THE MYTH OF MULTIRACIALISM IN POST-9/11 SINGAPORE: THE *TUDUNG* INCIDENT

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Sixteen years ago, several girls in southern Thailand insisted on wearing the Muslim *hijab* at school in defiance of school rules on uniforms. Consequently, they were expelled by the school authorities. This seemingly insignificant dispute led to a protest by more than ten thousand people. As a result, even the high level of the military was startled and decided to intervene.[2] Since the beginning of 2002, when the United States began its anti-terrorism campaign after the 9/11 attacks, Singapore has been undergoing a dispute quite similar to the *hijab* crisis in Thailand. The dispute, the *tudung* (headscarf) dispute, has driven public attention beyond the country's economy, which has been in the doldrums since the Asian economic crisis of 1997, and has given rise to a continuous debate involving several cabinet ministers and even the Prime Minister. Members of Parliament (MPs), ministers, political parties, non-government organizations, and radicals in Malaysia, Indonesia, and Brunei have also become involved. Fiery debates have taken place in the other East Asian societies: e.g., Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macau. As a result of this dispute the Singaporean government is likely to be sued for allegedly violating the Constitution and infringing the religious freedom of Muslims.

[2] For the details of the event, see Chaiwat Satha-Anand (1994), " *Hijab* and Moments of Legitimation: Islamic Resurgence in Thai Society" , Charles F. Keyes, Laurel Kendall and Helen Hardacre eds., *Asian Visions of Authority: Religion and the Modern States of East and Southeast Asia*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, pp.285-9.

If the *hijab* crisis in Thailand is understood as the Muslim minority's effort to strive for a "moment of legitimacy" in a country in which Buddhism is the national religion,[3] then the *tudung* dispute in Singapore has even greater significance. It is rare for the parents of students to become involved in civil disobedience in a country well-known for its authoritarianism and paternalism. Besides the significance of fighting for religious freedom, their action has made known the awkward situation of Malay Muslims, who have been marginalized for a long time in the process of social mobility and ethnic integration. Since the economic crisis, and in the context of the post-9/11 domestic and international setting, the *tudung* incident demonstrates that within the People's Action Party (PAP) and among the public, right-wing political ideology has easily re-gained the upper hand. Does this indicate that the Singaporean government's commitment to multiracialism and shared values is contradictory?[4] Does this incident imply a latent crisis brought about by the globalization of American-style capitalism and US hegemony? With special reference to the conceptual framework employed by Chaiwat Satha-Anand in his outstanding analysis of the *hijab* crisis in Thailand, I will analyze this easily neglected incident in Singapore in terms of bureaucratic rationality, sociological reasoning, and the nature of the political realm.

The paper is divided into five sections. In the first section, I briefly provide a background to the incident. Immediately following is a critical analysis of the explanation employed by the government to justify its current stance historically. With the use of documents from the British colonial period, I refute the government's argument of continuing colonial practice and show that this argument is simply unfounded and is nothing more than a form of bureaucratic rationalization. In fact, the real issue that is disguised by this historical argument is the ethnic discrimination in governance against the Malay Muslims that has deep roots in the social engineering of national integration as perceived by the government. In the third section, I outline the concept of national integration as articulated by the government and show how a discourse on social engineering regarding a minor issue has been dictated by the government's discriminative understanding of national integration in a multi-ethnic society. From the perspective of political sociology, I further analyze how the policy implementation in the name of national integration has deliberately inhibited the social mobility of this minority group. In the fourth section, I demonstrate how the *tudung* incident puts at stake the agenda, which began in the 1980s, of the development of civil society with more political space for minorities. The incident has not only shown that with the worsening economic situation in Singapore the political realm for the Malay has once again been curtailed, but it has also sent a dangerous message that the global anti-terrorism movement can be easily

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[3] Satha-Anand (1994), *Ibid,* pp.279-300.

[4] Lai Ah Eng (1995), *Meanings of Multiethnicity: A Case-study of Ethnicity and Ethnic Relations in Singapore*, New York: Oxford University Press, p.179; Michael Hill & Lian Kwen Fee (1995), *The Politics of Nation Building and Citizenship in Singapore*, London: Routledge.

abused and hence transformed into a regional anti-Muslim agenda. This incident, in fact, touches upon the prevailing global issue of how we should understand the conflict between claims originating from liberalism and those originating from local anti-terrorism. I will further show that the conflict can be even worsened when we come to understand the various implications of wearing *tudung* within the historical formation of the *tudung* movement. Finally, I conclude that national solidarity as pursued by the Singaporean government can never be achieved while the Muslim is marginalized, as witnessed in this incident.

Genesis of the *Tudung* Incident in Singapore

For many years in Singapore, girls have been forbidden to wear the *tudung* (Muslim headscarf) in national schools. However, from the beginning of January 2002, four first-grade Malay Muslim girls in one primary school disobeyed the school rules by wearing the *tudung* every day. After the school authorities had tried in vain to stop them from doing so, the government asserted that the girls would no longer be permitted to attend the school if they did not, within a specified time limit, follow the rules. Nevertheless, the parents of the students did not surrender and insisted that wearing the *tudung* is an Islamic requirement aimed at protecting a girls' modesty. As a result, one of the four voluntarily left the school and the other three were compelled by the government to leave. The parents of the girls are now considering taking legal action against the government for depriving their children of the religious freedom endowed by the constitution.

