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**Sustaining Islamic Activism in Secular Environments:  
The Muhammadiyah Movement in Singapore**

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## INTRODUCTION

The role of Islamic activists in shaping the politics and religious life of Muslims in secular states has attracted an increasing level of scholarly interest and media attention in recent years in view of the current global war against terror. In Southeast Asia, as well as in North America and Europe, the genesis, structure, membership and sources of funding of Muslim movements have come under the close scrutiny of states and security analysts, whose overriding concerns are the identification and proscription of groups that lean in any way towards support for violence. Nowhere is this anxiety more evident than in Singapore. Having dealt with the threats posed by religious riots and violent plots by militant personalities and organizations such as *Sunting* (BLOSSOM), *Angkatan Revolusi Tentara Islam Singapura* (ARTIS, Revolutionary Movement of the Singapore Islamic Army) and the *Jemaah Islamiyah* (JI, or Islamic Congregation), the island-state's leaders have constantly monitored all such bodies, movements and personalities.<sup>1</sup> One movement that has attracted the attention of both colonial and postcolonial authorities in Singapore is the Muhammadiyah, due mainly to its promotion of a missionary ideology and unyielding critiques of practices that are deemed as incompatible with the pure Islamic faith.

This paper is not intended as a response to state policies. Rather, it aims to add to the small body of scholarly literature surrounding Islamic activism and Muslim movements in Singapore. While many studies have been devoted to the history and evolution of the forty-million-strong Muhammadiyah movement in Indonesia, very little has been written about movements in other parts of Southeast Asia that have shared common general goals and ideas. To this lacuna must be added the preoccupation of past students and scholars with the study of selected Islamic movements in Singapore, particularly the All-Malaya Missionary Society (or Jamiyah), owing to the remarkable breadth of its activities and to its prolonged existence.<sup>2</sup> The Muhammadiyah movement in Singapore thus deserves a more in-depth analysis and treatment, not only because of the paucity of works about it, but also because of its reformist and modernist outlook, which parallels that of Jamiyah. Both movements have also been equally attuned to global developments, while simultaneously demonstrating a high degree of dynamism and commitment in their engagement with local challenges, especially in the realm of the education, social welfare and religious guidance.

Furthermore, the fact that the Muhammadiyah movement has maintained a strong presence since 1958, whilst operating effectively within a secular, non-Muslim-dominated society governed by what have been described as 'illiberal democratic' colonial and post-colonial regimes in Singapore, is a particularly interesting theme that calls for deeper investigation. Located between Malaysia and Indonesia with a total land area of no more than 700 square kilometres, Singapore was one of the most important British colonies in Asia. A highly developed colonial infrastructure, system of laws and civil service has been continued by the Peoples' Action Party (PAP) since its ascent to power in 1959. The PAP government has been described by media analysts, scholars and international activists as driven by economic pragmatism, strict authoritarianism and dominance by an elite technocracy. Amidst these criticisms, however, the island-state has been regarded as a safe haven for foreign investors

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<sup>1</sup> 'Activities of ARTIS (Angkatan Revolusi Tentara Islam Singapura – Singapore Islamic Revolutionary League)', CO 1030/1193 and Ministry of Home Affairs, *The Jemaah Islamiyah Arrests and the Threat of Terrorism: White Paper* Singapore: Ministry of Home Affairs, 2003.

<sup>2</sup> James L. Peacock, *Muslim Puritans: Reformist Psychology in Southeast Asian Islam*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978, pp. 143-175.

and tourists and is reputed for its social orderliness, excellent health services, stability and security.

Singapore has been the home for Muslims that constitute no more than fifteen percent of the total four million people, making them the largest minority within a predominantly Chinese population. This percentage of population has remained constant for over one hundred years. Most Muslims of Singapore are classified within the 'Malay' ethnic category, with Muslims who are not Malays – specifically, Indian, Arab, Chinese, European and Eurasian Muslims – accounting for the rest.<sup>3</sup> The prevailing form of Islam in Singapore is that of the Sunni branch, with a small minority subscribing to the Shiite ideology. Lacking an entrenched power base and divided along class divisions as well as political, ideological and organizational affiliations, Muslims in Singapore are often left with very few alternatives to participate in the mainstream political process and national policies. Such imperatives have meant that Muslim activists and movements have had to devise creative programmes and implement multi-faceted strategies in order to ensure their survival. The Muhammadiyah, as will be argued, provides an informative case study of a Muslim movement in Singapore that has been successful in overcoming the limits of social demography and state secularism by broadening its activities and ideology, and by readjusting its *modus operandi* in accordance with evolving political and social contexts. Additionally, the interplay between local Islamic activism and international movements and the appropriation of global Islamic discourses and paradigms within a local context as exemplified by the Muhammadiyah reflects the creative agency of Muslims in Singapore which allows for comparison in the study of Islam in other parts of Asia.

By synthesizing historical evidence with insights and concepts borrowed from social movement theorists, this paper will provide a critical analysis of the processes that have enabled the Muhammadiyah movement in Singapore to sustain its relevance and vitality. I will argue that four processes have been crucial in this regard, the foremost being the symbiotic relationship between the leaders and the led. The *esprit de corps* among the rank and file was instrumental in the forging of networks and links, both locally and globally. The crucial roles played by key members of Muhammadiyah in the formulation and subsequent revision of the movement's ideational frames constituted the second process that will be elaborated at length. Thirdly, there existed, from time to time, political opportunity structures which Muhammadiyah judiciously exploited, insofar as this strategy did not compromise the general goals of the movement. The fourth historical determinant is to be found in the availability of a wide array of mobilizing structures, which served as bases for the dissemination of the movement's ideology, and as arenas where new members could be recruited and funding could be sought. The next part of this paper will discuss the origins of the Muhammadiyah movement and its formalization, focusing primarily on the background of its key personalities and the contexts within which they operated. This section, which will also elucidate the rendering of the movement's history, will be followed by an explication of the four processes which contributed to the consolidation and expansion of the movement from 1958 to 2007.

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<sup>3</sup> Leow Bee Geok, *Census of Population 2000: Demographic Characteristics*, Singapore: Dept. of Statistics, 2001.

