necessary because the best talents would be the ones leading the country, ensuring that leaders are not mediocre; while multiracialism, where no one is given different treatment because of his/her race, is the only feasible ideology that would ensure racial harmony (Moore, 2000; Tan K. P., 2008). Economically, a small country cannot afford to be ideological if it wishes to survive, and should do 'what works' (Kausikan, 1997). The PAP also adopts a paternalistic and technocratic approach to governance, believing that the state knows best: a good government is one which does not bow down to populist appeals, and is willing to do the 'right' thing (Mauzy & Milne, 2002).

4 World Bank, https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/ny.gdp.pcap.cd. Accessed 7 September 2018.

The state has always been interventionist, and unapologetically so. Consider the following quote by Lee Kuan Yew:

> I say without the slightest remorse that we would not be here, would not have made the economic progress, if we had not intervened on very personal matters – who your neighbour is, how you live, the noise you make, how you spit (or where you spit), or what language you use. It was fundamental social and cultural changes that brought us here. (Lee Kuan Yew, as quoted in (Mutalib, 2000, p. 321).

In spite of the apparent varying styles of leadership of the three Prime Ministers, the PAP has not been significantly altered. In the midst of clamour from certain quarters of society to allow greater individual freedoms, and global pressures for more democratization, the party has held firmly to its belief that Singapore cannot afford to leave societal affairs to market forces, and that the state needs to actively and perpetually intervene, even at the expense of personal liberties, to ensure a functioning and cohesive society.

Nowhere, however, is the state's interventionist streak as stark as in the realm of race and religion, as will be detailed in the following section.

1.3 Islam in Singapore

> The government will not interfere in doctrinal matters within each religion, but the Government has to step in to protect our racial, religious harmony. We cannot allow someone to preach values which are contrary to our multiracial, multi-ethnic harmony. We take a firm, clear stand on that and make no apologies.[5]

Those were the words of Minister of Home Affairs and Law, K. Shanmugam. The senior leader captured the essence of the PAP's philosophy in managing race and religion in the above-quoted paragraph. While the state professes to be secular, its brand of secularism needs to be unpacked. Secularism does not entail a complete separation of church and state; rather, consistent with the PAP's paternalistic governance style, secularism means that the state will intervene as and when necessary to prod, alter or even discourage certain

5 K. Shanmugam, "Religion, Terrorism and Threats to Singapore, the Region," *The Straits Times*, 20 January 2016. https://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/religion-terrorism-and-threats-to-singapore-the-region. Accessed 7 September 2018.

outcomes. The PAP has no qualms interfering in the religious affairs of a community, if it is deemed to be of national interest to do so. Thus, while the state in Singapore is supposed to be free of religious influences, religion is not exempt from state intrusion.

Although Muslims comprise a minority of the population – in 2010, Muslims constituted 14.7% of the population[6] – politically, it is not an insignificant bloc. History accounts for this salience. The experience Singapore, and Lee Kuan Yew, had during the merger with Malaysia, though ephemeral, was formative for the nation. For Lee, Malaysia's insistence on maintaining a Malay-dominated system, and the racial riots which occurred in 1964 between the Malays and Chinese against the backdrop of strains between the PAP and the Malaysian leadership, cemented his beliefs about the dangers of diversity (Milne, 1966). Tensions were rife between the ethnic Malays and Chinese during the period of merger, as the issue of race became a sore point of contention between Malaysian leaders and Lee Kuan Yew. Undoubtedly, sentiments were stoked on both sides of the aisle. Leaders in the ruling United Malays National Organization (UMNO) vilified Lee for undermining the social contract between the various ethnic groups in Malaysia, while Lee's 'Malaysian Malaysia' rhetoric was not well-received by some quarters in the Malay community (Milne, 1966). Violence broke out between Malays and Chinese in the Peninsula, and on 21st July 1964, during a procession commemorating the birthday of Prophet Muhammad, the riots spread to Singapore (Low A. H., 2001). Race and religion, therefore, had to be consciously and consistently managed, since they were potential sources of conflict, as the Malaysian experience had shown. More importantly, religious fervour could lead to split loyalties for citizens: when an individual identifies with his/her faith more than with citizens of other religious beliefs, it can be a major cause for concern. The riots further exposed the realities of Singaporeans being affected by developments in the region, which is why the state devotes particular attention to the phenomenon of rising conservatism or Islamization in Malaysia, Indonesia and Brunei. Minister Shanmugam warned in 2015 that Islamization in Malaysia had 'gone beyond the tipping point', and that Singapore would be affected by trends in Malaysia and Indonesia.[7] Prime Minister Lee has warned of a similar danger, expressing

6 98.7% of Malays and 21.7% of Indians are Muslims. See Singapore Department of Statistics, Census of Population 2010, https://www.singstat.gov.sg/-/media/files/publications/cop2010/census_2010_release1/cop2010sr1.pdf., p. 11.