The parents put forward two terms for compromise. Firstly, their daughters should be allowed to wear the *tudung* when enrolling in a national secondary school in the future; or, secondly, the government should commit to increasing financial support for *madrasahs* (Islamic religious schools) to improve their educational quality, and should ensure that their daughters would be able to attend a *madrasah* secondary school. If the government agreed to either of the above terms, then their daughters could come to school without wearing the *tudung*. This proposal not only mirrored the parents' discontent with the school's interference in the girls' right to perform their religious obligations, but it also suggested that the government had failed to provide enough support to *madrasahs*, leading to marginalization in the national education system and the restriction of a key mechanism for social mobility.

The Singaporean government did not accept either of these terms. In the following six months, a powerful consensus developed between the government, pro-government politicians, and a large section of the public and this exerted enormous pressure on these parents, a rare situation in Singapore. Below I will analyze the discourse created by this majority, taking *The Straits*

Times, the major Singaporean newspaper, as representative of this position,[5] and I will deconstruct the discourse to expose the social and political scenario, both in the domestic and international contexts, revealed by the incident.

Bureaucratic Rationalization or Ethnic/Religious Discrimination?

The Singaporean government held that wearing the *tudung* was in conflict with the school regulations regarding uniforms, and that the parents had contravened the spirit of the law.[6] To outsiders, the government appeared overly sensitive because the wearing of the *tudung* did not bother others, and as the government allowed Sikh schoolboys to wear the *turban* at school, its position indicated favour for one group over another. In response to the latter charge, the government argued that the policy allowing Sikh boys to wear the *turban* had been in effect since colonial times, and to compare these two issues did not help solve the problem. They further argued that what was at stake in the incident was social solidarity.

However, the government's excuse induces one to wonder how the British colonizers dealt with the Muslim *tudung*. Unfortunately, there are no official historical records concerning whether the British colonial government had any written rules permitting or forbidding Muslim girls to wear the *tudung* at school. The government failed to provide any documents to support its position that wearing the *turban* was permitted under British colonial rule.[7] The colonial government considered Malays too obtuse to be educated, and believed that they were better retained in the agricultural sector; it deliberately only established primary schools for Malays where only the Malay language and some basic general knowledge were taught. Furthermore, only a very limited number of young Malay men had the opportunity to study at English secondary schools, with the exception of those trained to be teachers at the Malay primary schools. Before independence few Malay girls had the opportunity to study at English schools. The British colonial policy of "strategic ambiguity" led to the common practice of colonial rulers not establishing any regulatory standards regarding folk culture in colonies. However, the influence in Singapore's upper politics of the Muslim community, including wealthy Arab and Arab/Malay families, was well recognized by the British before the Japanese invasion of 1942. The pragmatic colonizer had no reason to trigger religious conflict with the Muslims. To stay aloof in its administration was considered the best way to avoid conflict with the indigenous people and to protect colonial trading

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[5] From the beginning of the incident to the end of July 2002, I analysed 52 reports and commentaries. In comparison to the last few years when the media focused primarily on economic recovery, it was very unusual that so much attention was paid to such an incident.

[6] See the criticisms by the Home Affairs Minister, the Prime Minister and the Education Minister, *The Straits Times*, 27th January 2002; 3rd February 2002; 12th February 2002.

[7] See the defence by Mr Lim Boon Heng, Minister in the Prime Minister's Office, *The Straits Times*, 17th February 2002.

interests.[8] To the British colonial government there was no need to set up any rigid uniform regulations at schools that might lead to religious concerns. Indeed, I easily found school photos taken in colonial times, in which most of the Malay girls were wearing the *tudung*.[9] Therefore, it is hardly convincing for the Singaporean government to justify its favourable and particularistic treatment of the Sikh *turban* in contrast to its biased and harsh measures regarding the Muslim headscarf by reference to historical practice. Furthermore, the fact that all Muslim women teachers have been allowed to wear their *tudung* in national schools contradicts the government's position on students.

This is not the first time that Muslims have asked the Singaporean government to permit schoolgirls to wear the *tudung* at school. Two years ago, Muslim teachers put forward the same request when the government was to launch compulsory education.[10] Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong claimed that his government would not change the policy because the nation was not yet well integrated.[11] Goh seemed to impress upon the Muslim community that the practice was theoretically allowable, but the societal and ethnic situation was not mature enough for the government to make any change now. After the recent *tudung* incident, the Prime Minister once again emphasized in public that the policy could be reviewed and changed only when the time was right. He explained, "this is not a 'never never', but I want to build a successful multi-racial society first." Given the current ethnic landscape and international tension about Islam, it was unwise, Goh argued, to stir up any sensitive ethnic/religious issues. He further argued that "we have been functioning this way for many years: students don't wear headscarf in school. It has worked. I think better don't change it."[12] Yet, as reasoned by some students' parents, many schools have not followed the government line. Occasionally, some Malays have worn the *tudung* with the acquiescence of the school authorities. Some headmasters confessed that it was the first time for many years that schoolgirls had been forced to quit school because of Muslim attire.[13] If this is correct, then why has the government become so concerned recently about whether the rules are followed? Given the government's determination and the unfortunate fact that many Muslim students were forced, though unwillingly, to go to *madrasahs*, can we afford to dismiss the incident as a mere school dispute?

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[8] Jim Baker (1999), *Crossroads: A Popular History of Malaysia & Singapore*, Singapore and Kuala Lumpur: Times Book International, chapters 10 & 12; there were many similar practices in colonial Hong Kong: see Carl Smith, *A Sense of History: Studies in the Social and Urban History of Hong Kong*, HK: Hong Kong Educational Publishing Co., 1995.
[9] *Costume through Time Singapore*, Singapore: National Heritage Board, 1993, p.31.
[10] " Appeal on Islamic Attire", *The Straits Times*, 21st May 2000.
[11] " Time is Not Right for lslamic Attire in National Schools" , *The Straits Times*, 8th May 2000.
[12] " PM firm on *tudung* issue" , *The Straits Times*, 3rd February 2002.
[13] *The Straits Times*, 30th January 2002.