## THE ORIGINS AND FORMALIZATION OF MUHAMMADIYAH, AND THE RENDERING OF HISTORY

The beginnings of the Muhammadiyah movement in Singapore can be traced to the immediate post-World War Two period, when three Muslim religious teachers began to conduct classes in mosques and houses in various places in Singapore. Hailing from Sumatra and the Riau Islands, and heavily influenced by the reformist ideas that had gained ascendancy in their villages, the three men, namely Rijal Abdullah, Abdul Rahman Haron and Amir Esa, decided to share their beliefs with the Muslim community in Singapore. These three young men in their twenties belonged to the massive flow of Indonesian migrants and wayfarers who came to Singapore in search of employment in the aftermath of the Indonesian Revolution. At the same time as Rijal Abdullah began to conduct his classes at Masjid Paya Goyang near the central area of Singapore, Amir Esa and Abdul Rahman Haron attracted more than two dozen devoted students from Kampung Melayu and Lorong Tai Seng respectively. Their methods of teaching were similar; each of the teachers would read passages from the Qur'an and the Hadith, as well as key texts, such as Hasan Bandung's *Soal Berjawab* and Haji Abdul Karim Amrullah's (HAMKA) *Tasauf Moderen*, with the sole aim of enjoining their students to return to the true teachings of Prophet Muhammad (*Kembali Kepada Sunnah*) whilst adapting to the changes brought about by modernity. The curriculum included Theology, Quranic Exegesis, Islamic Jurisprudence, the Science of Hadith, Islamic history and *Bid'ah* (Innovations) in Islam. Unlike most Islamic schools of that time, students were allowed to debate with their teachers and were given full liberty to teach what they had learnt to their families and friends. The three emerging strands of what was later to become a unified Muslim movement were bound together by the shared belief that Muslims in Singapore had subscribed to an erroneous interpretation of the faith. Members of the movement were convinced that the solution to this problem lay in a profound understanding of Islamic scriptures combined with intensive *da'wah* (preaching) efforts.<sup>4</sup>

By the mid-1950s, teachers, labourers, street hawkers, clerks, police officers and housewives had come under the tutelage of the three men and were contributing money to sustain their mentors. The rapid increase in the number of students was accompanied by resistance from the general Muslim public. Rumours began circulating that the three men were propagating the teachings of the *Kaum Muda*, a reformist movement that was led by Sheikh Sayyid Al-Hadi in the early twentieth century.<sup>5</sup> It was further alleged that the machinations of the new movement would lead to the eradication of certain age-old practices, such as *Maulid* (the celebration of the Prophet's Birthday), as well as *tahlil* and *talkin* (the recitation of Quranic verses to bring blessings to the living as well as the deceased). Rijal Abdullah, Amir Esa and Abdul Rahman Haron were also said to be affiliated with a heterodox movement, the Ahmadiyyah. They were thus labeled as *sesat* (deviant), *qadiani* (followers of the Ahmadiyyah movement) and *bukan mazhab Shafii* (not from the Shafi'ite school of Islamic Jurisprudence), among other accusations. This labeling process had little success in dissuading the followers of the three teachers from propagating the new teachings among their families and friends. Pamphlets and posters providing information on the religious classes were distributed and put up in public places. Things came to a head when Yasin Amin

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<sup>4</sup> Persatuan Muhammadiyah Singapura, *Muhammadiyah 50 Years, 1957-2007*, Singapore: Muhammadiyah, 2007, p. 13. For a discussion of claim making as a feature of social movements, see Charles Tilly, *Social Movements, 1768-2004*, Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2004, p. 3.

<sup>5</sup> William Roff, *The Origins of Malay Nationalism*, Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1967, pp. 56-90.

Sahib, who was one of the students of Abdul Rahman Haron, took it upon himself to admonish a prayer congregation at Masjid Wak Tanjung of the crucial need to return to the true teachings of Muhammad and abolish *tahyul* (superstition), *khurafat* (heresies) and *taqlid buta* (blind following). Yasin was forcibly evicted from the mosque and assaulted by members of the congregation.<sup>6</sup>

This, together with other incidents of abuse and violence, prompted Ali Hainin, who was a teacher at a local school and a regular attendee of the classes of Abdul Rahman Haron, Amir Esa and Rijal Abdullah, to agitate for the unification and formalization of the three movements. The three religious teachers eventually met and decided upon the best course of action by which their teachings could be sustained. During a mass meeting held on 25 May 1957, it was agreed that a new missionary organization was to be formed, called Persatuan Muhammadiyah Singapura (hereinafter referred to as PMS). The founders of PMS made it clear from the very outset that, although the new organization shared the same name and reformist cum modernist ideas as the Muhammadiyah in Indonesia, it was not an offshoot of the latter. In other words, the organization would not seek or receive any monetary support from the Muhammadiyah in Indonesia, with the exception of books and printed materials.<sup>7</sup> This was a strategic move to allay the colonial government's anxiety about the establishment of a pan-Islamic movement. To be sure, the British were keeping a close watch on the PMS due partly to incidents of violence involving the movement's members and petitions sent to the government from other Muslims in the colony requesting the closure of the classes of the three religious teachers. Due to the lack of proper information, British intelligence officers described the PMS as puritanical and a derivative of the 'Wahabi' movement in Saudi Arabia.<sup>8</sup>

Cognizant of the realities that Muslims were a minority and that their rights were duly protected by the secular state, the founders of PMS stressed to those present at the 1957 mass meeting that Singapore was neither *Darul Islam* (House of Islam) nor *Darul Harb* (House of War). Instead, they explained that Singapore was *Darul Da'wah* (House of Propagation), and that the choice of the term 'Muhammadiyah' indicated that the members of the organization would hold true to the teachings of Muhammad and that they were obligated to teach Muslims and non-Muslims in Singapore about the Islamic way of life.<sup>9</sup> Among the unique features which the PMS shared with Muhammadiyah in Indonesia were the logos and the reformist cum modernist bent. But the pioneers of PMS was unambiguous regarding the fact that this was a new Singaporean-based movement that was autonomous and had been founded by those who aimed at reforming and uplifting the plight of Muslim minorities on the island and not elsewhere. Personal acquaintances and formal links between members of the PMS and Muhammadiyah Indonesia would be maintained insofar as it did not transgress

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<sup>6</sup> 'Interview with Cikgu Ali Hainin, 7 September 2008' and Haji Ali Hainin, 'Penggumulan Tokoh-Tokoh dan Penjanaan Pemikiran Gerakan di Kalangan Muhammadiyah Singapura', in *Suara Muhammadiyah*, February-May 1997, pp. 35-41. See also Djamal Tukimin, 'Beberapa Pemikiran Tentang Reformasi Islam dan Hubungannya dengan Muhammadiyah', Unpublished paper delivered at Masjid Jihad, 20 February 1977, p. 8.