7 Charissa Yong, "Singapore Cannot Exist in a Cocoon: Minister," *The Straits Times*, 28 August 2015. https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/singapore-cannot-exist-in-a-cocoon-minister. Accessed 10 September 2018.

concerns over the politicization of Islam in the region.[8] The wariness over split loyalties has been present since independence, and is a recurring theme in the relationship between the state and Singapore Malays. Lee Kuan Yew once candidly remarked that it would be a 'tricky business for the SAF (Singapore Armed Forces) to put a Malay officer who was very religious and who had family ties in Malaysia, in charge of a machine-gun unit' (Chua, 2003, p. 65). Here, the senior Lee draws an explicit link between a Malay-Muslim's religiosity and the potential lack of loyalty to the nation. This is a point which will be returned to later.

As discussed in the previous section, the state maintains a paternalistic approach to governance, especially in the realm of race and religion. The PAP has been categorical about its apprehension at the influence of any faith in politics. PM Lee Hsien Loong said:

> In such an environment, to maintain harmony in our multiracial and multi-religious society, the Government must take a watchful, prudent and hands-on approach. It has got to be neutral, secular in its approach, and pragmatic in solving problems. We cannot afford to take purist positions on freedom of expression, or the right to be offensive to others. We will not hesitate to act firmly when necessary, because if conflict erupts, it will cause grave damage to our social fabric. Our limits may be stricter than some other societies, but we make no apology for that [...] We should not change fundamental policies that have served Singapore well in our unique situation.[9]

Indeed, firm action has been taken against individuals who purport to act in the name of faith. On 21 May 1987, sixteen people were arrested under the ISA for an alleged 'Marxist Conspiracy'. These individuals were activists and workers from the Catholic Church. The charge from the PAP government was that these individuals were using the Church to engage in subversive activities against the state. Although there was some initial pushback from the Archbishop, he conceded the validity of the arrests after a meeting with

8 Prime Minister's Office, "Opening Remarks by PM Lee Hsien Loong at a Dialogue with Community and Religious Leaders on 24 July 2017," 24 July 2017. https://www.pmo.gov.sg/newsroom/pm-lee-hsien-loongs-opening-remarks-dialogue-community-and-religious-leaders. Accessed 10 September 2018.

9 Prime Minister's Office, "Transcript of Speech by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong at 66th Anniversary of Inter-Religious Organisation on 12th May 2015 at Istana," 12 May 2015. https://www.pmo.gov.sg/newsroom/transcript-speech-prime-minister-lee-hsien-loong-66th-anniversary-inter-religious. Accessed 10 September 2018.

Lee Kuan Yew (Goh, 2010, pp. 69-70). The arrests emphasized a few things: one, the state was willing to utilize the draconian laws at its disposal when deemed necessary; and two, no faith is spared from the state's monitoring. The Marxist Conspiracy arrests (otherwise known as Operation Spectrum) precipitated the introduction of the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act (MRHA), a law designed to ensure that religion is kept separate from politics (Tey, 2008). Apart from the ISA and MRHA, the Penal Code further gives the state authority to strengthen its grip on religious matters: Section 298 of the Penal Code criminalizes the act of 'uttering words with deliberate intent to wound the religious or racial feelings of any person', an offence which is punishable with imprisonment.[10]