Sociological Reasoning: National Integration and Social Mobility

The excuse mostly used by Goh's cabinet and supported by public opinion is that if the government concedes on this issue, Malays and even other ethnic groups will present to the government ever more challenging demands.[14] As a result, "common space" will shrink, which in turn will do harm to ethnic harmonization and national integration.[15] Yet, the excuse is hardly convincing. How could the wearing of headscarves by primary school girls pose a threat to national integration and reduce the common space? In contrast to the deafening commodity promotions on Orchard Road (Singapore's most popular shopping district) and the answering of mobile phones in cinemas, the wearing of headscarves would never disturb others. There is no report that the Malay girls who wore the *tudung* were kept at a distance by other schoolmates and hence threatened inter-ethnic communication or understanding among students. As a news critic remarks, "school children are not inherently prejudiced against other races, unless they have been taught so by adults".[16] Some headmasters also defended the *tudung* by commenting that, except for arousing curiosity at the very beginning, it did not disturb the running of classes.[17] Obviously, forbidding Muslim students to show their faith when their religious act does not disturb others can only deepen the gap between different ethnic groups and eventually threaten ethnic harmony and national integration. Hence, the problem that was exposed in the incident is not whether the Muslim headscarf is permitted, but whether the particular ban and the government's ethnic policies in general are made on a clear, fair, and rational basis. How can different treatments of the same religious ritual, be it the Muslim's *tudung* or Sikh's *turban*, be justified as consistent in realizing the government's aim of promoting national integration? In other words, how can inter-ethnic antagonism not be intensified by such an inconsistent policy?

Indeed, the news critic Chua Lee Hoong argues that solution to the problem lies in getting Singaporean children used to diversity – in dress, looks, and cultural practices – and that this should start in school. One way of encouraging this is to allow school uniforms to be modified according to religious requirements.[18] This idea was immediately criticized by the Education Minister, Teo Chee Hean, who has for years advocated that "uniform is a way to stress common ties".[19] Sharing Teo's philosophy of conformity, Prime Minister Goh also argued against Chua's suggestion.[20]

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[14] See the interview with the Minister of State Yaacob Ibrahim, "Common Uniform Policy Strengthen National Unity", *The Straits Times* (Singapore), 9th February 2002.

[15] See the interview with Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, "SAP to Stay", *Today*, 4th February 2002.

[16] Chua Lee Hoong, "What lies behind the *tudung* debate?" *The Straits Times*, 30th January 2002.

[17] "4 still wearing *tudung* as deadline approaches", *The Straits Times*, 30th January 2002.

[18] Chua.

[19] See the interview with Education Minister Teo Chee Hean, "Uniform is Way to Stress Common Ties", *The Straits Times*, 2nd February 2002.

[20] "PM firm on *tudung* issue", *The Straits Times*, 3rd February 2002.

Ironically, in response to the *tudung* dispute, Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, the son of Lee Kuan Yew, presented a view that was in principle very similar to that of Chua: "in schools, pupils must learn about one another's customs and traditions, and learn how to get along with one another".[21] In principle, Lee and Chua Lee Hoong seem to share the same position. In Lee's speech, however, the pupils who should learn from others are Malay Muslims. It is puzzling why minorities, or only one minority in this case, should alone be obliged to make such efforts to learn from others.

The Singaporean government further argued that the girls had no obligation to wear the *tudung* as they had not reached puberty, and that when they had reached puberty, they could choose to study in *madrasahs*.[22] Following this line of thinking, one would agree that forbidding the wearing of headscarves in national schools is really not a big deal, as there are schools that not only take Muslim students but also allow them to dress according to their faith. However, there are only six *madrasahs* in Singapore, which all focus on subjects such as Islamic doctrines, Malay, and Arabic, etc., and in which mathematics, physics, and other practical sciences are considered less significant. Their educational purposes and structures are entirely different from that of the national schools. Furthermore, *madrasahs* depend financially on fundraising and donations from Islamic organizations. For decades their financial situation has been very strained, and the annual funding from the Ministry of Education is only 10 SGD per student.[23] Two years ago, when the government was to launch compulsory education, it promised to fund one of the *madrasahs* but only under the harsh condition that its students must have passed the Primary School Leaving Examination so as to be exempt from enrolment in national schools. The shortage of financial and institutional support from the government inevitably results in poor educational quality in *madrasahs* and they have become much inferior to the national schools. The parents in the *tudung* incident pointed out that judging from the faculties, facilities, and budget in the *madrasahs*, it is extremely difficult for students to enter university. Theoretically, Malay Muslim girls have the same opportunity to choose other schools, but in reality they have to make a painful decision in face of the following dilemma: either they perform their religious duties in the *madrasahs* but stay in a lower social cluster, or they enter a secular school in order to be mobilized upward in the rigid social hierarchy.[24] Given this dilemma, the above-mentioned 'compromise' put forward by parents is better understood as an accusation about the long-term marginalization of Malay children, and how they are being obstructed from upward mobility within the current education system.