<sup>7</sup> 'Abdul Rahman Haron to HAMKA, 19 January 1963', Abdul Rahman Haron's private papers.

<sup>8</sup> 'Special Branch Intelligence Summary for April 1960 (No.4/60)', FO 1091/107.

<sup>9</sup> A lucid discussion of Darul Da'wah and its applicability in the Western context is found in Tariq Ramadan, *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, pp. 65-79. So committed were the PMS members to realizing this ideal that one of the founders of the newly-established organization even invented a new surname: 'Al-Muhammadi'. See: 'Ucapan Alu2an Yang Dipertua Agong Muhammadiyah (Abdul Rahman HaronHarun Al-Muhammadi)', Abdul Rahman Haron's private papers.

the legal limits defined by state authorities. PMS was formally approved as a legitimate body by the Registry of Societies on 25 September 1958. What was once a disparate group of teachers and students advocating a set of opinions and beliefs had become a social movement organization (SMO); ‘a complex, or formal, organization which identifies its goals with the preferences of a social movement or a counter-movement and attempts to implement those goals.’<sup>10</sup>

Reflecting on the movement’s history since its initial founding, the present leadership of PMS has delineated three consecutive stages of development, the first being the stage of *da’wah bil lisan* (calling by word of mouth) which stretched from 1958 till 1970. This was an era whereby the ideology of PMS was disseminated secretly (*bil sirr*) and informally through classes that were conducted in the homes of core members. By the mid-1970s, there was a progressive shift from *da’wah bil lisan* to *da’wah bil ilm* (calling by way of knowledge). More than fifty *dai’* (missionaries) were assigned to conduct classes in as many villages and housing estates in Singapore. A decade later, PMS entered its third stage of development: *da’wah bil hal* (calling by way of community service). During this stage, the PMS established educational and social welfare institutions, as well as businesses, that have continued in operation up to the present. So rapid has been the growth of PMS that the number of its followers has grown from 350 in 1958 to more than 25,000 members and sympathizers in 1995. The latest membership figures have yet to be disclosed although it is claimed that the present cost of maintaining the movement amounts to more than five million Singapore dollars a year.<sup>11</sup>

While such neat divisions provide useful heuristic devices to understanding distinctive shifts in the movement’s history, it is problematically predicated upon the assumption that the movement limited its activities to selected spheres whilst ignoring others. My own interviews with PMS members and a close reading of the private papers of the movement’s founders indicate that there were efforts to proselytize and extend PMS activities via community services as early as the 1960s. For example, booklets explaining the pitfalls of innovations and the correct teachings of Islam were distributed to the general public, but such efforts were met with intense opposition from PMS’ detractors – some of whom defiled the movement’s headquarters at 624 Lorong Tai Seng with urine and faeces. Funds were raised and given by the PMS to victims of a volcanic eruption in Bali in April 1963, and other charity efforts were also carried out to help the poor and needy within the vicinity of the PMS headquarters. It would not be erroneous here to suggest that the masking of selected activities of the past through a progressivist rendering of history serves as a legitimating factor to bolster the image of the present leadership of PMS and to demonstrate, albeit subtly, the effectiveness of its policies. More to the point, the history of the PMS as described by the present leadership does not give an adequate explanation of the underlying circumstances and historical processes that favoured the preservation of the movement in the face of mounting opposition and public distrust. Much emphasis has been assigned by the present members and in other recent publications to *pertolongan dari Allah* (divine help), a coherent ideological framework, *istiqamah* (steadfastness) of those who withstood the social and familial pressures, the

<sup>10</sup> John D. McCathy and Myer N. Zald, ‘Resource Mobilization and Social Movements: A Partial Theory’, *American Journal of Sociology* 82, 1977, p. 1219.

<sup>11</sup> Pimpinan Muhammadiyah, 2007-2009, ‘Ibda’ Bi Nafsi’, Unpublished Paper delivered at Retreat 2008 at Austin Golf Hill Resort, Shaik Hussain Yaacob’s private papers and ‘Interview with Shaik Hussein Yaacob, 9 September, 2008.’ For the financial statements, see: <http://www.muhammadiyah.org.sg/index.php/about-us/financial-statements>, <accessed on 3 October 2008>

training of cadres and the growth of support from individuals, organizations and governmental institutions locally and regionally. Building upon some of these observations, I will offer a more sophisticated analysis of four key processes that have contributed to the sustenance of the PMS in the following section, as seen through the lens of social movement theory.

## SUSTAINING AN ISLAMIC MOVEMENT

### The Symbiotic Relationship between the Leaders and the Led

Leaders of Islamic movements often function not only as symbols, managers and mobilizers, but also as role models, ideologues, visionaries and brokers who connect their collectives with other movements, organizations and political parties, in order to perpetuate the movement's aims and goals. Examples abound and among the recent prominent figures that could be mentioned here are Muhammad Mahdi 'Akif of the Ikhwanul Muslimun in Egypt, Fethullah Gülen who is currently the leader of the *Gülen* movement in Turkey, the late Sheikh Ahmad Yasin who was the head and founder of HAMAS in Palestine and Din Syamsuddin of the Muhammadiyah movement in Indonesia. PMS leaders are no exception to this norm of fulfilling multiple functions. In line with Suzanne Staggenborg's perceptive typology, three types of leadership are noticeable in the fifty years of PMS' existence. From 1958 to 2001, the Presidents of PMS – namely, Rijal Abdullah (1958-1959), Osman Taib (1959-1960), Hussein Taib (1960-1963), Abdul Rahman Haron (1963-1983) and Shaik Hussain Yaacob (1983-2001) – straddled between being 'nonprofessional leaders' whose commitment to the movement transcended monetary rewards and 'nonprofessional staff leaders' who were compensated for the time they devoted to the movement's activities. These leaders obtained their income through religious teaching and donations from members, as well as from other forms of employment, and were generally considered to be poor. As PMS grew in size and importance, a unanimous decision was made to employ a full-time President. Shaik Hussain Yaacob was employed as a 'professional manager' in 2000 and has been paid for his role in leading the PMS movement on a full-time basis ever since, with the exception of a brief interval of a few months (from March 2001 to December 2001) which saw Abdul Salam Sultan holding the office of President.<sup>12</sup> Granted that there were varying management styles and that different levels of support were received from members and sympathizers, we may nevertheless discern a few broad features which characterized the successive leaders and permitted the longevity of the PMS.

