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**Contextualizing Political Islam
for Minority Muslims**

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ABSTRACT

Political Islam is a reality today and it will be a growing trend in the future of the region. In today's globalized society, political Islam will become more influential in some segments of the Muslim community in Singapore, however much one attempts to prevent it. Rather than arguing for a total ban on political Islam, this paper argues that spaces should be opened up to allow the existence of a moderate strand of political Islam, as it is a better option to prevent Islamists within a minority Muslim community from being drawn into supporting the extremists. However, this can only happen if an alternative viewpoint to strands of political Islam—that could raise security threats and create social problems in Singapore—can be put forth and accepted by the Islamists. This paper seeks to offer an alternative viewpoint based on Islam's rich tradition. This is done by, first, refuting absolutism in political Islam and, then, applying it within the social setting of Singapore based on the view that contextual understanding of Islam is one of the fundamental characteristics of Islam.

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Contextualizing Political Islam for Minority Muslims

Introduction

In this paper, political Islam is defined as the idea that Islam and politics are two inseparable parts and the establishment of Islamic state is an obligation to Muslims wherever they live in.

Like many other proponents of political ideas, Islamists (proponent of political Islam) are not homogeneous. There are various strands of Islamists. Some are violent like Al-Qaeda and Jemaah Islamiyah and some are not like the Muslim Brothers. Some, like the PAS (Pan Islamic Party of Malaysia) and Partai Keadilan Sejahtera (Justice Prosperous Party of Indonesia), view participation in the democratic political process to achieve their objective as permissible, and some, like Hizb At-Tahrir (Liberation Party), do not.

Painting political Islam broadly as a threat to the security of Western countries, in particular, or Western-modelled countries, which are characterized by secular democracy, is reductionism¹ and is wrong.

However, it is equally wrong to suggest that there is no problem at all among Islamists and that all negative portraits of Islamists are merely prejudices framed to deny them their political rights.

Some Islamist groups like Al-Qaeda do pose security threat to governments. These groups not only show that the political dimension of Islam is an essential aspect of their ideology but also believe that violence is an essential and legitimate tool to achieve political objectives, which are the establishment of the Islamic caliphate or Islamic state, to facilitate the implementation of the *sharia* law and subjugation of non-Muslims under the rule of Muslims. To them, these objectives necessitate armed rebellion against infidel or apostate governments.²

Other Islamists could pose a social problem in a society. They do not resort to violence but view non-Islamists as essentially lesser Muslims for not understanding the comprehensiveness of Islam, or apostates for not believing in political Islam. Some of them refuse to pay taxes to governments or abide by law legislated by authorities. They call for

¹ Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997, pp. 45–48, 102, 109–111, 184. See also Bernard Lewis, “The Roots of Muslim Rage”, *Policy*, Summer 2001–2002, pp. 17–26.

² “Bin Laden’s Fatwa: Declaration of War against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Places”, *Online NewsHour*, retrieved on 30 April 2007 from www.pbs.org/newshour/terrorism/international/fatwa_1996.html; “World Islamic Front for Jihad Against Jews and Crusaders: Initial ‘Fatwa’ Statement”, *Al-Quds Al-Arabi*, 23 February 1998.

uzlah (seclusion) in order to protect themselves from unIslamic environment. Those who live in non-Muslim countries reject any attempt to integrate Muslims with other communities. These attitudes polarize the Muslim community and will not contribute towards a harmonious and peaceful coexistence between Muslims and non-Muslims which are not only important for Muslims' social well-being but critical for a successful sharing of Islam with non-Muslims.

This paper does not seek to propose a holistic solution to the above problems in the context of Muslim minority living in non-Muslim countries due to limited space. It only seeks to argue for the importance of a contextual understanding of political Islam as an alternative viewpoint to strands of political Islam that could raise security threat and create social problem. Special focus, however, has been given to minority Muslims in Singapore, as an example.