On the surface, the PAP believes in meritocracy; the value of a person being based on fair competition regardless of race, and only excellent students

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[21] "Ministers call for 'give and take' attitude", *The Straits Times*, 17th February 2002.
[22] See Goh Chok Tong's speech, "Take Practical Approach to *Tudung* Issue", *The Straits Times*, 3rd February 2002.
[23] See *madrasah* homepage, http://www.madrasah.edu.sg/about.html, 12th July 2002.
[24] "Three girls to wear *tudung* to school today", *The Straits Times*, 1st February 2002.

are eligible for the key positions in government and major enterprises. As the academic achievements of Malay students are generally inferior to those of Chinese and Indians, the government is always inclined to attribute Malays' inferiority to their indolence and absence of motivation to achieve — the so-called 'culture deficient theory'.[25] Lee Kuan Yew, the former Prime Minister and founder of Singaporean authoritarianism, even emphasized that the talent of a human being is innately determined, and the government ought to focus on cultivating the elite and follow elitism in engineering the education system.[26] Accordingly, more resources should be allocated to the elite and, beginning from primary school, students should be classified solely on their talent and performance and educated separately from their inferiors. When the government is obsessed by elitism, these marginalized Malay Muslim students inevitably receive far less attention and support, and in return it is even harder for them to move upward in the education system. It is beyond doubt that the Singaporean government has deliberatively neglected the interactive relations between "inferiority" and negative socio-economic and educational factors for the Malay, placing sole emphasis on innate talent and cultural factors in policy-making.[27] Consequently, the Malay has been treated as having an inferior ethnicity. The government also hesitates to provide more resources to the "inferior" Malay through a fear of arousing discontent from other ethnic groups. In terms of educational support, it has thus limited itself for many years to exempting Malay students from tuition fees. There has been no other measure to improve the academic achievement of Malay students or to facilitate their study.[28] The population of Malays is two times that of Indians, but in the eyes of the PAP, Malays are the worst in terms of income, career, educational level, economic performance, potential, and contribution to the national economy. Some of their indices in the above items are only one tenth that of the Indians. The Indians' performance in the above items is better than the average, even better than that of the Chinese who are the majority in Singapore (see Tables 1-3 at end of paper). Is this one of the clues that can help explain the government's distinct policies toward Malay Muslims and

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[25] Lily Zubaidah Rahim (1998), *The Singapore Dilemma: The Political and Educational Marginality of the Malay Community*, New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 52-57.

[26] *The Straits Times*, 15th August 1983.

[27] In Western societies it is generally agreed that there is a close relationship between students' academic performance and their economic background. In most Asian newly industrialized economies (e.g., Hong Kong), the relation is also widely recognized. The opinion in Singapore is an exception, see Herbert Grossman (1995), *Teaching in a Diverse Society*, Boston: Allyn & Bacon, chapter 1; Mike Cole ed., (1989), *The Social Contexts of Schooling*, London: The Falmer Press, part 3; Tsang Wing Kwong (1993), "Educational and Early Socio-economic Status Attainment in Hong Kong," Occasional Paper No. 23, Hong Kong Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies, The Chinese University of Hong Kong.

[28] With government sponsorship, the Malays set up a self-help organization, *Mendaki* (Council on Education of Muslims Children), in 1982. Its purpose is to improve the performance of Malay students, but it has been criticized as being a government puppet. See Lily Zubaidah Rahim (1998) and Tania Li (1989), *Malays in Singapore: Culture, Economy and Ideology*, Singapore: Oxford University Press.

Indians?   Surely it is more reasonable to conceptualize the Malays' predicament as a class problem. For a long time, however, the PAP preferred to interpret the Malays' plight within the framework of ethnic discourse, as long as the living standard of the middle class could be sustained.[29]

The *tudung* incident revealed the marginalisation of Malay Muslims in terms of religious rights and social mobility.   Its deeper significance is the exposure of a perceived incompatibility between their religious ethos and the PAP's creed of economic growth.   Because of their religion, Malays are targeted, with more and more pressure imposed upon them.   In 1993 Prime Minister Goh initiated a survey on Malays' orientation of living and thoughts, and discovered that they were not interested in economic matters at all. Instead, they paid most attention to religious concerns, such as whether their children could be enrolled in the *madrasahs*.   Goh was frustrated by this result and considered it inappropriate to put religious concerns above the economic growth of the country.   Goh went even further by stating that such an attitude would hinder the development of the national economy.[30]   Evidence shows that Goh has borne a grudge for many years. He has continuously satirized Malay parents who were eager to send their children to *madrasahs*.[31]   A survey in May 2002 showed that 15,000 Malay parents planned to send their children to *madrasahs*.   Goh's cabinet was very irritated about this, and his religious advisor, Abdul Hamid, warned " their action will cause the Muslims to become weak when importance is only attached to individuals' obligations to God without including their obligations to the betterment of their society in terms of acquiring knowledge and management technology and economy".[32] With beliefs considered incompatible with the dominant ideology, and governed by the " superior" Chinese-PAP, how can the " inferior" Malay Muslims in Singapore escape marginalization?

The Development of Civil Society and the Political Realm: Has it Ended Too Soon?

With sluggish economic growth and the current anti-terrorism campaign, Malay Muslims are encountering more and more disappointments in their politics of recognition.   In the 1980s, when the economic situation was much better, the PAP Government was more liberal about the development of civil society.[33]   However, that was only to the extent of allowing the establishment of some middle class interest groups that were apolitical and without

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[29] Garry Rodan(1996), " State-society relations and political opposition in Singapore" , in Garry Rodan ed., *Political Oppositions in Industrialising Asia*, London: Routledge, p.105.
[30] *The Straits Times*, 3rd June 1993.
[31] *The Straits Times*, 28th September 1995; 5th November 1995; 5th December 1999.
[32] " 15,000 Muslim children shun secular schools" , *The Straits Times*, 29th May 2002.
[33] Garry Rodan (1996), " Class transformations and political tensions in Singapore's development" , in Richard Robison and David Goodman eds., *The New Rich in Asia: Mobile Phones, McDonalds and Middle-Class Revolution*, London: Routledge, pp. 37-39.