To start with, in terms of personal traits, all of these leaders possessed a high degree of charisma, as well as organizational and oratorical skills, while exhibiting a profound knowledge of the Islamic sciences and the challenges posed by modernity. The founders established a coherent organizational structure that demanded strict obedience to the central leadership, and this has been improved upon by their successors. An informal intelligence network was created to detect attempts to subvert the PMS.<sup>13</sup> The leaders were also activists who inspired and galvanized the wider membership through the display of moral courage and real action beyond mere rhetoric. A case in point is Osman Taib, who took it upon himself to preach to members of the Khadijah Mosque in eastern Singapore, knowing full well that the

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<sup>12</sup> Suzanne Staggenborg, 'Social Movement Communities and Cycles of Protest: The Emergence and Maintenance of a Local Women's Movement', *Social Problems* 45, 2, 1988, p. 587.

<sup>13</sup> 'Jawatankuasa Penyasat', Abdul Rahman Harun's private papers.



congregation there adhered to the Sufi *tariqah* (way). Several arguments regarding the rituals and practices that contravened the spirit of the Sunnah ensued and although he had attracted some following from the congregation, his critics petitioned the Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Community Development, appealing for Osman Taib to be barred from the mosque. As a result of these aggressive efforts, letters of complaint were forwarded to the Minister for Labour and Law requesting that the PMS be dissolved; however, these efforts were in vain. Following in the footsteps of his predecessors, the present leader of PMS gained respect from members and critics for having told Goh Chok Tong, who was the former Prime Minister of Singapore, that the PMS had yet to fulfill its obligatory duty to invite the cabinet ministers into the fold of Islam.<sup>14</sup>

Yet we must not overstate the roles played by these top-rung leaders in sustaining the PMS movement. Robert D. Benford has pointed out the ‘elite bias’ found in the contemporary literature on social movements, at the expense of the contributions of other members in the rank and file. This is particularly the case when researchers depend upon interviews with leaders, and written sources, such as newspapers and/or other sources generated by a given movement.<sup>15</sup> While Benford’s critique of the elite bias is instructive, his points regarding problems of source materials deserve some further refinement. My study of the publications of the PMS and other relevant sources suggests that the elite bias is counterweighted by an unceasing recognition on the part of the leaders of the vital roles played by non-elite members of the movement. Basing its membership structure upon the Qur’anic injunction that ‘Allah loves those who fight in His Cause in rows (ranks) as if they were a solid structure (61:4)’, PMS leaders have long emphasized the welfare and concerns of the members were fully taken of, and have ensured that their efforts were duly commended, no matter how small. Evidence for this emphasis can be found in the formalization of the *Jabatan Keanggotaan* (or Members Department) that kept detailed records of the personal particulars, interests, occupations, memorable days and outside involvements of each and every member. In almost every sermon delivered by PMS Presidents during Eidul Fitri and Eidul Adha celebrations, and in the editorials of *Suara Muhammadiyah* magazine through the years from the 1970s to 2006, explicit mention was made of the importance of each and every member of PMS. For example, an editorial in the 1989 issue of *Suara Muhammadiyah* described the rank and file of PMS as the driving force behind the success of every leader. The rise in the number of ‘sleeping members’ was seen as an ailment that would be detrimental to the trust which PMS had gained among the Muslim community in Singapore.<sup>16</sup>

It is this symbiotic relationship between the leaders and the members that enabled PMS to reach out and forge ties with other prominent personalities and organizations that were either sympathetic or shared their movement’s ideals. The links established with Jamiyah was made first through members who were active in that movement as well as in the PMS. Since the election of Abu Bakar Maidin as the president, Jamiyah has supported PMS activities via funding and moral support.<sup>17</sup> Through its youth wings (Pemuda Muhammadiyah and

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<sup>14</sup> ‘Special Branch Intelligence Summary for May 1960 (No.5/60)’, FO 1091/107 and ‘Interview with Mohd Ghazali Alistar, 9 September 2008’.

<sup>15</sup> Robert D. Benford, ‘An Insider’s Critique of the Social Movement Framing Perspective’, *Sociological Inquiry* 67, 4, 1997, p. 421.

<sup>16</sup> *Suara Muhammadiyah*, January-March 1989, p. 1.

<sup>17</sup> ‘Message from Mr Abu Bakar Maidin, President of Jamiyah Singapore, in Muhammadiyah Association, *Muhammadiyah Education Service*, Singapore: Muhammadiyah Association, 2003, p. 8.

Aisyiyah), PMS has made significant headways into recruiting members from tertiary institutions, and has even recruited youths who were associated with gangsterism and vice. Dzulfihar Mohammed and Ahmad Khalis Abdul Ghani, two recruits who were former students at the National University of Singapore, became PMS Executive members in the late 1970s and 1990s respectively. Jumat Osman and Abdul Aziz Mohamed were disinterested in religious matters before they were inducted into the PMS movement. They became active members and were later sponsored by PMS for further instruction in Islamic studies in Indonesia and Mecca in the 1980s. PMS members who were based in various branches across the island helped attract new recruits in their neighbourhoods, including men and women of different ages, with a variety of occupations, ethnicities, and experiences. Hussein Yaacob and Abdul Salam Sultan are notable samples of Indian Muslims who rose up the ranks from being passive followers to becoming the Presidents of PMS.

