

Islamophobia in Singapore and/ vs Western Islamophobia: the state, colonialism, and the Muslim experience

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The colonial and Western heritage of Islamophobia influences the way that Muslims are perceived today in Singapore. Focusing upon structural and governmental discourses, rather than personal or day-to-day instances, I argue that while a Southeast Asian Islamophobia will be distinct from a Western one, we must be aware of this heritage and the way it manifests within current perceptions of Muslims. This forms a backdrop for understanding how Muslims relate to the wider society and each other within contemporary secular nation states.

An overview of Singapore's history and demographics

Arguments for the founding of Singapore dispute whether the city state dates back [to 1819](#), the 'foundation' begun by Sir Stamford Raffles and the start of British colonialism, or to the [fourteenth century or before](#) when historical records of settlers and kingdoms, seen as the ancestors of today's Malay population, can be established. While the dates may seem a matter of [historiographical debate](#), they concern the contemporary [nation building narrative](#).

After Independence in 1965 (Singapore gained partial self-rule from the British in

1959, fully established in 1970), Singapore sought to develop an inclusive national identity which would not be a Chinese majoritarian state, giving due prominence to the Malays. The People's Action Party (PAP), Singapore's dominant political party pre-independence and which has held governmental power since independence, gave assurances to Malays in the run up to independence that they would govern in the interest of all citizens. This has been termed a [multiracialism](#) (today the more widely globally used term 'multiculturalism' is often deployed). Demographic proportions have remained, arguably, [remarkably static](#) since the early twentieth century: c. 75 percent Chinese, 14 percent Malays, 10 percent Indians (mainly Tamils), and the rest 'Others', predominately Eurasians. These four 'races' compose the CMIO matrix (Chinese-Malay-Indian-Other) inscribed onto every citizen's identity card as a distinct (and [unitary](#)) [racial identity](#).

The assurances to Malays are established in such ways as a dedicated cabinet post (the Minister-in-Charge of Muslim Affairs); Shariah (locally, Syariah) law being provided for under the Administration of Muslim Law Act (AMLA), which particularly covers marital and inheritance law; and, the national language being Malay, with the national anthem in that language (English is the working language, and alongside Mandarin and Tamil these make up the four official languages). Seeking unity and amity, the [official narrative](#) has been that Singapore was founded in 1819, even framing it as a new nation where [everybody is an immigrant](#) with the colonial legacy embraced as a uniting factor. [Promoted as a founder](#), Raffles has [proved controversial](#), and while 2019 was termed the bicentennial, a [growing historical awareness](#) of the older history meant that there was a need to [foreground this earlier history](#), relating to wider global [discourse on decolonisation](#), and to changes in how [Singapore's story has been told](#) ([the most recent secondary school history textbook](#) starts Singapore's history in 1299).

As well as being ethnically diverse, Singapore is also [religiously diverse](#). It has a [Buddhist-Daoist majority](#), relating to its Chinese majority demographics, while Christianity has recently overtaken Islam as the second largest religion. The last of the demographically, and arguably socio-politically, significant religions is Hinduism

which is related to the Tamil population, brought by the British as plantation workers, as well as other Indian immigrants. Undeniably, religion is an important factor within Singaporean society, and plays a key role in most people's identities. It is also often centrally posited in society and politics, sometimes as a form of 'moral ballast,' with [secularism in Singapore](#) often officially framed as 'religion-friendly'. The government is also distinctly interventionist, and the often vaunted 'harmonious religious coexistence' is, some may say, managed by an iron fist in a velvet glove, with measures including the [Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act \(MRHA\)](#), originating at the end of the 1980s and updated in 2019, alongside a range of other legislative and organisational instruments which oversee what has been described as '[precarious toleration](#)'.