The paper does not seek to fundamentally debunk the notion of political Islam. The basic assumption is that political Islam is an unavoidable reality for today and the future. It will persist, whether one likes it or not. Looking at developments in the region, there will always be a significant segment of the Muslim community who subscribe to the idea. In today's globalized society, minority Muslims cannot be shielded from external influence and the development of political Islam. Thus, there is a need to help this segment of the Muslim community put the idea in proper perspective and adapt to the reality that they live in.

Why Focus on Minority Muslims?

This paper focuses on minority Muslims because it is a significant segment of the present Muslim *ummah*. It is a segment that has not been given due attention or distinctly identified because Islam has closely been, and still is, associated with its traditional countries in the Middle East and with the Arabs.

Minority Muslims here refers to Muslims who are citizens of non-Muslim countries or countries which do not belong to the Organisation of Islamic Conference.

Minority Muslims are significant because they are estimated to be 30 per cent of Muslim population in the world today.³ Also, the number is expected to grow due to the

³ M. Ali Kettani, *Muslim Minorities in the World Today*, Mansell Publishing, London, 1986, pp. 238–241.

migration of Muslims and conversion of local Europeans, making Islam a fast-growing religion in Western world.⁴

Minority Muslims are also a strategic target for Al-Qaeda propaganda because winning over their support will:

- facilitate Al-Qaeda's plans to launch operations and bring the battle to non-Muslim countries, such as America and some European countries, regarded as hostile; and
- assist its operation elsewhere by giving access to safe sanctuaries, financing and recruits from the minority Muslims community. The Madrid train bombing, London bombing and the discovery of several plots in Singapore, Germany and France are some examples.

Al-Qaeda seeks to manipulate the identity dilemma faced by minority Muslims between being Muslims and citizens of the state, and the perceived common discrimination against minority groups.

It is important to see minority Muslims as a distinct segment against Muslim terrorist and extremist groups in counter-ideology work because of the different context that they live in. It will be argued later that, from the Islamic theological and jurisprudence point of view, this different context and reality offer opportunities to minimize the potential threat.

Another opportunity also arises from the increased awareness and efforts by minority Muslims in Europe, America and other countries to integrate with the mainstream society in the non-Muslim countries where they live.⁵ The new generation of Muslim migrants are increasingly making attempts to sink their roots in the country that they live in and disassociate themselves from the past and historical context of their forefathers.⁶

Muslim thinkers and religious scholars are increasingly recognizing minority Muslims as a different segment of Muslim *ummah* in that their different context requires different

⁴ "Fast-growing Islam winning converts in Western world", *CNN*, 14 April 1997; Barr Seitz, "Fastest Growing Religion Often Misunderstood", *BICNews*, 13 December 1997; M.M. Ali, "Muslims in America: The Nation's Fastest Growing Religion", *Washington Report on Middle East Affairs*, May/June 1996; Craig S. Smith, "Where the Moors Held Sway, Allah is Praised Again", *The New York Times*, 21 October 2003; "Muslims in Western Europe", *The Economist*, 8 August 2002; Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, "Do Muslims Not Belong to This Christian Europe?", *The Independent*, 16 December 2002; Uwe Siemon-Netto, "Faith: Islam's Third Run For Europe", *UPI*, 12 November 2002.

⁵ Pergas, *Moderation in Islam in the Context of Muslim Community in Singapore*, Singapore, 2004; Muhammad Haniff Hassan, *Muslim...Moderate...Singaporean*, Alkhair Mosque Management Board and Perdaus, Singapore, 2003.