It follows then that the symbiotic relationship between the leaders and the led is one of the factors which explains why PMS has rarely been hampered by splits and ideological fissures among the rank and file. The first major split in the movement occurred in 1971, when a group of PMS youth members led by Djamal Tukimin, Zain Ahmad, Osman Nasir and Hasan Ghani decided to form the *Himpunan Belia Islam* (HBI or Muslim Youth Assembly), an organization which was formalized in 1973 and dedicated to the reformation of Muslim youths in Singapore. HBI activities included leadership camps, religious classes, forums, talks and the publishing of a semi-academic journal, the *Asyyahid*, as well as classic Islamic texts. PMS youth members were encouraged by the central leadership to take part in HBI activities, as it was seen as an organization that shared the aims of reviving the Sunnah. Heavily influenced by the currents of Shiism that emanated from Iran in the late 1970s, a large number of HBI members abandoned the ideology they shared with PMS. In 1982, more than a dozen youth members of PMS adopted the Shiite ideology. While some abandoned the PMS movement in favour of HBI, others spread doubts within PMS of the validity of the Sunni version of Islam. This was rebutted by PMS members through the publication of booklets explaining the falsehoods of Shiite doctrines.<sup>18</sup> Some other fissures within the PMS included the establishment of splinter collectives and organizations such as the Ansarus Sunnah (the Helpers of the Sunnah) in the early 1980s, the Fellowship of Muslim Students Association (FMSA) in 1994, the Persatuan Islam (PERSIS) in 1997 and the Persatuan Al-Qudwah in 2004. In addition, members were periodically expelled for failing to comply with the rules of the PMS as embedded in its constitution. Even so, the basic fabric of the PMS movement remains intact, having never been threatened by insurmountable problems.

### **Ideational Framing**

Islamic movement activists are an integral part of the society which they seek to change, and hence are compelled to fashion their ideology in ways that resonate with its members and the broader public. The process of making sense of the world and the movement's **raison d'être in order to promote collective action** has been termed by social theorists as 'ideational framing'. Quintan Wiktorowicz has identified several ideational frames that have been employed by Islamic movements to gain widespread Muslim support. They are: 'to create an Islamic state', 'to create a society that is governed and guided by Islamic law (*syariah*)',

<sup>18</sup> *Konsep Taqiyah dalam Syiah Imamiyah: Suatu Komentar*, Singapura: Persatuan Muhammadiyah, 1986 and *Syiah Imamiyah: Pendekatan Ringkas dan Menyeluruh*, Singapura: Persatuan Muhammadiyah, 1986. See also: Christoph Marcinkowski, 'Aspects of Shi'ism in Contemporary Southeast Asia', *The Muslim World* 98, 1, 2008, pp. 36-71.

‘Islam is the Solution’, blaming ‘Western values and practices for a variety of social ills’, and asserting that ‘regimes are merely extensions of Western interests determined to weaken and control Muslim societies’. The tactics and strategies to achieve these frames vary from discursive means and social programmes to political participation and violent acts.<sup>19</sup> Despite the subscription of members of the PMS to aspects of this array of ideational frames, they have been mindful that presenting them in ways akin to Islamic movements overseas would place PMS in jeopardy of contravening the country’s laws. Concomitantly, there has been a conscious recognition among the key members of the need to continuously reformulate PMS ideational frames in line with the evolving public perception and support of the movement.

Three ideational framing and reframing phases – ‘frame bridging’, ‘frame amplification’ and ‘frame extension’ – are noticeable throughout the period from 1958 to 2007.<sup>20</sup> These phases should be viewed as a continuum, rather than as distinct chronological periods. The years from 1958 till the early 1960s witnessed the ‘frame bridging phase’ to unify the students of Rijal Abdullah, Amir Esa and Abdul Rahman Harun under a coherent ideational frame. Five key points were delineated by the movement’s ideologues:

1. PMS needs to exist in view of the declining status of the Muslim community in Singapore and Malaya.
2. PMS takes the Qur’an and the Sunnah as its sources of reference and does not subscribe to any school of Islamic Jurisprudence (*mazhab*).
3. PMS would provide Islamic instruction to its members and the Muslim public.
4. PMS would guide mankind towards the *Siratal Mustaqim* (The Right Path).
5. PMS belong to *Ahli Sunnah Wal Jama’ah* (People of the Sunnah and the Community) and would combat any beliefs that ran contrary to the spirit of Islam.
6. PMS has no links or shared ideology with Ahmadiyyah as has been alleged by the ignorant and those who were distant from the teachings of the Qur’an and the Sunnah.<sup>21</sup>

It is obvious here that the PMS had given new forms to old ideas. The Muslim community in Singapore during this period was no less aware that the Qur’an and Sunnah are essential sources for the study of Islam, though they were highly dependent upon the interpretations of Muslim scholars and learned men. By stressing that the PMS upheld the two key texts of Islam above all else, members of the movement were urged to depart from the dominant approach to understanding Islam and were empowered to exercise independent reasoning when they faced issues pertaining to their religious beliefs. Furthermore, by differentiating PMS from the Ahmadiyyah and asserting that the movement fell under the category of *Ahli Sunnah Wal Jama’ah*, PMS members were assured from the outset that the PMS belonged to a mainstream Sunni version of Islam and was not a heterodox cult.

<sup>19</sup> Quintan Wiktorowicz, ‘Introduction’, in Quintan Wiktorowicz (ed.), *Islamic Activism: A Social Movement Theory Approach*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004, p. 116.

<sup>20</sup> I have adopted the three framing concepts from David A. Snow, E. Burke Rochford Jr, Steven K. Worden and Robert D. Benford, ‘Frame Alignment Processes, Micromobilization, and Movement Participation’, *American Sociological Review*, 51, 4, 1986, pp. 464-481.

<sup>21</sup> ‘Laporan Ringkas Dari Jwatan Kuasa Pengasas: Persatuan Muhammadiyah’, Ali Hainin’s Private papers.