With regards to governance of the Muslim population, beyond what has been noted above, [MUIS](#) (Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura, or Singapore Muslim Council, a government statutory body) has oversight for the wellbeing of the Malay-Muslim community, and incorporates the Office of the Mufti and the Fatwa Board. MUIS also runs an [Asatizah Recognition Scheme \(ARS\)](#) for the accreditation of Islamic religious teachers/scholars before they can operate in Singapore (notably, a requirement which does not apply to any other tradition). This scheme has a role to provide what is [seen as local context](#) for how Islam operates in Singapore and to give approved interpretations of Islam to Singaporean graduates from Islamic universities overseas (currently Singapore has no institution for tertiary Islamic-based education). This is to counter a perceived possibility of young local Islamic scholars being exposed to potentially 'extreme' interpretations of Islamic tradition in places such as Egypt, Malaysia, and Saudi Arabia where many do their studies.

Within this context, understanding how Muslims are framed in society, especially in relation to Islamophobic tropes, helps provide a backdrop to understanding both inter- and intra-religious dynamics, including in relation to the secular state (and, within this, seeing interreligious relations as including the [non-religious demographic](#)).

The Malay-Muslim

While I have spoken of ‘Malays’ or ‘Muslims’ above, it is common to use the term ‘Malay-Muslims’; which, it should be noted, is part of a range of [racialised terms](#) for [homogenising](#) groups inherited [from British colonial](#) practice and [ideology](#). Within Singapore, to be Malay is to be Muslim, with over 98 percent of those labelled as Malays also identifying as Muslims (98.8 percent in the [2020 census](#)). Islam is primarily associated with Malay customs and culture such that the two are often perceived or framed as coterminous. Indeed, to cease to be a Muslim would, in the eyes of many of the community, mean that one would cease to be a Malay. Nevertheless, neither term names [a monolithic category](#), while even though the association of Malayness with Islamicity was constructed through British colonial organisational imperatives, then reinforced in post-independence narratives, it also involves the agency of those so named and identifying.

Malay-Muslim is also distinct, because, in contrast to the other Chinese-Malay-Indian-Other markers, Malay acts both as a perceived racial category, but also a religious marker. While many assume that most Indians are Hindus, as indeed the majority are (approximately 57 percent), there is not the same cultural resonance between them, and certainly large numbers of Indians are Christian, Sikh, or Muslim. Moreover, because of the way that the understanding of ‘Malay-Muslim’ operates, even if one were technically an Indian according to one’s identity card, if one spoke Malay and followed Malay customs then one would be [accepted within the Malay-Muslim](#) community as a ‘Malay’. The case of Maria Hertogh (discussed below) also seemingly made it possible that somebody ethnically identifiable as a white Caucasian could become a ‘Malay’.

Defining Islamophobia

In [the contemporary literature](#), Islamophobia has come to be understood as a form of prejudice. [Prejudice](#) is conceptualised into three aspects: stereotypes, or an

ideological frame relating to concepts and images of others; prejudice, or an emotional dislike with an active acceptance of the stereotypes; and, discrimination, or enacted prejudicial acts and systems. In the case of Islamophobia, this is prejudice against Muslims and those perceived as Muslims. Importantly, prejudice is not simply about the attitudes and emotions of individuals, but also what are often defined as structural factors, meaning that prejudice infects or permeates through wider cultural, social, legal, and political systems.

Importantly, Islamophobia is a racialised form of prejudice. In other words, it operates upon the basis of the signifier 'Muslim' [acting as a racial category](#): by stereotyping a homogenised and essentialised identity for all Muslims (or taking this as the default against which the potential of a 'good Muslim' may be identified), the Islamophobe operates with a racialised notion of Islam and Muslim.

