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Islam in a secular state Muslim activism in Singapore

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This study is rich in details which can only be provided by an insider-scholar who is privy to the intimations of everyday experience and knowledge of his subject-actors and their engagements with the state. Two phrases stand out in this book – "secular state" and "Muslim activism". I cannot presume that the author intends for the reader to think of the two as contraries, or that "never shall the twain meet". But the suggestion is there. The research question on the first page of the first chapter alludes to the difficulties faced by Singapore Muslims in navigating "their way through politics in a secular, authoritarian state…" (7). Active Muslim politics are often associated with a slew of "isms", from "extremism" to "radicalism" to "militarism" to "terrorism". Hence, why would Muslim activism be any more difficult to navigate in a state with particular feature, be that democratic, theocratic, autocratic or secular? Or, otherwise stated, is it the secular nature of the Singapore state which makes this study on Islam new and uncharted? This raises the question of whether Singapore is the archetype of a secular state. Assuming for now that Singapore does represent such an archetype, does it necessarily follow that the politics around Islam will be distinctive when it functions under the rubric of secularism? The research question seems to imply that Muslim activism takes on particular features, restriction or workarounds when it is under the domination of a secular state, though the book itself is not conclusive on this.

The problem lies in the definition of the key concepts used. If a secular state is the independent variable or new case introduced here, would Muslim activism in constitutionally-secular Turkey take on the same feature as that of Singapore's? Would a theocratic Islamic state such as Saudi Arabia or Iran be necessarily more tolerant of Muslim activism? The answer to both questions would likely be in the negative. A more rigorous problematisation of the concepts of "secularism" and the "secular state" could situate this study more usefully as to how different national states deal with Islam as politics, rather than Islam as culture. There does not appear to be any sustained discussion and explanation of secularism, despite the concept being central to the thesis of how religious activism functions under it. Just as frustrating is the lack of in-depth discussion of what is meant by "activism", and whether "Muslim activities" has distinctive features. The reader is left with questions as to whether the activism which is being studied is in the form of a social movement, or of an organised pressure group, or of even an identifiable Muslim civil society in Singapore. This would be helpful in then connecting the concept to that of secularism.

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A recent, if not popular way of understanding French secularism (or laïcité), is the following – "It is neither a form of state atheism, nor the outlawing of religion. Rather laïcité enshrines in law the right to believe, or not to believe, while at the same time keeping religion out of public affairs" (*The Economist 2020*). To a certain extent, the Singapore state does not want religion to play any role in governance. However, this is not always the case. More certainly, it sees the utility of using religion when it serves its interests, and practices "pragmatic secularism" according to one account – "If the state is sensitive to the potential for resistance and opposition from religious quarters and the threat they pose to hegemony, the state is just as aware of religion's usefulness for building and strengthening hegemony" (Tan 2010, p. 343). This view is in fact validated by Abdullah's own observation – "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 [People's Action Party's] paternalistic governance style, secularism means that the state will intervene as and when necessary…" (16). Then there are the notions of "passive secularism" of the United States and "assertive secularism" of France and Turkey (Kuru 2009). Would the Singapore state be classed under the former or the latter? Given the wide latitude into which secularism can be located, it begs the question as to the usefulness of such a concept in the study of Islam in society.

Social activism as used in this book also needs to be finely distinguished from social mobilisation by organised groups. In this study, no particular organised groups are studied; except for a few registered societies, such as Pergas (Singapore Islamic Scholars and Religious Teachers Association). But Pergas appears more like a professional association rather than a political movement. It was founded in the early days of the postcolonial state in 1957, and was registered as a charity in 2005 (https://www.pergas.org.sg/about/). The subjects of the book are largely individuals who fluidly, even amorphously, fit into one categorisation of thought, leaning and social association or another. They are identified as belonging to the grouping of either *ulama*, liberals or conservatives. Yet, repeatedly, the author reminds readers that these groups are not mutually exclusive and neither do members in each group exhibit homogeneous characteristics – "By now, there is perhaps no need to belabour the point that each category of activists is not homogeneous, as the previous chapters have shown" (213). This point is reiterated – "It has been more than alluded to in relevant chapters that the categories of liberal and conservative are not homogeneous themselves; there exists much variety within each" (273). Why then the need to pigeon-hole respondents into any one of these categories? Is it even useful to study Muslim activism in Singapore through the use of these surface identifiers? New paradigms of intersectionality, reflexivity and situationality of identities could perhaps better explain the shifting but pragmatic affiliations of Muslims in Singapore.