grassroots links. Under the worsening economic condition brought about by the Asian economic crisis, right-wing ideology revived the belief that the government could speed up the recovery of the economy by adopting an authoritarian model of governance, which has unfortunately shackled the political openness in this NIE.[34] The pressure exerted by the government and the public on the concerned parties in the *tudung* incident has proved, to a certain extent, that the space for the future development of civil society is quite limited.   Goh dismissed the symbolic importance of religious attire and exhorted parents by saying that it was not right to strangle education for girls for such an insignificant matter. He further warned that many people had lost their trust in Malay Muslims after this incident and some Chinese employers might no longer hire them.[35]   The Prime Minister was seemingly making an earnest plea in the best interests of the Malay Muslims, but also obviously warned those disobedient Malays that they would always be the losers in their confrontation with the government.   Echoing the Prime Minister's tone, ministers have emphasized the greater importance of economic recovery over other issues at a time when the country has been making efforts to strengthen the economy. In the face of this primary target, the people should rationally put aside religious issues.[36]

A recent poll reported that on this issue most Singaporeans side with the government; the proportion of the non-Muslim population is 80%.[37] For a long time, the government has placed more emphasis on meeting people's materialistic wants than on safeguarding other human rights. According to Internet and newspaper sources, most Singaporean Chinese thought that the Malay parents were causing trouble for little or no reason. However, whether this kind of consensus reflects the genuine opinions of the public is always hard to tell.   As a matter of fact, major local media have always constrained themselves by following the government, and self-censorship has been a common and conscious practice among most newspaper editors and reporters. As one critically examines the content of the *Straits Times*, one will notice that from January, when the incident took place, until the open comments by the government on the 3rd of February, there were quite a number of articles either showing sympathy for the Muslim parents or commenting impartially. However, after the Prime Minister and the Minister of Education made their public comments on 3rd February, fewer and fewer articles delivering opposing opinions were published.[38] The people supporting the Malays then found out that they had no public means to voice their concerns. Political parties and

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[34] Raul Daza, "The Asian Crisis: Political Responses to the Problem"; and Michael Vatikiotis, "The Long Hard Road Towards Political Reform in Asia", in Uwe Johannen et al., *The Political Dimensions of the Asian Crisis*, Singapore: Selected Books.

[35] "SM-Singapore Faces Danger Despite Arrests of 13", *The Straits Times*, 18th February 2002.

[36] See, for instance, *The Straits Times*, 27th January 2002; 16th June 2002.

[37] "Races not far apart", *The Straits Times*, 20th February 2002.

[38] After the Prime Minister's speech on the 3rd February, only four articles showed their sympathy for Malay parents in Singapore.

social activists used the Internet to condemn the *Straits Times* for its refusal to publish their articles.[39] Websites that were blacklisted by the administration for posting radical opinions were even closed down temporarily. Scholars and young intellectuals claimed the government showed its immaturity by limiting the public sphere for debate to the extent that public opinion could easily be manipulated or repressed.[40] Reporters disclosed that even though some leaders of the Muslim community and Muslim MPs had privately canvassed government officials for support, they were reluctant to side with their Muslim fellows and had chosen to back the government in public.[41] Yet, we still cannot underestimate the significance of the civic disobedience of the Malay Muslims. That the pressure from government and the public has not stopped shows that the firm stand of those parents frightened the government. As one of the sympathizers has powerfully remarked,

> Only a handful do so right now, but numbers alone do not attest to the issue's significance or the power it holds among the local Muslim community. What used to be a quite personal decision – to do or not to do the *tudung* – seems to grow into a political issue as threats are made to test the constitutionality of the Ministry's stand in court.[42]

In Singapore the term "political" has negative connotations in social discourse. Goh's cabinet has been successful in pressuring parents. In his February speech, he described those parents who criticized Muslim MPs as "politically motivated."[43] In May, Dr Abdul Hamid suggested that the Muslim parents might have received the support of the opposition Muslim party for reasons of politics.[44] Two months later he even suggested that the Malay opposition party, the Singapore National Front, had been in touch with the parents for a political purpose.[45] Such a strategy yielded the desired result. The parents were then alerted, resisted being regarded as "political", and so refused to align themselves with any political group.[46] Their resistance puzzled those who are concerned with the development of civil society in Singapore:

> Among some Muslim individuals or groups, underlying religious assertion may well be political assertion – the assertion of political stature and a battle for more political space. There is nothing inherently right or wrong about the latter; contestation for space is part and parcel of civil society and citizenhood. Trouble starts,

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[39] See http://www.fateha.com/; http://www.singaporedemocrats.org/index.php?id=media release/media0042.html; and http://www.singaporedemocrats.org/news/news0019.html.

[40] "*Tudung, Fateha*: Debates which ended too soon?" *The Straits Times*, 9th March 2002.

[41] "Muslim leaders must been seen to speak their minds", *The Straits Times*, 6th February 2002.

[42] Chua.

[43] *The Straits Times*, 3rd February 2002.

[44] *The Straits Times*, 29th May 2002.

[45] "Group wants parents delay *tudung* case", *The Straits Times*, 13th July 2002.