Particularly since 9/11, policy makers and others in the public eye, including some scholars, have been keen to distinguish the 'good Muslims' from the 'bad Muslims,' i.e. those who are peaceful and law abiding as against those who 'illegitimately' employ Islam for political ends and to justify violence. From an insider perspective, it is quite possible to argue [that Islamic tradition](#) (from exegesis of the Qur'an, the hadith and Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammed, Shariah legal injunctions, and understandings of jihad) is antithetical to the kind of terrorist activities carried out by the likes of Al-Qaeda, Jemaah Islamiyah, and ISIS. This is not particularly in dispute. However, the public discourse of the 'good Muslim' puts an onus on all Muslims in a way that is not similarly done for other communities or traditions. For instance, if a terrorist activity is carried out by a Christian or Buddhist then all Christians and all Buddhists (or, at least, their leaders) are not expected, or called upon, to denounce this action and declare it as not legitimate within their tradition. Hence the Muslim (*qua* their racialised status) is considered 'guilty' until proven innocent. Moreover, the way that Islam is framed within this context means that the 'good Muslim' must deny that their religion has anything to do with politics, in a way that, especially within the West, is not considered necessary for Christianity, which is often readily mixed with or associated with governance, politicians, and the

political process ([secularism is rarely, if ever, clearly distinct from religion](#)). As a signifier, the very assumption that we can/must locate the ‘good Muslims’ (which necessitates the perceived very real possibility of there being ‘bad Muslims’ lurking close-at-hand) is uniquely applied to Islam. This marks Islam as distinctive and inherently problematic: the need exists to define ‘the good ones’.

Colonial Islamophobia in Singapore

The above draws, primarily, from theory established in Western contexts. It may therefore be asked as to whether there is a distinctive Southeast Asian, even Singaporean, Islamophobia. While patterns of human prejudice have something of a universal character—for human hatred, prejudice, and othering draw upon impulses from a deep evolutionary background—this does not deny particular contextual manifestations. As such, we will expect linkages conceptually. Moreover, across South and Southeast Asia, Islamophobia manifests within certain forms of [Hindu and Buddhist discourse](#) which have a clear lineage derived from Western colonial influence. Given direct British colonial rule from 1819 to 1959, we may expect any Islamophobia in Singapore to bear some colonial stamp. This is not to say that we can simply read Western norms onto this part of Asia, but we should not expect to see something radically different either.

We can lay out some colonial background in the Singaporean context. Firstly, within the definition of Islamophobia laid out above, [Raffles](#), like many [colonial officials](#), would be defined as an Islamophobe, which is [readily seen](#) in his writings; for instance, he spoke derogatively of ‘Arabs’ (perceived as [idealised Muslims](#)) and [described Mohamed](#) as a ‘false’ prophet. This was not surprising given the way the signifiers ‘Europe’ (often denoting ‘Christian’) and ‘the Muslim world’ were co-created as antagonistic in the imaginary of ‘Europeans’, in a trajectory going back at least as far as the crusades, while [‘continuity’](#) with colonialism has been noted as a facet of contemporary Islamophobia. Moreover, we must pay attention to the wider colonial context, as Singapore existed within an imperial system. Particular attention

can be given to the [Indian Mutiny](#) (or First War of Independence) of 1857 in which Muslims were framed as potentially seditious and unable to accept a non-Muslim as their ruler. The notion of the perceived aggressiveness of Muslims and their potential for sedition was reinforced by two local incidents. Firstly, in 1823, a [Malay man Sayid Yasin](#) stabbed Colonel William Farquhar, the First Resident of Singapore (a non-fatal attack), and, secondly, the [Sepoy Mutiny of 1915](#) saw Indian Muslims rebel when they believed that they would be sent to fight against the Ottomans who then held the title of Caliph. As such, colonial and [Western images](#) of the hostile and [potentially disloyal Muslim](#) (for their loyalty lay with other Muslims above their countrymen or other links) permeated pre-independence Singapore.