From the mid-1960s to the late 1980s the PMS experienced a period of ‘frame amplification’. By amplification, I mean the translation of the six points highlighted above into events, discourses and activities that would publicize and broaden the movement’s appeal. This phase also saw a consolidation of the PMS membership and the widening of its support base. The movement’s leaders saw that no recourse was needed to differentiate the movement from cults and other heterodoxies. The stress then was on the reformation of selected groups as a means to uplift the Muslim community as a whole, both in terms of knowledge and morality, and for the PMS to be given the liberty to expand its operations. Nowhere is this ideational frame more apparent than in a speech delivered at the sixteenth anniversary of the movement’s founding. Abdul Rahman Harun mentioned that PMS should concentrate its energies on obtaining *the acquiescence of the* following groups:

1. The Government. The PMS should be given the space to propagate Islam, and this could only be achieved if the peace and security of the country were upheld.
2. Other religious groups. They would recognize PMS’ mission in imbibing the awareness of the Oneness of God and that they would enter into the fold of Islam whilst not neglecting their roles as citizens of their country.
3. Muslim scholars. PMS urge Muslim scholars in the country to focus their time and efforts on alleviating ignorance and superstition among Muslims in Singapore, while maintaining an attitude of open-mindedness.
4. Educated Muslims. PMS members would be committed to assisting educated Muslims in finding solutions to social problems.
5. Muslim Masses. PMS members would devote themselves to join the Muslim masses to seek knowledge and to avoid the throwing of insults against their co-religionists.<sup>22</sup>

The terms of office of Shaik Hussain Yaacob and Abdul Salam Sultan represent the phase of ‘frame extension’. From the late 1980s to 2007, the ideational frame of the PMS has been one that is societal-centred whilst being religiously-committed. Less stress was given to the removal of innovations in religion and the primacy of deriving knowledge from the authentic sources of Islam for the reason that such ideational frames had by then become popular even among organizations that were once resistant to these notions. Furthermore, the splinters and fissures within PMS itself, as have been discussed above, meant that the movement’s ideology was transplanted in other places in the form of new organizations and the initiatives of individuals. *Dari Masyarakat ke Masyarakat* (From Society to Society)’ has been the ideational frame of PMS during its third phase, and this has been manifested in educational, medical and social projects that will be discussed below.

### **Political Opportunity Structures**

Sidney Tarrow defines political opportunity structures as ‘consistent - but not necessarily formal or permanent – dimensions of the political environment that provide incentives for people to undertake collective action by affecting their expectations for success or failure’.<sup>23</sup> Political opportunity structures may exist locally and regionally, as well as in global arenas, all of which can profoundly impact Muslim movements in a given context. By virtue of

<sup>22</sup> ‘Sambutan Ulang Tahun Ke 16 Muhammadiyah Singapura, 2-3 February 1974’, Abdul Rahman Harun’s private papers.

<sup>23</sup> Sidney G. Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements, Collective Action, and Politics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, p. 85.

Singapore's diminutive size and its inter-connectedness with other parts of the world since the beginnings of British colonialism in the early nineteenth century, changes in forms of governance and political environments in Singapore and elsewhere have done much to sustain the PMS movement. In this section, I discuss four specific external changes in the political environments that enhanced the opportunities for the PMS to expand its influence and entrench its place in Singapore, specifically: the rise of the Peoples' Action Party (PAP) government in 1959, the establishment of the Islamic Religious Council in 1968, and the oil boom in the Middle East in the 1970s and 1980s.

Elsewhere, I have argued that the advent of the PAP government to power in 1959 ushered an era whereby wide-ranging policies were implemented to upgrade the downtrodden status of the Malays. Financial support was given to community organizations that promoted the well-being of the Malays in particular and Muslims in general as part of the party's short-term political strategy to fortify the case for a merger between Singapore with Malaysia. Even the new Singapore state flag featured a crescent moon which was perceived by Muslims then as an important symbol of Islam.<sup>24</sup> The PMS benefited, and in many instances, exploited the changes in political climates. Since 1959, both Muslim and non-Muslim politicians in the PAP endorsed the existence of the PMS and its right to expand its operations in spite of protests from the general public. This was due partly to the secularist outlook of the republic which meant that all religious faiths or ideologies are given the right to exist as long as they do not seek to threaten the legitimacy of the state. Among the prominent figures who have expressed support for the PMS over the years are the late Haji Ya'acob Mohammed (a former Minister of State for the Prime Minister's Office), Yatiman Yusof (a former Senior Parliamentary Secretary), Zulkifli Mohammed (a Member of Parliament), Sidek Saniff (a former Senior Minister of State) and the present Minister of Muslim Affairs, Dr Yaacob Ibrahim. In a media release dated 30 August 2000, Yatiman Yusof commended the PMS for having channeled its resources towards the welfare of the community, particularly in the rehabilitation of youths. Such media releases and speeches by leading politicians have doubtlessly shaped public opinion towards the PMS.<sup>25</sup>

The inauguration of the Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura (MUIS or Islamic Religious Council) in 1968 provided the PMS with an immense opportunity to enhance its standing within the Muslim community in Singapore.<sup>26</sup> This quasi-governmental body which consists of esteemed members of the Muslim community legitimized the PMS through its constitution, regarding the movement as one that was dedicated to social and religious reform. Beyond mere recognition, PMS members were nominated to be a part of the MUIS council, which was a governing arm of the religious bureaucracy. Responsible for the formulation of policies and major operational plans pertaining to the administration of *zakat* (alms), *wakaf* (endowment), pilgrimage affairs, halal certification, administration of mosques and madrasah and Islamic education as well as the issuance of *fatwas* (judgments on matters of religious law) and financial aid, the MUIS Council comprises of the President of MUIS, the Mufti of

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<sup>24</sup> Syed Muhd Khairudin Aljunied, 'The Role of Hadramis in Post-Second World War Singapore – A Reinterpretation', *Immigrants & Minorities* 25, 2, p. 167.

<sup>25</sup> 'Ucapan Yatiman Yusof, Setiausaha Parlimen Kanan(Penerangan Dan Kesenian) Di Majlis Perasmian 'Ekspo Keluarga Dan Barang Pengguna Indonesia' Anjuran Rumah Kebajikan Muhammadiyah Welfare Di Dewan Ekspo Singapura Pada 31 Ogos 2000, 3.00 Ptg', at: <http://stars.nhb.gov.sg/stars/public/viewPDF.jsp?pdfno=yy20000831n.pdf> <accessed 18 September 2008>

<sup>26</sup> For details of the establishment of MUIS through the provisions of the Administration of Muslim Law Act (AMLA) see: *The Administration of Muslim Law Act, 1966*, Singapore: Government Printers, 1966.