[46] "Three girls to wear *tudung* to school today", *The Straits Times*, 1st February 2002; "*Tudung* issue: PAS visits not political, say parents", *The Straits Times*, 1st June 2002.

though, when the two are confused or not recognized for being two separate forces at work.[47]

The changing attitude of the Singaporean government toward the Muslim schoolgirls' *tudung* from acquiescence to denial must have been influenced, to a certain extent, by the post-9/11 international context. Singapore has been closely related to the West, especially with the US, in the fields of the economy and military affairs.[48] It is quite natural for Singapore to support the anti-terrorism campaign led by the American government. Furthermore, the government in Singapore has keenly noticed how American anti-terrorism has dictated its foreign policy since 9/11. Indonesia and Malaysia, two Islamic neighbours of Singapore, have reacted quite differently to Washington's quest for cooperation in fighting terrorism. Compared with Indonesia, Malaysia has been more proactive and supportive of Washington's anti-terrorism. In accordance with their responses, Washington has thus drastically adjusted its relations with Indonesia, which was once its close ally, and with Malaysia, which was once a major critic of America's global policy.[49] The Singaporean government must have observed the change, and therefore adjusted its policy towards the Muslim minority. In addition to moving quickly to arrest any suspected terrorists, Singapore has expressed anger towards Indonesia, which has shown little inclination to act on information that Singapore has provided to it about radicals with terrorist connections.[50] Goh has repeated several times that there would be no alteration concerning the school rules on the *tudung*, and that the Government's rigidity on this policy was related to the ongoing anti-terrorist campaign and the fact that a dozen Muslims were arrested because they were engaged in terrorism in Singapore.[51]

Early in November 2001, Goh complained about the Muslim community's uncooperative stand on America's war in Afghanistan, and even labelled it a threat "to split the nation apart."[52] In fact, according to a recent poll on America's war against terrorism, 75% of Muslims and 84% of non-Muslims in Singapore supported the US.[53] Although the difference was only nine percent, it was sufficient to make the government and the public nervous. This insignificant difference was unfortunately manipulated as a sign of potential terrorist threat from the Muslim minority. As a result, the Singaporean government reasoned, one of the ways to prevent the occurrence

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[47] Chua.

[48] Trish Saywell (2002), " Common Ground" , *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 165 (3), 24th January 2002, p.21.

[49] John Gershman (2002), " Is Southeast Asia the Second Front?" *Foreign Affairs*, 81(4), p.60.

[50] " US Wins Licence to Open Second Front in Terror War" , *The Times* (London), 30th July 2002.

[51] *The Straits Times*, 3rd February 2002; " *Tudung* issue: 'Not wise' to involve outsiders" , *The Straits Times*, 18th February 2002; " *Tudung* issue must not lead to segregation" , *The Straits Times*, 3rd March 2002.

[52] "Ruling party confident of Malay backing" , *The Straits Times*, 2nd November 2001.

[53] *The Straits Times*, 20th February 2002.

of terrorism was to abandon all open Muslim religious ceremonies and symbols. Such linkage of Muslim religious issues with terrorism is without doubt irrational. It is not certain whether these measures can attain the desired goal, but they most certainly have worsened the relationship between the Malay Muslims and the government and other ethnic groups, and have aroused widespread protests in neighbouring Islamic countries.

Unfortunately, the incident has developed into a vicious cycle. It has naturally stirred up strong anti-Singaporean sentiment and radical responses in Singapore's Islamic neighbours, i.e. Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei. Criticism of the Singaporean government's oppression of the religious rights of Malay Muslims has been heard from all these countries. Ministers and MPs have strongly condemned the violation of Muslims' human rights, political parties have raised funds for the parents' legal action, and universities and NGOs have protested for justice in the media, embassies, and to Singapore's High Commission.[54] More than a hundred angry protestors even besieged the Singaporean Embassy in Jakarta.[55] As far as Singapore is concerned, two geo-political factors are vital to it as a small city-state: regional security and its dependence on its neighbours for natural resources. Maintaining good and balanced relationships with its neighbours has always been the major concern in Singapore's foreign policy. Yet the mindset of the policy-makers is also deeply moulded by their biased understanding of the Islamic resurgence movements in its peripheral neighbours (including the Philippines).[56] Domestically, Muslims are usually stereotyped as disobedient to the government, disloyal to the country, and uncompromising in safeguarding the values of their religion in the face of temptations posed by the materialistic desire for a middle-class living standard. The Singaporean government has regarded such a politically disobedient group as a bad example of an ethnic minority – a radical other. In a country composed of diverse religious traditions and ethnic groups, Islam is inevitably perceived as a challenge to the government's cautious policy of maintaining harmony in domestic politics, and Muslim Malays as an ethnic group pose a threat to domestic control and national security. For more than 10 years, Goh has been complaining about Malay Muslims' poor support, in contrast to Chinese support, for the Chinese-

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[54] " Politicians and groups criticize S'pore over *tudung*" , *The Straits Times*, 31st January 2002; " KL minister tells S'pore to heed *tudung* sensitivity" ,*The Straits Times*, 3rd February 2002; " PAS leaders in Singapore to give support to *tudung* girls" , *The Straits Times*, 21st May 2002; " PAS raises $4,700 for *tudung* girls" , *The Straits Times*, 23rd May 2002; and " S'pore under fire again at PAS assembly" , *The Straits Times*, 2nd June 2002. A political party in Brunei also delivered its letter of protest to the Singapore Government, see *Sing Pao* (Hong Kong), 7th February 2002. " PAS Youth hands protest memorandums to embassies" , *New Straits Times* (Kuala Lumpur), 30th January 2002; " Keadilan urges tolerance over wearing of *tudung*" ,*New Straits Times*, 5th February 2002.

[55] *Hong Kong Commercial Press*, *Oriental Daily* (Hong Kong), 26th February 2002.

