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(English Translation)

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### **Commentaries From A Sosio-Religious Perspective of the Suara Musyawarah Report**

By Mohd Jakfar B Hj Embek

#### **Synopsis**

*The issue of the Islamic education fund in the Malay/Muslin community was recently thrown into the limelight. It began with the findings from the Suara Musyawarah report (published on 9 July 2013) followed by the Prime Minister's speech during the National Day Rally on 18th August 2013 and subsequently by the Minister in-charge of Muslim Affairs, Dr Yaakob Ibrahim, in his speech at a Hari Raya dinner held at Sheraton Hotel on 23<sup>rd</sup> August 2013.*

*However, the issue mentioned above is only one amongst the many other issues raised in the Suara Musyawarah report released in July 2013. This article serves to explore some the other issues raised in the report from the socio-religious perspective, specifically relating to matters regarding religious leadership, building the capacity of our religious teachers and Islamic education.*

#### **Introduction**

"Suara Musyawarah" or SM for short, is a semi-official platform that was initiated as a means to gather unbiased views and opinions from the Malay/Muslim community with regards to pressing issues within the community and express their hopes and aspirations for life in Singapore in time to come. The initiative came to light after it was first mentioned in his

speech by the Minister in-charge of Muslim Affairs during a Hari Raya celebration on 31<sup>st</sup> August 2012.

The platform was not intended to address all the issues and problems facing the community but rather, to focus on a few main ones. While discussing these issues do not mean providing the community with detailed solutions, it is hoped that the effort can bring the community forward together.

The report essentially outlines 3 main themes, namely:

- i) Sense of Belonging (*Semangat Kekitaan*)
- ii) Breaking the Cycles (*Memecah Lingkaran*)
- iii) Social Conciousness (*Kesedaran Sosial*)

The following commentaries represent the author's initial thoughts on the report which was published last July.

## **Commentary**

### **1) Theme 1 - Sense of Belonging**

The report described the Malay/Muslim community as one which still holds dearly to its rich values, traditions and its religious rites and beliefs. What the report failed to recognize, was whether the community consists of individuals who observe their religious belief at a mere ritualistic or seasonal level, or have we really moved towards having a deeper understanding and observance of Islam.

It is important to note that Islamic spirit and values form the very essence of the Malay language and culture. Thus, apart from its dances, songs, fashion and crafts, the Malay community should also be seen from the aspect of values preservation, etiquette and the spirit of seeking knowledge. The wealth of knowledge and deep beliefs within the community, as can be seen from past literatures, are a result of efforts by preachers and clerics of past in spreading Islam to the Malay world.

In serving the community, one needs to understand the concept of *fardu kifayah*. While the call for a clearer understanding of this concept is commendable, this effort has to go hand in hand with the wholesome understanding of the *maqasid syariah*. Knowing *maqasid syariah* is important as it guides the community in identifying the goals and objective of performing certain acts of worship. Furthermore, *maqasid syariah* also equips the community with knowledge on prioritizing needs (*Fiqh Awalwiyat*) and achieving balance (*Fiqh Muwazanat*) while performing their duties and worship. Nonetheless, acquisition of this knowledge and its application has to be practical and suited to the context of present times and a simple way to achieve this is to deliver it via life skills modules and problem-based learning.

### **Strengthening the Culture and Moral Foundation of the Community**

Apart from proposals to enhance efforts in providing a more structured mapping of needs of every segment of the community, the Malay Muslim Organizations (MMOs) also needs to be reinforced with more capable and effective leadership to induce positive habits in the daily operations of the organization.

Independent civil and semi-official movements can also play its part in infusing moral values within the community. Malay teachers in national schools can also play their part by infusing moral values in Islam while teaching the Malay subject in the classroom.

### **The impression of unequal chances**

Meritocracy has long been the principle of the Singapore Government. Thus, the policies formed by the government agencies should rightfully reflect the aspiration of this principle. However, since making its debut in parliamentary debates in the 1970s, the issue of Muslims not being appointed to certain positions within the civil service and having limited access to "sensitive areas" is still prevalent today.

Limited appointment in the military, Madrasah graduates not being called up for National Service (NS), Muslim women working as nurses in government hospitals not being allowed to don the "tudung", restrictions in observing the Muslim attire in national schools and muslim NS men not allowed to keep their beard are amongst issues that remain "unresolved" till today on the pretext of the national integration policy.

The government's commitment to relook at some of its policies and address some of these double standard policies, should be hastened, to ensure the continued faith in sharing common spaces within the society.