While the state is suspicious toward any forays by religion into the public sphere, greater caution is applied in the case of Islam. This is for a number of reasons. Firstly, as already explicated, historical and geo-political factors matter considerably. Singapore's history with the merger and racial riots, coupled with its location in the middle of Muslim Southeast Asia, immediately casts attention on Islam. Secondly, Malays, the majority of whom are Muslim, are constitutionally acknowledged as the indigenous people of Singapore, and it is the duty of the government of the day to 'protect, safeguard, support, foster and promote their political, educational, religious, economic, social and cultural interests and the Malay language.'[11] Islam too is given special provisions in the constitution as parliament is mandated to 'make provisions for regulating Muslim affairs and for constituting a Council to advise the President in matters relating to the Muslim religion.'[12] Third, Islam, like Christianity, is a religion with a comprehensive worldview and value-system, and makes certain exclusive claims about itself. Islam purports to be more than a religion and is *ad-din* or a complete way of life (Al-Attas, 1978). This is something which the nation-state may find problematic and has to contend with. Finally, the threat of terrorism and its links with Islam and religiosity have heightened the state's circumspection when it comes to dealing with the faith. In a particularly revealing interview with Tom Plate, Lee Kuan Yew recalled a conversation he had with Samuel Huntington on the 'Clash of Civilizations' thesis. Lee told Huntington that the Eastern

10 Singapore Statutes Online, https://sso.agc.gov.sg/Act/PC1871?ValidDate=20171001&ProvIds=pr298-. Accessed 10 September 2018.

11 Article 152, Constitution of Singapore. https://sso.agc.gov.sg/Act/CONS1963. Accessed 10 September 2018.

12 Article 153, Constitution of Singapore. https://sso.agc.gov.sg/Act/CONS1963. Accessed 10 September 2018.

religions were mostly 'secular' and posed no existential threat to the West. On Islam though, he remarked:

> But the Muslims believe that if they mastered the Quran and they are prepared to do all that Muhammad has prescribed, they will succeed. So, we can expect trouble from them and so, it happened (Plate, 2010, p. 118).

Lee's comments may have reflected his personal opinions and not that of the current PAP leadership. Nevertheless, it is evident that the terrorist menace has contributed to the state exercising even more caution when it comes to Islam. The government has repeated the mantra 'not if, but when', highlighting the inevitability, and perhaps imminence, of a terrorist attack.

The state has attempted to manage Islam in a variety of ways. Islam has been bureaucratized in Singapore, as is the case in many other former British colonies. The Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (*Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura*, MUIS), was established as a manifestation of the constitutional guarantee that the state would regulate Muslim affairs. The organization is formally an arm of the state, under the purview of the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth (MCCY). Since its inception, MUIS has acquired tremendous importance in the daily lives of Muslims. It is responsible for managing the most basic and salient aspects of Islamic practice in Singapore, including regulating hajj services,[13] issuing halal certificates for food outlets,[14] calculating and determining the timings for the daily prayers in Singapore, writing the sermons for Friday prayers,[15] and collecting and distributing zakat, *inter alia*. Perhaps most significantly, MUIS is the only body in Singapore which issues *fatwas* or religious edicts. A *fatwa* is an answer to a query by Muslims on matters pertaining to the faith. In Singapore, *fatwas* are issued by the *fatwa* committee of MUIS, which is headed by the Mufti, the highest religious authority in the land, who is appointed by the President of Singapore (Abdullah, 2013). Since MUIS and the Mufti are officially working for the state, there have been suggestions that the *fatwas* or religious opinions issued in certain cases, such as the hijab saga which will be discussed later, are politically expedient. Former Mufti, Shaykh Isa Semait, who served in the role for 38 years from 1972-2010,

13 Hajj is the pilgrimage to Mecca which is obligatory for every Muslim who can afford it. It is the fifth pillar of Islam after the declaration that God is one and Muhammad is His Messenger, prayers, zakat (alms-giving) and fasting in the month of Ramadhan.

14 Halal refers to anything (not limited to food) which is Islamically permissible.

15 All Muslim males are required to attend weekly Friday prayers in congregation. This is usually done at the mosques, though it does not have to be limited to mosques.

wrote in his memoirs that he was often accused of being a stooge of the government, though he obviously rebuffed the claim (Hussain, 2012). Semait has repeatedly declared that there has never been government interference in his official duties (Nasir, Pereira, & Turner, 2009). Nevertheless, in spite of his denials, many members of the Muslim community have expressed their apprehensions toward the institution of the Mufti, and concomitantly, the *fatwas* issued (Abdullah, 2013). A respondent notes:

> It cannot be coincidental that *fatwas* issued by MUIS are always either in favour of, or do not oppose, the government.[16]