[56] Erich Kolig (2001), " Modernisation without secularization? Civil Pluralism, Democratisation, and Re-Islamisation in Indonesia" , *New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies*, 3(2), pp.17-41; Patricia A. Martinez (2001), " The Islamic State or the State of Islam in Malaysia" ,*Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 23(3), pp.474-503.

dominated PAP in parliamentary elections. However, what has bothered him may only be a 5-10% difference between these two ethnic groups.[57] In response to this insignificant difference, in allocating public housing Goh has limited the proportion of Malay families and their relatives living in the same district to avoid any potential negative influence on his party in elections.[58] He has gone even further by restricting the enrolment of Malays in the army to avoid any possibility of their collusion with Islamic extremists in neighbouring countries. Goh's policies have been so discriminative that even Habibi, the moderate President of Indonesia, did not hesitate to express concern about the suffering of his fellow Muslims in Singapore.[59]

In the *tudung* incident, I noticed the following paradox: the more critical the responses and interventions received from the neighbouring countries, the more severe the oppression imposed by the Singaporean government upon Malay Muslims.[60] It seems that ever since independence, the Singaporean government, like the Israeli government, has been moulded by crisis thinking.[61] As a matter of fact, such challenges have always posed a real threat to the security of the country: such things as concern over the nature of colonial rule, ethnic conflict and riots, threats from neighbouring countries, the spread of communism in Southeast Asia, the recent Asian Economic Crisis and the 9/11 terrorist attacks all demonstrate how national security has always been the major concern of the Singapore Government. Yet, to be sensitive to threats and hence oriented by crisis thinking is quite different from being moulded and hence limited by crisis thinking. The Singapore Government has been well known for a form of crisis management that is always ready to surrender to authoritarianism and the violation of peoples rights for the sake of the so-called national security. In the case of the Muslim headscarf, we witness the same line of reasoning. The incident, occurring just at a time when Muslim people all around the world could easily be labelled as the object of anti-terrorism, has been highly politicized as a means to resolve internal ethnic conflict and to tame potential external threats from Islamic revivalists in Malaysia and Indonesia. Occurring in the high tide of anti-terrorism, a case involving the violation of basic human rights has been justified by the government as a local battle against potential terrorism. In the face of the alchemical discourse created by the government, Muslim MPs were forced to explain to the PAP the difference between Muslim piety and Islamic fundamentalist extremism and to give assurances that the Islamic resurgence movement of the Malay Muslims has nothing in common with the latter.[62]

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[57] *The Straits Times*, 26th September 1988.

[58] Chua Beng-Huat (1997), *Political Legitimacy and Housing: Stakeholding in Singapore*, London & New York: Routledge, chapter 7.

[59] *The Straits Times*, 29th September 1999.

[60] " S'pore to KL groups: Stay out of *tudung* issue" , *The Straits Times*, 1st February 2002; " Young PAP says Malaysian politicians should respect Singapore's right to resolve domestic matter internally" , *The Straits Times*, 6th February 2002 " *Tudung* issue: 'Not wise' to involve outsiders" , *The Straits Times*, 18th February 2002.

[61] "PM Reveals Plan to Crash Jet into Changi", *The Straits Times*, 6th April 2002.

[62] "Don't confuse piety and extremism" , *The Straits Times*, 26th November 2001.

Manipulating the endless crises and threats, the Singapore Government successfully manoeuvres the society to sacrifice the freedom and human rights of the minority for the interests of the majority.

The Religious and Social Implications of the Muslim Headscarf

Singapore is not the only country that forbids Muslim attire at school. Similar events have taken place in France, Thailand, Turkey, Israel, and most recently in Spain. The reasons for the prohibition vary from the theoretical to the practical. In the eyes of feminists, the Muslim headscarf is a means for the oppression of women and hence should not be allowed in schools, which are places to educate using enlightened values. Feminists in Canada used this argument in advocating the abandonment of Muslim headscarves. Similarly, Goh has succeeded in manufacturing a social discourse that criticizes the religious act of wearing the *tudung* as "conservative."[63] Yet the fact is that the government and most Chinese are ignorant of Islam in general and Malay culture in particular. An illustration of the misunderstanding of the Chinese about Malay Muslims is the fact that when some Chinese parents heard that their children's teacher was a Muslim, wearing the *tudung*, they requested that their children be transferred to other classes.[64]

When judging Singapore's policies, we cannot be ignorant of the religious meaning and social implications of the *tudung*. The *Quaran* does not tell women to wear headscarves. This became part of Muslim ritual only after readers made specific interpretations of the *Quaranic* call for modesty with regard to women's attire. Nowadays most Muslims, be they orthodox or liberal, regard it as a must. Yet, there are no agreed principles concerning the extent to which the head and face should be covered. Muslims living in the West or those living in countries that have frequent contact with the West are more inclined to think that covering the face is not necessary.[65] In the case of Malay Muslims, the origin of wearing the headscarf has a direct relationship with the *dakwah* religious movement of the 1970s. According to Nagata, the clothing of Malay women was quite casual before the movement, but with the dramatic change in Malaysia's economy during the 1970s and 1980s, women grew up in that period consciously feeling that they could barely hold on to their spirituality in the face of rapid modernization and urbanization. In search of Muslim tradition, university students and young women professionals living in the cities thus began to launch the *dakwah* to look for self-assertion with the help of Islamic spirituality. By dressing in religious clothing, they showed their faith in Islam, identified themselves with traditional culture and, most

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[63] " PM Reveals Plan to Crash Jet into Changi" , *The Straits Times*, 6th April 2002; Asad Latif, " There's no room for skepticism, distrust and fear in Singapore" , *The Straits Times Weekly Edition*, 6th April 2002, pp.14-15.

[64] Trish Saywell (2002), " Common ground" , *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 165 (3), 24th January 2002, pp.20-2.