It would be useful for readers to learn of the various Malay-Muslim Organisations (MMOs) that exist in Singapore, though not much is provided by the book. Aside from Pergas, the other significant actors seem to be nothing more than a few unstructured collectives straddling the interests and interstices of the statist MUIS (Singapore Islamic Religious Council), PAP Muslim politicians, and the independent realm of public intellectualism. Only a few individuals are featured as "spokespersons" in each of the ulama, liberal or conservative groups. With more in-depth probing, it would be interesting to discover if "liberal" Muslims were behind the repeal of immunity for marital rape in the amended Penal Code. Were they also behind the pressure group which led the President to praise the Fatwa Council for including a woman as a permanent member? (205).

Abdullah's mention of internationally-known activists such as Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Irshad Manji, Scott Kugle and Ebrahim Moosa, among others, as comprising the pantheon of "liberal Muslims" may or may not resonate with Singapore Muslims. There should be some attempt to examine their relevance to the Singapore context, and how their works are translated as praxis, besides their inclusion on the reading lists of university courses on Islam. Even closer-to-home, it could be questioned whether Indonesia's Liberal Islam Network (JIL) had any influence in the ferment of "liberal" Islam in Singapore.

What is clear from reading this book is that the manifestation of grievance and marginality among Singapore Muslims is unlike that of other societies, in which Muslims deprived of socio-economic status

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find redressal in a more heightened embrace of religion as a tool for resistance and salvation. Although being Malay-Muslims in Singapore coincide, to an extent, with a particular socio-economic status, this marginal status is not comparable to Muslim experiences in Europe or North America. There, the correlation between extremist religious ideologies and socio-economic dispossession can be quantitatively demonstrated. Some attempts are made to compare Singapore's social activism with that of Malaysia's, though I do not find the Malaysian examples discussed in the book to be comparable. The Singapore state controls the discourse and narrative of inclusivity and equality of faiths tightly. The Malaysian state endorses the policy of exclusivity (of Muslims and Islam) and inequality (of religious, political and cultural rights). Yet, intra-Islamic contestations are a pervasive feature of the Malaysian state.

What seems to be the main finding of Abdullah's study is that each Muslim group in Singapore falls into a common line of strategizing vis-à-vis the state – "just like the *ulama*, and the liberals, conservative activists typically work within the system, even when they disagree with state pronouncements" (207). The author provides the reason for this – "If one challenges the state too much, one would suffer serious consequences; but if one does not, one makes gains but ultimately reinforces the system. Most activists choose the latter, either by overtly cooperating with the state, or just operating in uncontroversial spheres. As a result, the PAP's hegemony is as secure as before…" (Abdullah 2021, p. 271). It is concluded that Muslim activists depend on optimum or safe political opportunities rather than going against the grain to fight for their cause. Is there then any activism among Muslims in Singapore? And what of the state's secularism?

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Britain's Second Embassy to China: Lord Amherst's *"Special Mission"* to the Jiaqing Emperor in 1816

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This new study aspires to be the first "comprehensive and detailed" full-length account of the second British Royal embassy to the Qing imperial court at Beijing, led by William Pitt, Lord Amherst, in 1816. Whereas the more famous first embassy of 1793–1795, led by Lord Macartney, has received at least three full-length accounts and a wealth of additional scholarship, that of its successor has

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