Islamophobia and Singapore

As noted, the Singaporean government under the People's Action Party has gone to great lengths to reassure its Malay-Muslim population that it is fully included within the life of the nation. Muslims have played, and continue to play, leading roles in society. The current president, Madam Halimah, is a Muslim [representing the Malay-Muslim constituency](#) within this leading symbolic, but significant, role. Recently, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong reversed a headscarf ban meaning that the tudung (hijab) would be allowed for public facing government staff, [including nurses](#), which had long been an issue of [simmering resentment](#). Yet, at the same time, there are wider public concerns, and undoubtedly personal antagonism towards Muslims will be felt by some, meaning that government ministers have sought to [reassure the public](#) that extremism is not rife, and have spoken [against Islamophobia](#), though violent antagonism is [rare](#). This personal level of animosity, however, is not the concern [addressed here](#). Rather, the issue will be whether or not we can detect forms of structural Islamophobia, particularly through the narratives of the state. These may well bear the imprint of the colonial legacy, and the ongoing neo-colonial hegemony of Western norms. A key question could be whether, and how, we can locate a distinctly Singaporean Islamophobia, though I raise it as a matter of potential inquiry rather than trying to define and classify it here.

Returning to nation-building narratives, two key events at the cusp of independence form part of the [myths](#) of modern Singapore. The first was the [Maria Hertogh riots](#) of 1950, some aspects of which are noted here, while its contemporary resonance is shown by its [invocation in speeches](#), and for Chinese New Year 2021 a 15-part television special [This Land is Mine](#) aired on prime time television, which showed a fictionalised and [adapted version of the Maria Hertogh story](#). During WWII, a Dutch family left their daughter in safe keeping with a Malay friend, and several years after the war sought her return. But Maria, now called [Nadra binte Ma'arof](#), was both [regarded as a Malay-Muslim by the community](#) and saw the friend, Che Aminah, as her mother. Initially, the courts kept Maria with her adoptive mother, but when an arranged marriage was made under Muslim customary law, Maria's birth parents again took legal recourse and this time the thirteen-year-old was returned. Inflamed by preachers and some local newspapers, especially when it was believed she was being (re)converted to Christianity, the Malay-Muslims rioted, and 19 deaths and 173 casualties ensued. The second incident was the so-called [Race Riots](#) of 1964 (there were also [less mentioned Race Riots in 1969](#)) between the Chinese and Malays, which resulted in 23 deaths and 454 serious injuries.

Together, these events have contributed to the sense that [intercommunal conflict is inevitable](#) without strong state control. But, also, with both incidents involving the Malay-Muslim community, it has helped add to the sense that Muslims pose an inherent fault-line in society, potentially violent when their interests are threatened or traditions not fully respected. However, certainly, in state narratives the Malay-Muslim involvement is not made central, rather the messaging is about racial fault-lines as inherently dangerous. This is in stark contrast to what would likely happen within a Western context.

A more [distinctive narrative](#) about Malay-Muslims operates, though, in relation to the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF). At around 18 years of age, it is compulsory for all male Singaporeans to undertake two years of [national service](#). While often seen as a key part of the building of the fabric of social cohesion amongst the various racial groups, it is nevertheless a point of contention. A quote [by Lee Kuan Yew](#) from

1999 summed up the concern: 'You put in a Malay officer who's very religious and who has family ties in Malaysia in charge of a machine-gun unit, that's a very tricky business.'^[1] In other words, given Singapore's split from the Federation of Malaysia and the perceived common Malay-Muslim bond, there is a worry that, in the event of a war, the loyalty of Malay-Muslim citizens would be in doubt. While, officially, there is no exclusion of Malay-Muslims in the SAF, this has [been the case historically](#). Despite some [high-ranking Malay officers](#), there [remains a deep suspicion](#) that an exclusion applies primarily to pilots in the air force, the armoured division of the army, and parts of the navy. In other words, it is often felt that no Malay-Muslim would be given control of an item that could cause serious harm to their own side (such as a fighter plane, tank, etc.). While some Malays do hold such positions, they remain underrepresented. Defence Minister Ng Eng Hen [has stated](#) that while 'race' is not a factor for 'sensitive' positions in the armed forces, a recruit is assessed on 'his ability and beliefs to ensure that he is not a security risk.' As such, the same dynamic of concern about loyalty that ran through colonial British thinking about Muslims potentially permeates at least some aspects of the Singapore government's current perception of its own Malay-Muslim demographic, with the issue of 'beliefs' being a factor. While Minister Ng did not explicitly make reference to Islamic beliefs, he was speaking in the context of Malay servicemen being allowed as sailors on military vessels, raising the implication that this is what 'beliefs' may refer to. Meanwhile, Lee Kuan Yew's quoted words remain in the collective consciousness of the nation.

