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The Ulama in Singapore and their Contemporary Challenges

Khairudin Aljunied

It is hard and seemingly impossible to imagine a religion called Islam that is devoid of the scholarly and knowledgeable class (the ulama, syaikh, muftis and asatizahs, thereafter referred to simply as “ulama”). Since its initial founding up until the present, what has made Islam a major force in the history of mankind have been the crucial roles played by Muslim scholars and intellectuals. These were men and women of ideas who provided new interpretations of the faith and its precepts to suit the needs of changing times. The ulama also served the multiple functions such as judges, counselors, advisers and strategists, to name a few, in their endeavor to guide the masses towards maintaining a social order bounded by the rules of the syariah. For this and many other reasons, Muslims have always held the ulama in high estimation, furnishing them with illustrious titles and honours for over a millennium.¹

The coming of modernity and, of recent, post-modernity, has completely altered this tradition. So vigorous and resolute has been the counter-forces against the sway and authority of ulama that one author has described the current age as the era of the ‘crisis of religious authority’.² But are the ulama losing their clout over

¹ Muhammad Zaman Qasim, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam: Custodians of Change* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), pp. 181-193.

² Bryan S. Turner, ‘The Crisis of Religious Authority’, in Anthony Reid and Michael Gilsenan (eds.), *Islamic Legitimacy in A Plural Asia* (London: Routledge, 2007), pp. 53-70.

society? What are the factors that exposed the ulama to be subjected to societal scrutiny? In this brief essay, I shall focus on four main factors that can help us to explain why the general public today is subjecting the ulama under critical examination or that they are held in lower esteem than they were before even though the respect for persons belonging to such class may, to some extent, prevail among the Muslims. Because of the wide scope of this topic, I shall focus in on the ulama in Singapore, the majority of whom are trained in Islamic institutions in the Middle East, North Africa and also in regional Muslim universities and colleges.

Some basic information of the ulama class in this island-state could be found in the works of Walid Jumblatt.³ I shall not delve too much into that. Suffice is it to state here that the ulama in Singapore could be divided into three different groups: 1) Those who are autonomous and not affiliated to any organizations or movements whatsoever. They refer themselves as “pendakwah bebas” (autonomous preachers). 2) Those who are part of non-governmental institutions such as PERGAS, Jamiyah, Muhammadiyah and PERDAUS. These ulama are either under the payroll of these institutions or they are unpaid volunteers. 3) Those who are part of state agencies such as MUIS and the Syariah court and are constrained by the policies and politics of the ruling government. These three groups ulamas may share the same audiences though the respect conferred to them by Muslims at large differ in accordance to their stance on selected issues affecting the ummah.

What is perhaps more important to note here is that all of these ulamas are cognizant that they are living within multicultural and secular environment which entail that some adjustments and, at times, compromises as to how Islam is to be practiced. This process of adjustment, reinterpretation and recasting of an established faith hence places them under the watchful eye and assessments of both the state and society.

³ Walid Jumblatt Abdullah, “Religious Representation in Secular Singapore: A Case Study of MUIS and Pergas, *Asian Survey*, Vol. 53, No. 6 (November/December 2013), pp. 1182-1204.

1. The Rise of Dynamic Global Muslim Intellectuals

Why are the ulamas in Singapore scrutinized more heavily now for their words and deeds today more than ever before? The first and perhaps more obvious explanation for this has to do with the advent of dynamic global Muslim intellectuals whose influence far outweighs the local ulamas and whose discourses tend to be seen as clearer, straightforward and logical while exhibiting a high degree of courage. Some global Muslim intellectuals have an edge over local ulamas because of another reason: they are proficient in the English language in contrast to the Malay-language centred ulamas of Singapore. The linguistic skills of these global Muslim intellectuals meant that they are able to connect directly with an increasingly English-based Muslim population in city-states such as Singapore. Some examples of such intellectuals who are trained in the traditional sciences of Islam but are, at the same time, well-versed in the major issues of the current day and age are Tariq Ramadan, Hamza Yusuf, Nouman Ali Khan and Mufti Menk.⁴

But linguistic prowess is just one factor that could explain the popularity of these global Muslim intellectuals. Even Arab ulamas such as Dr Yusuf Qardawi as well as Malaysian ulamas such as Dr Asri Zainal Abidin could muster a strong following because they are able to deliver their ideas in a charismatic, outright, sometimes forceful, manner to the extent that these ideas would then be translated to many languages thus expanding their appeal. Their acute analyses of the deep-seated challenges faced by the ummah can and have left a deeper impression among the local Muslims because these scholars are not only proficient in their own fields of specialization, but rather because they are able to contextualize the various texts that they have learnt in an appealing and relevant way. Muslims in Singapore do – consciously or unconsciously – make comparisons between these global Muslim intellectuals and the local ulamas reaching to the general conclusion that more could

⁴ Some authors have called this the “Global Mufti” phenomenon. Even though Yusuf Qardawi speaks in Arabic, the authors noted that his works are now translated into English and this has widened his global appeal. See: Jakob Skaovgaard-Peterson & Bettina Graf (eds.), *Global Mufti—The Phenomenon of Yusuf al-Qaradawi* (London: Hurst, 2009).

be gained from the public talks delivered by these “foreigners”. This is evidenced in the attendance to the talks delivered by Dr Asri, Mufti Menk and Nouman Ali Khan which have been, all too often, packed to the brim in comparison to those delivered by local ulamas.