The perception some Muslims have toward MUIS being an instrument of the state proves to be a recurring theme in the history of state-Islam relations in Singapore. For some Muslims, religious institutions should be independent of political interference. For others though, MUIS has done a tremendous job in catering to the spiritual needs of the community, and it is precisely because of its relationship with the state that it is able to perform its duties – such as the issuance of halal certificates for food outlets and the management of mosques – diligently.[17] Thus, while the authority of MUIS has been questioned by members of the community, this criticism is by no means universal, and many Muslims, in fact, do display a lot of trust in the organization. The former Mufti, Dr. Fatris Bakaram, has been a rather popular figure within the community since he replaced Isa Semait, even though he too has not escaped accusations of pandering to the state. Fatris has been particularly adroit at utilizing social media to connect with Muslims. The positions the *ulama* in MUIS have taken will be discussed in Chapter 4, together with other *ulama*.

The establishment of MUIS was part of the PAP's 'politics of survival' necessitated by the circumstances of separation from Malaysia (Chan, 1971). Being a small Chinese-majority nation in the middle of the Malay Archipelago, the PAP saw it as crucial to assure its Malay neighbours that the Malay minority would not be side-lined in Singapore. The Administration of Muslim Law Act (AMLA) was enshrined in the constitution, as a manifestation of the government's guarantee to ensure provisions for the regulation of Muslim affairs required by Article 153. Apart from MUIS, the other institution explicitly recognized under AMLA is the *Syariah* court. It is common for former British colonies to have dual legal systems for the

16 Interview with conservative activist, 15 September 2019.

17 This sentiment was communicated to me by some respondents.

Muslims in their countries, inheriting such a system from their colonial masters (Kugle, 2001). The case is similar in Singapore. The *Syariah* court has limited jurisdiction, and its authority is limited to matters pertaining to family law, marriage and divorce (Steiner, 2015).

The state has further relied on co-optation as a strategy to manage the Muslim community. Organizations such as the Singapore Islamic Scholars and Religious Teachers Association (*Persatuan Ulama dan Guru-guru Agama Singapura*, Pergas) have been informally co-opted, a point which will be investigated further in Chapter 4. Prominent Muslims such as Zainul Abidin Rasheed, former Associate Editor of *The Straits Times*, Alami Musa and Ahmad Magad, two of the founding members of the Association of Muslim Professionals (AMP) – an organization which was at its formation critical of the state – have been recruited to either join the PAP or the civil service. The PAP is quick to bring Muslims who are successful in their respective fields into the party machinery: a cursory look at the list of current Malay/Muslim MPs would demonstrate this. Dr. Yaacob Ibrahim, a former Minister, was an Associate Professor at the National University of Singapore, and had attained his Ph.D. in Engineering from Stanford University; Masagos Zulkifli, the current Minister in-charge of Muslim Affairs, was the Chief Executive Officer of Global Officers for Singapore Telecommunications, the country's largest telco; Fatimah Lateef, is an Associate Professor in medicine and senior consultant at the Singapore General Hospital; the other MPs boast similar credentials.[18] Co-optation represents a deft stratagem of the state, via which it is able to give persons who may otherwise be critical of the government, a stake in the system.

Recently, the state has added another powerful tool to its repertoire, the Asatizah Recognition Scheme (ARS). Under Section 87 of AMLA which is the statute concerning ARS, any religious teacher or provider of Islamic education must be registered and regulated. Any person who was not certified by the Asatizah Recognition Board (ARB), a committee under the jurisdiction of MUIS, was not allowed to teach Islam in the country. Thus, Islam became even more regulated. Though the ARS was introduced in 2004, it was only made compulsory in January 2017. To qualify for certification, a person must not only have the requisite educational training and/or qualifications, but he/she must also be deemed to be a 'fit and proper' individual. To be considered 'fit and proper', one must 'meet the standard of behaviour generally expected of a teacher' at an Islamic institution.

18 See the list of MPs and their profiles at the Parliament of Singapore website, https://www.parliament.gov.sg/mps/list-of-current-mps. Accessed 19 September 2018.