[65] Annes S. Roald (2001), *Women in Islam: The Western Experience*, London: Routledge.

importantly, made a gesture to resist the intrusion of Western secular clothing into their Islamic country.[66] What is most interesting is the fact that most of them had received higher education, and cared much about their self-image. Hence, it is beyond doubt that wearing the headscarf was a self-assertive personal choice. Such a rational and self-conscious movement should not be perceived as equivalent to a religious extremism that forces women to cover their faces with headscarves. The Islamic resurgence movement launched by young cultured Malay women was not an independent phenomenon. It also took place elsewhere in Southeast Asia, such as southern Thailand and Mindanao in the Philippines. There is no doubt that one side-effect of the movement is that it annihilated other traditional clothing, but the religious message conveyed by wearing the headscarf is what deserves our attention. To Malay women, no matter whether they are wearing the *tudung* nowadays or were wearing a *selendang* (a headscarf loosely covering the head and neck) in the early days, their religious act has the same message: to discourage male sexual fantasies, a woman should not expose her hair and neck (not necessarily including the face) in public. Some Islamic women even go further to insist that by wearing the headscarf they gain more respect from other people. Men will then not treat them as targets of sexual assault; and there is no need to dress themselves up just to please other people and to make themselves adherents of the Western fashion industry. For them, wearing headscarves means women's liberation in the genuine sense of the term. The meaning of this religious ritual is in sharp contrast with the general misunderstanding that the headscarf is a symbol of oppression of women's rights.

We should not ignore the fact that those parents who were involved in the *tudung* incident placed much emphasis on their children's religious education and preferred to send them to *madrasahs* rather than secular schools. These people were not only highly educated, but had also studied in the West with government sponsorship.[67] Should we deliberately dismiss this choice, as the right-wing extremists did, as irrational religious frenzy? Should the educational values held by the parents be condemned because they are not politically correct in an authoritarian country that stands against universal humanitarian ideas originating in the West? Should the Singaporean government take advantage of the widespread anti-Muslim sentiment in the West at the moment and use it to support its own abuse of minority rights? This complicated phenomenon definitely deserves further scrutiny.

Conclusion

The prolonged suffering of Malay Muslims can never be fully understood by examining a single incident. What I am particularly concerned about is

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[66] Judith Nagata (1995), " Modern Malay Women and the Message of the 'Veil' ", Jahan Karim ed., *Male and female in Developing Southeast Asia*, Washington: Oxford University Press.
[67] *The Straits Times*, 29th May 2002.

whether the Singaporean government can achieve its goals of social stability and national solidarity. By not allowing Muslim schoolgirls to wear the *tudung* at school, the government has violated Malay Muslims' right to religious freedom, a right that does not infringe on the rights of others. Malays have long been marginalized in Singapore, and lack both social recognition and political security. Hence, Islam serves them as a spiritual support. Abolishing the right to wear the *tudung* has sent a strong message to Malays that their social status has been further marginalized and their spiritual support is under threat. Consequently, the social stability and ethnic coexistence of Singapore's people as a whole will be threatened in the long run.

Will the government's policy really result in a long-awaited social stability and national solidarity? The government has always claimed that its multiracial policies provide equal opportunity for all ethnic groups. Theoretically, every ethnic group can live according to its own culture, use its own language, and believe in its own religion. However, there is another side to the story. Besides pursuing diversity, the government also advocates "ethnic harmony and unity". To achieve this goal, all ethnic groups are compelled to eliminate their cultural differences so that harmony, coexistence, and integration can be achieved. The government also strives to pursue the ideal of the so-called "New Singaporean" along with new Singaporean "shared values", according to which individual interests and values are secondary to the interests of society as a whole, with economic growth being the ultimate national goal at the expense of minority interests.

In practice, ethnic relations are never an isolated issue. They can only be understood in the web of power politics. Looking the web of Singaporean politics, the current ethnic predicament is nothing more than a product of a power conflict between different interest groups. Disguised in the government's idealistic phraseology of ethnic harmony is a battle for power, control and counter-control, degradation and recognition, coercion and freedom among different ethnic groups. On the surface the ethnic issues look very complicated, but the factors that render ethnicity problematical are very straightforward. The following observations of two Muslims may help at this point to explain the core issue in the debate about wearing the *tudung* at school.[68] An Indian Muslim said: one should first be informed that dissension about wearing the *tudung* has been a phenomenon in ethnic politics for a number of years. It is no new thing. What is an issue in the recent debate is that the Singaporean government's reaction has been reduced to a kind of ego issue. Persistent *tudung* activities have caused the government to dig in its heels, and now the situation is one of the ego issues disguised in the vocabulary of national unity. A similar opinion was held by a British Muslim who remarked that while a large number of Muslim Singaporeans he knew shared the concerns espoused in the *tudung* dispute, the confrontational approach placed the government in a position where accession to any of the demands meant that it would lose face.

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[68] "*Tudung* controversy a test in art of negotiation", *The Straits Times*, 20th February 2002.

A similar crisis once took place in Thailand sixteen years ago. Unlike Singapore, the Thai government eventually legalized the Muslim ritual. Its Ministry of Education revised regulations, thus permitting Muslim students to wear their traditional ethnic clothing at school. Sixteen years later, has that tolerant decision belittled the "common space" in Thailand and destroyed ethnic unity? Such is surely not the case. A Muslim woman in Singapore thus could not help asking the government, "why should Singapore not prove itself capable of a new paradigm in racial integration?"[69]

Robert J. Ackerman has argued that mainstream religion has great potential to develop into a socially critical force.[70] Indeed, the *tudung* incident in Singapore may be an excellent footnote to the above diagnosis. Buddha once said, "there are three thousand worlds immanent in a conscious-instant." Bearing in mind that, apart from the abovementioned Thai actions, France also relaxed its ban on headscarves in schools after a ten year debate, the Singaporean government should take heed of historical precedent and show the world a new Singapore that is truly diversified, multi-ethnic and, most importantly, tolerant.

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[69] Chua.

[70] Robert J. Ackerman (1985), *Religion as Critique*, Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press.