Returning to the historiography with which we began, the storytelling of the nation has often [invisibilised Malays](#) with the 1819 foundation narrative [denying the agency](#) and history of older Malay kingdoms in shaping Singapore. This has also, some have argued, made Malay belonging seemingly problematic, and something which is [potentially dangerous](#).

Finally, post 9/11, Singapore, especially in relation to its own context, has been supportive of what is often termed 'the war on terror'. As such, global dynamics in the post-colonial period (arguably neocolonial influences) have also had an impact on

the local scene. Singapore has faced its own terrorist threat from [militant neo-Islamic jihadism](#) in the form of [Jemaah Islamiyah's](#) (JI) thwarted plots to attack the city state in 2001 and 2002. Responses have arisen from within the Muslim community, notably with the Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG) as a community-led programme run by respected local religious leaders and teachers who go into jails and seek to deradicalise detainees, at first those influenced by JI and later by ISIS with [some notable success](#). It has also seen Singapore involved in the global [securitisation of aspects of community cohesion](#) efforts, including interreligious dialogue work. Local politicians have also [invoked the language](#) of the 'good Muslim'.

This securitised framing and the employment of the good-Muslim-bad-Muslim trope, can be put into the context of MUIS providing its own guidelines of what a Muslim should be like within the current day and age in Singapore, encapsulated within the '[Singapore Muslim Identity](#)' conception. Well respected scholar Charlene Tan has placed this within the context of a top-down attempt to [define Islam in Singapore](#) that promotes a 'moderate' against an 'extreme' version of the tradition. As such, the local Muslim community is involved in seeking to create a discourse that can align Islamic values with the nation, and so the good-Muslim-bad-Muslim dynamic is not determined by external or secular forces alone. In all contexts, internal Muslim discourses are part of wider flows of description, but given MUIS' position, it has wider influence. Nevertheless, there can be a perception that the discourse remains a governmental top-down approach that [may not always resonate](#) with the grassroots. Nevertheless, when [politicians invoke these notions](#), they can be seen to draw from internal Muslim debates which may give a different framing to the discussions. Such internal Muslim-centric debates of 'good' and 'bad' Muslims is not a facet of recent Islamophobic discourse; communities have always [policed their boundaries](#) to determine correct/acceptable/legitimate expressions against what is deemed incorrect/unacceptable/illegitimate. Since at least the time of the Kharijites, Muslims have sought to define 'acceptable' and 'unacceptable' forms of Islamic belief, practice, discourse, and behaviour, and this discourse still holds [resonance](#)

[today](#).

Conclusion

The situation in Singapore cannot be directly likened to such places as the UK, the USA, or France—countries in which a historical Islamophobia based on centuries of perceived (even mythical and mythicised) Muslim antagonism against Christendom/Europe/the West/Western values [permeates aspects of the system and worldview](#). Singapore's multiculturalism respects Islam, specifically in relation to the Malay-Muslim identity, as central to the national identity. Muslims and Malay culture have various provisions and grants within the system, hence the kind of structural Islamophobia of countries with a Christian cultural heritage, that permeates the majoritarian norms of society, does not exist. But this does not mean there is no Islamophobia, including structurally. Western discourses, especially implanted through colonialism and neocolonialism, remain potent. What this means for defining a Singaporean Islamophobia remains a matter for further research. Meanwhile, Muslims must negotiate their relationship with each other and their fellow citizens, religious and non-religious, within this contextual framing.

[1] The quote continues: “We’ve got to know his background.... I’m saying these things because they are real, and if I don’t think that, and I think even if today the Prime Minister doesn’t think carefully about this, I and my family could have a tragedy.” At present, Malay officers are in charge of machine gun units in the SAF.

Image: Hari Raya, Singapore. Credit: [Jnzl's Photos/Flickr](#).