The ambiguity of the clause is apparent: what does 'fit and proper' entail? Indeed, this amorphousness could very well contribute to Muslim *ulama* withholding their opinions on socio-political matters, or even religious issues, out of fear of censure. Cherian George, a prominent Singaporean academic, writes that many in the media industry self-censor themselves, even when there is no official directive to do so. This is due to the presence of OB markers, and the occasional chastisement which critics of the state receive; in order to avoid such precarious situations, journalists end up practising self-censorship (George, 2012). In the same vein, ARS could have deterrent effects for the *ulama*, as the state's disapproval could result in their livelihoods being affected (Abdullah, 2018a). It must be noted that the government does not directly administer the ARS; however, the very presence of the scheme, and the fact that it is managed by MUIS, an organ of the state, can and does have restraining effects on the *ulama*, as will be discussed in Chapter 3. The ARS is similar to the MRHA, ISA and Section 298 of the Penal Code in this regard; all of these legal instruments are designed to not only punish behaviour deemed to be detrimental to the multi-religious social fabric, but to prevent it in the first place. Interestingly, in Malaysia, a similar scheme known as *tauliah* exists, but has at times been overtly used in politically partisan ways, especially under the previously ruling *Barisan Nasional* (National Front) regime (Liow, 2009b). In Singapore, the ARS has not been invoked in a similarly political way: the point here is that its mere existence may cause the *ulama* to be extra cautious in speaking, and may even result in self-censorship.

At present, there are only 2 opposition Muslim MPs, Faisal Manap and Raeesah Khan, who are from the WP, while the other Muslim parliamentarians belong to the PAP. Faisal has raised issues of interest to the Muslims in parliament on a few occasions. More often than not, the reception by PAP leaders has been confrontational. Two incidents are most relevant. The first occurred in 2016 when Faisal called for the navy to be more inclusive and have halal kitchens on ships to ensure that Muslims would not be deterred from joining the organization. PAP leaders took issue with Faisal: Dr. Maliki Osman reminded Faisal that Singapore is a 'secular state', stating that the navy's 'operational priorities come before individual needs' while Defence Minister Dr. Ng Eng Hen claimed that Faisal was "only championing" for Muslims.[19] Both insinuated that Faisal was not upholding the values of

19 Adrian Lim, "Halal Ship Kitchens Difficult but SAF Offers Food Options," *The Straits Times*, 8 April 2016. https://www.straitstimes.com/politics/halal-ship-kitchens-difficult-but-saf-offers-food-options. Accessed 20 September 2018.

multiracialism and secularism, which Singapore considers sacrosanct. The second incident was even starker. In 2017, Faisal raised the aforementioned hijab issue and called for women to be allowed to don the hijab in professions such as nursing and the uniformed groups. Minister Masagos chided Faisal in no uncertain terms, arguing that Faisal had a propensity to raise 'discordant' issues in parliament which were meant to 'injure or hurt the feelings of the community rather than inspire them.'[20] The revulsion displayed by Masagos, Maliki and Ng seemed rather bizarre. Faisal was elected via the GRC precisely because the system guaranteed minority representation: if minority MPs could not raise matters which were pertinent to their respective communities, the GRC system would not serve much purpose then. Moreover, if Parliament is not the appropriate avenue for the enunciation of such concerns, which other platforms would be appropriate? Nevertheless, these incidents are instructive in underlining the PAP's approach toward Islam in Singapore. As far as possible, 'sensitive' issues are not to be discussed or championed publicly. Rather, a 'behind-closed-doors' approach is what is preferred by the government. Such is the conundrum facing activists as well.

The management of Islam can thus be described as interventionist, paternalistic, and intrusive, consistent with the state's overall approach toward governance.

1.4 Arguments in Brief

This book draws upon the concept of political opportunity structures to explicate the argument on Muslim activism in Singapore. I argue that political opportunity structures are limited for Muslims actors to influence political outcomes. The constricting political opportunities are due to the nature of the political system (competitive authoritarian state) and the state's approach toward religion and Islam especially. Therefore, Muslim activists carefully navigate the travails of political activism. Nevertheless, limited political opportunities do not mean no political opportunities. It is important to not discount the agency of Muslim actors. Essentially, they have the following options: 1) cooperate with the state as much as possible; 2) conduct activism in the spheres which the state is ambivalent toward or is

20 Charissa Yong, "Parliament: Masagos Questions Faisal Manap's Motives for Raising Divisive Issues," *The Straits Times*, 4 April 2017. https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/parliament-masagos-questions-faisal-manaps-motives-for-raising-divisive-issues. Accessed 20 September 2018.

willing to tolerate dissent; and 3) challenge the state in fundamental areas and risk reprisal from the state. Not surprisingly, most activists, regardless of their orientations, choose options 1 or 2. While there are some who do embark on the more perilous third option, these are by far in the minority, and their cases will be discussed later too. For the majority of activists who choose 1 or 2, they have to be content with not fully pursuing causes which are in line with their ideological orientations: liberals and conservatives may not champion liberal/conservative causes when the political opportunities are not in their favour. Activists presciently navigate the political system to maximize their benefits within this framework. As a result, the activists who make the most gains in the system are those who align themselves with the state, even when such an alliance would cost them some credibility. These activists are able to push specific agendas which they find germane when they have accepted the state's rules and do not challenge the state publicly. However, in the process, these activists may have to accept that by not challenging the state, they end up strengthening authoritarianism.