It is also important to note that the preference for global Muslim intellectuals has much to do with the changing demography of the Singaporean Muslim population. The rising levels of education, the ease of travel and mobility, the heightened sense of awareness about global issues and the deepening of knowledge about the responsibilities of scholars in the shaping of Muslim history have raised societal expectations of the local ulama.⁵ The public expects more from the local ulamas; in the manner to which Islam is presented, the issues that are raised in the public sphere, the courage exhibited by the best of them and, more importantly, their individual rather than collective voices in times of crisis. Dynamic global Muslim intellectuals speak truth to power when they are called upon to do so. Local Singaporean ulamas have left much to be desired.

2. Access to Digital Information

Closely related to the point above is the intensification of the digital age. Access to online information on Islam has grown tremendously through the years, making it easy for any Muslim in Singapore to learn about any given theme or branch within the Islamic sciences. With access to these endless storehouses of information comes the declining need for the expertise and guidance of local ulamas. Many Muslims now in Singapore and beyond could just get their queries about any Islamic matters answered simply by the click of the button. The coming into being of what has been termed as “Online Muftis” and “Virtual Syaikhs” who would more often than not

⁵ Kamaludeen Mohamed Nasir, Alexius A. Pereira, Bryan S. Turner, *Muslims in Singapore: Piety, Politics and Policies* (London: Routledge, 2009).

address any religious problems in a more detailed and engaging way has meant that the real Mufti and Syaikh are now less sought after than the online ones.⁶

And yet, more than just about the issue of access, the digital platforms allow for more free-flowing engagement between Muslims. Facebook is one example of a platform that is open and where Islamic issues could be aired and discussed freely without undue deference shown to any particular ulama for reasons of his/her educational background. A quick survey I did shows that our local ulamas are not as active as they should in the internet world, especially on Facebook and the blog sphere. Some ulamas have chosen to avoid these platforms for the fear of “fitnah” and “dumping down” religious knowledge and ethics (adab) of learning. Foreign scholars and persons who may not be religiously educated but are active in the digital worlds have therefore filled this void, shaping the minds of the Muslim public almost daily.

3. Divisions within the Ulama Class

The conflicts between the ulama class have created a sense of disillusionment among the informed Muslims in Singapore towards the local scholars. The Sufi and Salafi divide, in particular have raised questions as to whether the ulama are essentially committed to the cause of Muslims in general or are they more concerned about defending their own ideological stances.⁷ Most educated Muslims today are more geared towards addressing problems affecting Muslims and non-Muslims such as issues pertaining to environmental degradation, gender rights, basic liberties such as hijab and the LGBT movement. They find petty squabbles over the validity of the maulid, over the sanctity of mass zikir and other jurisprudential debates as petty, if not, a testimony of how divorced the ulamas are from the real problems of the day.

⁶ Gary R Bunt, *iMuslims: Rewiring the House of Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of California Press, 2009),

⁷ The Sufi-Salafi divide in Southeast Asia is not unique to the Singaporean context. See: Julia Day Howell and Martin van Bruinessen (eds.), *Sufism and the 'Modern' in Islam* (London: I.B Tauris, 2007).

If anything, the divisions between the ulama class have encouraged many Muslims in Singapore to seek for other sources of inspiration to address their religious and humanitarian concerns. I have discussed the influence of global Muslim intellectuals and the digital worlds in filling this vacuum. I would like to add here that the divisions among the ulama class in Singapore have created disillusionment on the part of many Muslim youths who are now more attracted to ideologies of liberal Islam for the sheer attractiveness of that ideology. Proponents of liberal Islam engage in wide-ranging issues covering human rights and challenges of being minority in non-Muslim environments, topics that are often neglected by the ulama class.

4. The Ulama and the State

Last but not least, the relationship, which the ulama have with the state, does affect their standing within the local Muslim community. In an age when all forms of authority are viewed with suspicion and disrespect, many Muslims today expect the ulama to maintain an independent or even critical stand against the state as and when the ideals of Islam are breached.⁸ In Singapore, however, the state has devised many platforms and strategies to ensure the compliance of the ulama or at least to ensure that their interpretations of Islam are in line with what has been defined by the state. While some ulama here do exhibit resistance to some of the state's policies, a majority are either silent or are willing participants in many state projects that would sometimes compromise basic demands of ordinary Muslims.

The hijab issue is one case in point that gives the impression that the ulama are not able, or even willing, to put up a strong and open advocacy campaign when

⁸ A recent study on this that could be well used as a comparative base for the relationship between ulama and the state is Thomas Pierret, *Religion and State in Syria: The Sunni Ulama from Coup to Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2013).

compared to the secularly educated Muslims who are at the forefront of the hijab movement. This rather nonchalant and dispassionate approach by the ulama on such long-standing issues erodes the respect that Muslims have of them as the rightful defenders of the faith. Left unattended, Muslims in Singapore would soon enough shy away from the local ulamas in Singapore seeking for religious guidance elsewhere.

Conclusion

I would like to conclude with an optimistic view that the ulama in Singapore would soon reinvent themselves to meet up the demands of the current age. This process of change and readjustment requires support from the local community and, more so, from established institutions such as PERGAS. What PERGAS needs to do right now is to draw up a blueprint outlining the major issues and concerns of the local community and outlining the ways in which the local ulamas could be trained to address these issues. On the part of the senior ulamas in Singapore, they will have to step forward to speak up on the challenges facing the community and to rise above unnecessary ideological and personal differences so as to empower the ulama community here. The future of the Muslims in Singapore is in the hands of the ulama. We can only pray that they will be better than what they are now.