Singapore, the Secretary of MUIS and other respected figures from major Muslim organizations. Members of the Council were nominated by the Minister of Muslim Affairs before being appointed by the President of Singapore to a three-year-term. Among the PMS members who served on the MUIS Council were Abdul Rahman Harun (1968-1974), Osman Ahmad (1974-1983), Salleh Abdullah (1983-1985), Abdul Manaf Rahmat (1989-2001) and Hamzah Abdul Rahman (2001-2004).<sup>27</sup>

It would be historically inaccurate to assert that the ties between state agencies and PMS have been without conflict. There were public disagreements over issues connected to the determining of the date of Eid celebrations, the permissibility of organ transplant, the implementation of Central Provident Fund (CPF) as well as the passing of the Women's Charter Bill and the Compulsory Education Act. To augment this, a number of PMS members had been arrested and charged for their involvement in the smuggling of arms and other anti-governmental activities, much to the dismay of the movement leaders. Still, such isolated episodes of noncompliance did not tantamount to a total severance of relationship. It is clear here that both the state and the PMS realize the far-reaching benefits to be gained from mutual cooperation and interdependence. Differences in opinions expressed by the PMS on issues pertaining to policies and laws were tolerated by the state insofar as they were directed towards the common good without jeopardizing the security of the country.<sup>28</sup>

The other political opportunity structure to be considered here arose out of the Middle East oil boom in the 1970s and 1980s. An unprecedented revival of economic interactions between the Middle East and Southeast Asian Muslims during this period inaugurated an epoch of Islamic resurgence in both regions. King Fahd of Saudi Arabia played a leading role in this process of fostering Islamic revivalism, by sponsoring the building of mosques and the work of missionary organizations, as well as other activities dedicated to the promotion of Islam and the countering of Shiite influence. More than three million United States dollars were donated by the Saudi, Kuwaiti and Libyan governments to Muslim organizations and mosques in Malaysia.<sup>29</sup> The two Muslim movements in Singapore that benefited from this largesse were Jamiyah and the PMS. The donation of one million Singapore dollars to the PMS facilitated the building of the new PMS headquarters at Number 14 Jalan Selamat, as well as sustaining the movement's activities for the next few years. Additionally, selected PMS members who were educated in Saudi Arabia and working as full-time activists received monthly salaries from the *Al Rabita Al-alam Al-Islami* (the World Islamic League). The movement benefited from these donations and Islamic resurgence in other ways as well. New networks were created with other Islamic movements in Southeast Asia, such as *Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia* (ABIM, or Muslim Youth Movement of *Malaysia*) and *Persatuan Islam Indonesia* (PERSIS, or The Muslim Organization of Indonesia). Religious teachers and clerics from Malaysia, South Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines were periodically invited to deliver talks at the PMS headquarters and to conduct training courses

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<sup>27</sup> The profiles of MUIS council members can be found in MUIS publications such as *Fajar Islam*, *Warita Kita* and *Annual Report* (Singapore: Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura, 1976-2007).

<sup>28</sup> PMS' stand regarding the implementation of laws and policies affecting Muslims in Singapore could be found in the following articles: Fadhlullah Jamil and Atiku Garba Yahaya, 'Muslims in Non-Muslim Societies and their response to Major issues affecting them: The case of Singapore', *Islamic Quarterly* 44, 4, 2000, pp. 576-600; *Suara Muhammadiyah*, Bilangan 1, 1987, pp. 4-5 and *Suara Muhammadiyah*, February-May, 1997, pp. 11-16.

<sup>29</sup> Fred R. von der Mehden, *Two Worlds of Islam: Interaction between Southeast Asia and the Middle East*, Gainesville: University Press of Florida: 1993, pp. 17-20.

for the members, while PMS members attended conferences, seminars and workshops in countries within the Southeast Asian region, as well as various parts of East Asia, North Africa and the Middle East.<sup>30</sup>

### **Mobilizing Structures**

In his detailed analysis of Islamic activism in Palestine, Glenn E. Robinson observes that social movements employ several types of mobilizing structures to sustain their activism, which may be classified as *formal* structures (such as political parties), *informal* structures (such as informal urban networks) and *illegal* structures (such as underground terrorist cells). 'It is through these structures that movements recruit like-minded individuals, socialize new participants, overcome the free rider problem, and mobilize contention.'<sup>31</sup> While eschewing the clandestine methods used by militant groups such as the *Jemaah Islamiyah*, PMS members have made effective use of formal and informal channels to increase its membership, to solicit support from sympathizers, and, in the process, to raise funds for its activities.

Informally, PMS members engage in recruitment activities 'off the street', at coffeeshops, bus stations, beaches and parks. This was most prevalent from the late 1950s to the 1970s, when it was felt that there was a dire need to keep youths away from the lures of drug abuse. The membership size has also grown through the years as PMS engaged in inviting friends, families and neighbours to the classes conducted at the homes of the movement's ideologues. Since a number of PMS members were and are still working as full-time teachers in national schools, recruitment was also done under the pretext of exposing students to outdoor activities and leadership camps, as well as in-house forums and talks organized by the Pemuda Muhammadiyah and other branches. More than seventy-two classes were conducted throughout Singapore in 1979.<sup>32</sup> PMS members were also active as volunteers within mosques and the mainstream Malay-Muslim organizations with the aim of establishing close rapport with persons who could potentially be recruited into the PMS. Such an approach was, of course, not without consequences. While some PMS members were received with open arms in the mosques and Muslim organizations where they sought to expand their membership and ideological base, many others were told to cease their activism.<sup>33</sup>

The PMS used several types of formal channels, the first being public events that were organized on a regular basis to gain visibility. The mass prayers to commemorate the end of the fasting month (*Eidul Fitri*) and the Feast of Sacrifice (*Eidul Adha*) were especially significant. The prayers were conducted at stadiums, sports clubs and other open areas near residential areas to ensure maximum participation from all Muslims, including men, women and children of all ages. Sermons were amplified with loudspeakers, while texts of the sermons were printed for distribution. Aside from elucidating the movement's ideology and

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<sup>30</sup> *Suara Muhammadiyah*, December, 1997, p. 23.

<sup>31</sup> Glenn E. Robinson, ' Hamas as Social Movement', in Quintan Wiktorowicz (ed.), *Islamic Activism: A Social Movement Theory Approach*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004, p. 116.