Two points need to be emphasized. In spite of having limited options, due to Singapore being a competitive authoritarian state, choices still do exist. Activists still have some room to manoeuvre, even if the space is far more limited than in liberal democracies. Secondly, these activists are 'rational'. They attempt to maximize benefits and minimize costs via their activism. However, these benefits and costs are not necessarily material. Ideological considerations matter for a person too. The concept of rationality will be problematized and explained further in Chapter 3, when the argument will be developed.

A note on the term 'activists' is due. An activist can be defined as a person who is involved in efforts for political and/or social reform. While an activist is typically understood as someone who does advocacy work, I call for a more holistic understanding of the term. Activists do not necessarily have to be part of social movements, or partake in overt political action. At times, activists could choose to be 'apolitical', if it serves the ultimate purpose of effecting social reform. The point to be made here is that in realpolitik, often, difficult choices have to be made. Some of these choices include not being directly involved in politics or political discourse, so as to be able to embark on particular courses which the actor finds to be beneficial for his/her constituents. I contend that activism should be understood in broader terms, to comprise such 'apolitical' action as well. It should be noted that being apolitical is a political choice itself (Mostarom, 2014). This understanding of activism differs from other definitions. Baumgardner and Richards aver that activism refers to engaging in 'everyday acts of defiance' (Baumgardner

& Richards, 2000, p. 283). Their definition, however, is restrictive as it limits activism to acts of opposition against the establishment. Such an understanding of activism is not useful, as it ignores the multi-faceted manner in which activism can take place, especially under authoritarian regimes. The actions of societal actors who desire reform are far more multi-faceted than just resistance. Saba Mahmood's seminal work on female grassroots movements in Egypt is instructive here. Not all actions should be viewed via the binary lens of resistance and subordination. Often, the actions of actors are more complex and nuanced (Mahmood, 2011). Other scholars of social movements and collective action have tied activism to identities (Taylor & Raeburn, 1995; Rupp & Taylor, 1999; Bobel, 2007). According to these scholars, activism is not only reflective of one's identity, but contributes toward shaping it as well. When an actor contributes to social movements, his/her identity is affected by the very act of participation. This line of analysis proves to be useful for my study: self-understood identities play a role in determining a person's course of action, as I will show later.

Activists thus decide on a specific action based on his/her rational calculations, deciding to maximize benefits and minimize costs. The decision-making calculus includes one's ideological preferences or identity. More often than not, these actors are cognizant of the benefits to be derived and the potentially pernicious consequences of respective options.

1.5 Case Selection and Methodology

Singapore has been chosen for this study for a number of reasons. First, Singapore has been described as one of the most conspicuous anomalies when it comes to modernization theory and democratization: in spite of attaining high levels of economic development, Singapore has not experienced agitations for democratic reform at the same levels as other countries (Geddes, 1999, p. 119; Tan K. P., 2018). As such, the city-state has been the subject of much analysis by scholars. Various explanations have been put forth for PAP's longevity, from those focusing on Singapore's economic and material success, to the regime's ability to institute authoritarian features which quell dissent and discourage political participation (Mutalib, 2003; Acemoglu & Robinson, 2006; George, 2012; Slater, 2012; Ortmann & Thompson, 2014). These explanations are all valid, and this book builds on them. Singapore continues to be a fascinating case study in the field of 'transitology', which attempts to understand why and when authoritarian regimes democratize (Moller, 2009). Thus, in spite of its small size, Singapore is a potentially