## **ii) Theme 2 – Breaking the Cycle**

In discussing the hurdles faced and social mobility of the community, the discussion seems to be focusing mainly on the challenges faced by the vulnerable groups. However, the report did not mention the issues facing the “sandwich” group which consists of the middle-income earners. With average inflation rates fluctuating between 5.2% in 2011 and 4.4% in 2012 and the rising cost of living in Singapore, this group will certainly be caught in harsh cycle of life.

Furthermore, the writer feels that applications for scholarships and financial assistance should also be extended to working adults who wish to upgrade themselves and pursue part-time studies, despite them being middle income earners (monthly income of \$2,500). With such opportunities, these group of adults, having been equipped with better skills and capacity, would certainly work towards increased productivity.

With regards to the fifth point in the report, many from the amongst the public and religious teachers group have voiced their concerns regarding the issue of education funding for the madrasah. This is with reference to what has been mentioned earlier regarding double standards in dishing out education funding policies. Alhamdulillah, PM Lee's announcement on the impending change to the Edusave policy to include madrasah students, was greeted positively by the masses. Nonetheless, whether this change is simply a political decision at a macro level, or whether it is as easy to implement at a micro level, remains to be seen.

Such instances demonstrate that "bottoms-up" negotiations involving policy issues can be a long and ongoing process which seldom comes clean. The writer hopes that this episode does not give the impression that the Muslim community is a "demanding" community, as the issue raised, is with regards to policies which can potentially lead to marginalisation of the minority group and reflect negatively on the governments' commitment to maintain a meritocratic principle in governance.

The writer also hopes that the government is able to amend policies which brings about dichotomy within the education system by not recognizing the madrasah as a national stream education institution. This is despite the fact that the madrasah was established at the same time when Sir Stamford Raffles first founded Singapore. In fact, the establishment of the first official school in Singapore (Madrasah Iqbal) by Syed Sheikh Al Hadi in 1908, stands testimony to the madrasah being part of the educational heritage in Singapore.

Given that Christian mission schools are acknowledged as part of Singapore's educational heritage, the writer feels that the madrasahs should also be accorded the same treatment. History has proven that the madrasah has contributed to the increased knowledge literacy among Singaporeans way before independence.

### **iii) Theme 3 – Social Awareness**

With reference to point 2 of the report, regarding the lack of resources within the MMOs in terms of working professionals and funds, the writer finds this fact coherent. However, the writer finds that the cause of this inadequacy stems from a policy within Registrar of Societies (ROS) which differentiates the status between a social and a religious organization. To date, almost all MMOs are given the status of religious organization despite their efforts in executing programs which involve helping and developing the community. Due to the classification above, MMOs tend to miss out on opportunities which would otherwise be available to outfits with social organization stature.

The third recommendation echoes the benefits that MMOs can reap if they work together as an ecosystem. For this to happen, CLF Secretariat must play its role in facilitating the needs of the MMOs through soliciting of grants and funds so that the individual organizations can focus on what they do best. Though this is an ideal situation, realising such synergy remains a challenge yet to be explored.

## **Moving Forward**

On the whole, the Suara Musyawarah platform has been successful in bringing to light certain key issues within the community though we are fully aware that the objective of this platform is not to provide solutions for issues mentioned.

We should always be on a lookout for discriminatory policies so that Singapore can realize its aspiration of an inclusive society. As a suggestion, the Government may want to consider passing an Employment Act which penalises employers who discriminate against potential employees either because they belong to a minority group or because of their religious practices.

On the issue of collective representation of the community, Suara Musyawarah's preparedness to be the voice of all, saw the religious teachers group coming forward to air their views, though not representative considering there was only one religious teacher involved in the steering committee and another group representing religious teachers group in the focus group. The writer feels that PERGAS can facilitate this to ensure that the religious teachers group is better represented in the future.

In addition, it is observed during the sessions that the Muslim community is represented largely by the Malay race per se. In fact, it seems that the community has not moved away from the stereotype that the 'Muslim' voice is equivalent to the 'Malay' voice and this has not changed since Singapore gained independence. Despite being a monotheistic religion, Islam still allows its followers to practice their beliefs in manner that is suitable to their context of geography and culture.

The changing population demographics and influx of Muslim expatriates from countries like Indonesia, Turkey, Bangladesh and even from the Arab world means that we also have to take into consideration their views and aspirations in building a more holistic picture of the Muslim community. Plurality in views and political commitment must go hand in hand to create a more impactful and meaningful change in society.

Nevertheless, one thing that must continue to be observed is a continued cordial and gracious relationship amongst the followers of ahlu sunnah waljamaah school in Singapore. The

question that remains to be asked is whether harmonious intra faith diversity can be achieved while maintaining maturity and openness in this era of globalization.

*Waallahu 'alam.*

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