<sup>32</sup> *Suara Muhammadiyah*, Bilangan 4, 1979, pp. 10-11.

<sup>33</sup> An example of governmental and public acceptance of the activism of PMS members was the appointment of a former Vice-President of the movement, Abdul Manaf Rahmat, as the Mosque Executive Chairman of Masjid Mujahidin and a member of the Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG), a voluntary group formed to rehabilitate Muslims who were alleged to have been involved in terrorist activities. See: [http://www.rrg.sg/subindex.asp?id=A229\\_07](http://www.rrg.sg/subindex.asp?id=A229_07), <accessed on 22 September 2008>.

thrust, the sermons included diagnoses of and solutions to the challenges faced by Muslims locally and globally, as well as an invitation to all those who were present to play an active part in the creation of a God-conscious society. It was a long way from a prayer congregation consisting of no more than twenty core members in 1958 to the Eidul Fitri prayers organized by PMS at a football stadium in 2006 that was attended by more than 5,000 Muslims. To complement these mass prayers, the PMS organized carnivals, public lectures and symposiums on an annual basis to raise funds, as well as drawing attention to the leading personalities of the movement and their achievements.<sup>34</sup>

Schools, medical institutions and social welfare homes represent other formal mobilizing structures that were employed effectively by the PMS. Seeing that the Islamic beliefs, values and ideology of the movement were best imbibed at an early age, a kindergarten called *Tadika Muhammadiyah* was established in 1981. Three years later, a weekend religious class called *Kelas Asas Bimbingan Agama* (KABA, or Basic Religious Guidance Classes) was started to provide Islamic instruction to students studying in national schools. PMS took over the administration of a full-time school called *Madrasah Al-Arabiah Al-Islamiah* (MAI) in 1989, providing Islamic and secular education for male and female students at the primary and secondary levels. To date, there are 342 students taught by 31 full-time and part-time teachers. A welfare home for juvenile delinquents was set up with the support of the Ministry of Community Development and Sports (MCDS) on the same year when MAI was taken over. *Kolej Islam Muhammadiyah* (KIM), a tertiary institute with diplomas and degrees conferred by *Institut Agama Islam Negeri* (IAIN, or National Institute of Islam) in Indonesia, was founded in 2000 to widen the provision of formal education to the Muslim public by PMS. The *Muhammadiyah Health and Day Care Centre for Senior Citizens* (MHCC) was formally inaugurated on 14 April 1997 to assist elderly people who were suffering from stroke, rheumatism, Parkinson's disease and other medical problems.<sup>35</sup> It is pertinent to mention here that, although the PMS has not succeeded in recruiting a large number of committed members through all of these mobilizing structures, it has benefited in other areas, such as in raising funds to sustain its activities and in gaining recognition from the state and other civic organizations, as well as in the spread of its ideology in a more subtle manner.

## CONCLUSION

'The Muhammadiyah we see today is not the same as the Muhammadiyah in the 1950s. It is less interested in ideological struggles. Muhammadiyah has become a populist and socially oriented organization.'<sup>36</sup> This observation by one of the surviving founders of the PMS summarizes the major transformations which the movement underwent over the five decades of its existence. The preceding discussion has explained how four key processes ensured its survival and, in the process, determined its evolution within a secular and politically-conservative environment. While the symbiotic relationship between the leaders and the rank and file ensured that links with other religious bodies could be forged, close rapport between the members enabled the movement to withstand the threat of ideological fissures. Through a continuous reformulation of ideational frames, the PMS adapted to the changing conditions on the ground. The movement also secured its place as a legitimate body in the eyes of

<sup>34</sup> Ust Shaik Hussain Shaik Yaacob, 'Bersatu & Bertoleransi Kunci Perpaduan', *Khutbah Aidil Fitri 2007*.

<sup>35</sup> *Suara Muhammadiyah*, October-December 1998, pp. 16-18.

<sup>36</sup> 'Interview with Osman Ahmad, 7 September 2008'.



political brokers, while obtaining much-needed backing from international donors through the exploitation of relevant political structures. The effective utilization of mobilizing structures provided avenues for recruitment and funding for activities, while the ideology of the PMS was propagated through less obvious means.

The progressive dismantling of public mistrust towards the movement and a shift towards cooperation and mutual interdependence were among the major outcomes that emerged from these processes. Through the efforts of the PMS, practices such as *Mandi Safar* (Bathing in the month of Safar)<sup>37</sup> have been eradicated, while a critical approach to the study of Islam that stresses independent thinking has now become commonplace. The conduct of Eid prayers in open spaces that is now routine throughout Singapore could be attributed to the relentless activism of PMS members. Whether the PMS can further heighten its present impact and influence on the lives of Muslims and non-Muslims in Singapore remains to be seen. There is however no denying that the myriad of challenges posed by cataclysmic shifts in the global environments, coupled with the ever increasing demands of the secular state, all point to the urgent need for PMS leaders to regularly take stock of the organizational structure, ideational frames, and training of members, as well as other PMS activities, in order to guarantee the growth and continued existence of the movement.

Finally, there are two larger *implications to this study* that should be developed by future researchers. The first concerns the blending of historical analyses of Islamic activism in Asia with theoretical tools and concepts derived from the social sciences. All too often, studies on Islam in Asia have been marked by blind empiricism on the one hand and theoretical determinism on the other. There is a need to avoid the fallacies of both approaches, to break down disciplinary boundaries and develop integrative methodologies in order to deepen and broaden our understanding of not only Muslim movements but also Islam as it is practiced in the region. The second and final implication pertains to the studies of Islamic activism in Asian countries where Muslims are minorities. Research on this aspect is limited and has been overwhelmed by studies concerning extremism and terrorism. To the extent that political violence and social unrest are indeed some of the key problems of our time, this should not however distract us from the urgent task of pioneering new methods and perspectives on the everyday struggles of minority Muslims in secular settings and their collective efforts to create an environment conducive to Islam.

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<sup>37</sup> *Mandi Safar* refers to the practice of cleansing oneself from calamities during the month of Safar in the Islamic calendar. In the 1950s, Muslims in Singapore who subscribed to this practice would congregate at beaches and would pour seawater over their heads with the hope of protecting themselves from disasters.