useful case study in comparative politics and sociology. Second, in spite of the academic focus devoted to Singapore, much of the research has centred on statist explanations. Many of these writings will be discussed in later chapters. For now, it suffices to say that because of the state's dominating nature, studies on Singapore have tended to be state-centric. To be sure, there is much justification in focusing on the state: the state in Singapore has been overwhelmingly powerful, and as documented already, has adopted an interventionist stance in virtually every sphere of life. However, this study chooses to investigate the role of non-state actors since it will bring a different dimension to debates on state authority, religion, and civil society. The dearth of studies on other actors in Singapore leaves some room for academic innovation in this regard. The actions, and even inactions, of non-state actors could prove instructive in putting forth a particular postulation. Understanding the stratagem of civil society activists in Singapore could assist in comprehending social movements under authoritarian regimes. Third, Singapore is a secular state with a Muslim minority, and its experience with Islam could be relevant for other states. In his book entitled *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam*, Tariq Ramadan considers Singapore to be a country with 'very Western circumstances' when it comes to the position of Muslims (Ramadan, 2004, p. 3). While Singapore has its unique geo-political and historical conditions which set it apart from its Western counterparts, Ramadan does have a point in recognizing that Singapore mirrors the West in some areas. Lessons from the city-state therefore have relevance beyond Southeast Asia.

Three categories of activists have been identified: liberals, conservatives, and the *ulama*. As already mentioned, Muslims can be categorized in a number of ways, and the choice of classification would involve some discretionary decision-making on the part of the author. I have chosen to typecast activists into these three groups for the following reasons. For the *ulama*, they are arguably the most important collection of actors in any Muslim society. In spite of the absence of a centralized religious authority equivalent to the papacy in Islam, the diffusion of authority does not result in the absolute absence of hierarchy. Wael Hallaq points out that since the early days of Islam, religious authority has resided in the *ulama*, and not among the political elites: this authority does not belong to a particular jurist, but rather, in the entire scholarly enterprise (Hallaq, 2004). Both authoritarian and democratic states have had to contend with the religious scholars in modern times. In the Middle East, successive secular and authoritarian regimes have had to devise a multitude of ways to interact with the religious scholars, ranging from outright repression to co-optation

(Ayubi, 1995; Hafez, 2003). In societies where Islam plays a paramount role in the personal lives of citizens, even the most secular of regimes cannot ignore its potential to influence outcomes in the public sphere. President Soeharto of Indonesia, who ruled with an iron fist from 1966 to1998, had to appease the *ulama* and occasionally pay lip service to Islam, in spite of his aversion to religious influence in policy-making (Hefner, 2000). In Malaysia, the Malay-nationalist and previously secular United Malays National Organization (UMNO) – which was the main ruling party in the coalition which governed Malaysia from its independence in 1957 right up to 2018 – began embarking on a state-initiated Islamization project from 1982 onwards, enlisting the help of the *ulama*; this was in a bid to ensure that Islam was an important partner in the state-building agenda, and to out-Islamize the main Islamist opposition party (Nasr, 2001; Wain, 2009). Even democratic states have had to solicit the assistance of the *ulama*: after 9-11, the Bush regime worked in tandem with Sufi *ulama* such as Hisham Kabbani, in an attempt to soften its image and demonstrate that the war on terror was not a war on Islam (Leonard, 2005). Politicians in Western Europe regularly engage with the *ulama* for practical and electoral purposes (Fetzer & Soper, 2005). The *ulama* is a bloc which simply cannot be ignored. As 'custodians of the faith', Muslims do look to the *ulama* for guidance, and for better or for worse, the actions of the *ulama* have been consequential. For instance, *fatwas* issued by *ulama* in the Indian sub-continent and elsewhere have contributed to the oppression faced by religious minorities such as the Ahmadis (Rahman, 2014). Simultaneously, the *ulama* have also been crucial allies in the campaigns against terrorism; delivering sermons, issuing edicts and publishing writings which condemn extremism from the theological and jurisprudential viewpoints (Ansary, 2008; Febrica, 2010; Abdullah, 2017c). Whether the influence of the *ulama* has been pernicious or constructive, it cannot be denied that they are an important group which warrants serious investigation. It must be noted that the *ulama* are not a monolithic group. The *ulama* differ along political, theological and jurisprudential lines. The heterogeneity of the *ulama* is another salient matter that will be explored.

The other two categories are perhaps more contentious. The terms 'liberals' and 'conservatives' are highly disputed, and their usage is often accompanied by polemical intent: the term 'liberal Muslim' for instance is often used in a pejorative manner by its detractors.[21] Nevertheless, I postulate that the terms do have utility and should be employed, albeit with a few caveats. Firstly, they are employed in this book in a value-neutral manner;

21 This will be explained further in Chapter 5.

it is neither 'good' nor 'bad' to be liberal or conservative. Secondly, they are to describe a particular orientation towards religious and socio-political stances. Liberals refer to individuals who are more comfortable with challenging established norms and standards held by the Muslim community, whereas conservatives tend to adhere to these values more stringently. Liberal Muslims tend to be on the left side of the political spectrum, cherishing individual freedoms and personal liberties; conservative Muslims, on the other hand, value societal stability over those individual rights. More thorough definitions will be provided in Chapters 5 and 6. Thirdly, it must be acknowledged that the lines delineating 'liberals' and 'conservatives' are not always acerbic. There will always be individuals who do not fit neatly into either category. Nevertheless, as general categories, the terms are still useful. This is because, I postulate, the fault-line between 'liberals' and 'conservatives' has not been adequately examined in the literature on modern Muslim societies. Much of the research on cleavages within Islam has revolved around ideological divisions – between Sunnis and Shias (Nasr, 2006; Abdo, 2017), and Sufis/traditionalists and Salafis/Wahhabis (Knysh, 2007; Brown, 2011; Khemissi, Laremont, & Eddine, 2012) –, or political differences, between those who are pro-state and those who are against the establishment (Sakallioğlu, 1996; Wiktorowicz, 2001; Zollner, 2008). These ideological and political differences, though useful, are not reflective of the entire picture. Furthermore, conservatives are often conflated with extremists, when in reality, the nexus between the two is spurious at best (Abdullah, 2017b). It thus becomes imperative to properly identify and investigate 'liberal' and 'conservative' Muslims.

This study utilizes a qualitative approach. Around 100 activists, professionals and ordinary Muslims were interviewed or talked to throughout the course of this research.[22] The views and thoughts of these individuals were crucial in developing and honing the arguments made in this book. The interviews provide first-hand material, as activists outline the methods via which they navigate the political terrain. The empirical findings further provide originality to this book, as there has not been a monograph which has utilized ethnographic data from Muslim activists in this manner. The statements, publications, actions and inactions of these activists were also studied as much as possible, in addition to academic works which have been written on the subject. Local newspapers, especially *The Straits Times* and *Berita Harian*, the only Malay-language daily in Singapore, proved to

22 Considering the religious and political sensitivities associated with the topic, many interviewees wish to remain anonymous, though some were willing to be identified.

be valuable. Perhaps more importantly, social media postings were looked at: online material is especially pertinent in the context of a competitive authoritarian state like Singapore where self-censorship is prevalent. To complement these, the actions and speeches of state elites too were investigated: even if the state is not the main protagonist in this study, its ubiquity in the Singapore context prohibits it from being ignored. Interviews were also conducted with observers of Singapore politics in general, and civil society activists who are not from the Muslim community. The thoughts of these individuals were used to triangulate the findings and arguments made in the book.

1.6 Outline of Book

This book will now proceed as follows. Chapter 2 provides a literature review of Muslim activism throughout the world. The purpose of this chapter is to tease out the various strategies and responses of Muslim activists in different political systems and under various regime types, and thus situate this book within the larger body of literature. Chapter 3 lays out the main arguments made in this book. Essentially, the actions of Muslim activists are based on political opportunities. The main theoretical framework will be expounded, and the concomitant arguments, explained. Chapters 4, 5 and 6 detail the empirical findings based on the interview data and research. Chapter 4 will be on the *ulama*, and argues that by and large, the *ulama* ostensibly promote a quietist position, when in actuality, they are politically acquiescent. Although there are some *ulama* who disagree with the state on occasion, two points are noteworthy: first, these *ulama* are in the minority; and second, their criticisms are rarely overtly robust or sustained. These dissenting scholars too will be discussed. Chapter 5 investigates liberal Muslim activists, and contends that liberals have largely been astute in manoeuvring within the system, and have managed to make some gains in the political system. Chapter 6 discusses conservative activists, and avers that unlike liberals, they have not made too much gain in the public sphere, and much of conservative activism is relegated to the online space. In most cases, their activism does not result in substantive outcomes. I will then conclude with Chapter 7 detailing the over-arching themes discussed in the book, their relevance to the wider Muslim world, and some suggestions for areas for future research that would be relevant for scholars of politics and Islam.

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