⁶ See Tariq Ramadan, *To Be a European Muslim*, United Kingdom: The Islamic Foundation, 2002; M. A. Muqtedar Khan, *American Muslims: Bridging Faith and Freedom*, Maryland: Amana Publication, 2002; Mohamed Siddique Seddon, Dilwar Hussein and Nadeem Malik, *British Muslims: Between Assimilation and Segregation: Historical, Legal and Social Realities*, United Kingdom: Islamic Foundation, 2004; Mohamed Siddique Seddon, Dilwar Hussein and Nadeem Malik, *British Muslims: Loyalty and Belonging*, United Kingdom: Islamic Foundation, 2003.

solutions and approaches for their problems⁷: thus, the idea of special *fiqh* (jurisprudence) for minority Muslims⁸ and the establishment of European Council for Fatwa and Research.⁹

By treating Muslim minorities as a different segment of Muslim *ummah*, more fitting approaches and strategies can be devised. This will increase the effectiveness of counter-ideology work.

Admittedly, minority Muslims are also diverse in many aspects. In Europe and America, minority Muslims consists of various ethnic groups such as Arabs, Turks, South Asians and local Caucasians, whereas in places like Singapore, Cambodia and Thailand, Muslims are generally of one ethnic group. But, the first important step is to identify that the minority Muslims are a distinct segment of Muslims *ummah* as a whole before attempting to divide them into smaller sub-segments.

This segmentation is a corollary to the idea that understanding different context in which Muslims live politically, historically and socially is essential in counter-terrorism and counter-ideology measures.

The paper attempts to present that if minority Muslims can localize or contextualize political Islam to their reality, or if they can be guided on how Islam allows contextual constraints to moderate their political aspirations, the current perceived security threat could be reduced. This will eventually allow counter-terrorism and counter-ideology to focus on other areas.

Basic Concept Underlying Political Islam

The underlying concept of political Islam is the view that Islam is a way of life. It is a comprehensive religion governing all aspects of human life, with no separation between any of the aspects. To appreciate the close relationship between Islam and politics, it is important to understand two important concepts held by Islamists.

The first concept is Islam is a way of life. It is a comprehensive religion governing all aspects of human life, with no separation between any of the aspects.¹⁰ The

⁷ See M. Ali Kettani, *Muslim Minorities in the World Today*, 1986.

⁸ See Yusuf Al-Qaradhawi, *Fi Fiqh Al-Aqalliyat Al-Muslimah: Hayat Al-Muslimin Wast Al-Mujtamaat Al-Ukhra*, Cairo: Dar Asy-Syuruq, 2001; Muhammad Sulaiman Tubuliyak, *Al-Ahkam As-Siyasiyah Li Al-Aqalliyat Al-Muslimah Fi Al-Fiqh Al-Islami*, Lebanon: Dar An-Nafais, 1997.

⁹ Retrieved on 30 April 2005 from European Council for Fatwa and Research official website, www.e-cfr.org

¹⁰ Sayyid Qutb, *Milestone*, retrieved on 30 April 2007 from www.youngmuslims.ca/online_library/books/milestones/hold/chapter_7.asp. See also Abu Al-`Aala Al-Maududi, *Islamic Way of Life*, retrieved on 30 April 2007 from www.youngmuslims.ca/online_library/books/islamic_way_of_life/index.htm#b2.

comprehensiveness of Islam may be seen from the variety of books on *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) and etiquette in Islam. The fact that these books discuss diverse topics in life from hygiene to the relationship between husband and wife, affairs of the state, matters of justice and social regulations is a testimony to the comprehensiveness of Islam.

Since Islam is a way of life, Islamists argue that it certainly includes politics because politics is part of the reality of life. This also means that Islam does not accept detaching any aspect of life from the guidance of religion and despises the people of the past who believed in a part of God's teachings and rejected the rest.

The second concept is that of man as God's *khalifah* (vicegerent) of this world. The Quran says, "And, behold your Lord said to the Angels: I will create a vicegerent on earth." (2:30).

As a *khalifah*, man is to submit fully to God and is obligated to establish His order by implementing what he has decreed in the Quran and had been explained by His Prophet in the *hadiths* (Prophet's tradition) in all aspects of life in this world. Establishing God's order in this world is regarded as an important manifestation of submission and worship of God (3:85, 51:56).

Based on the above two concepts, Islamists conclude that it is the responsibility of every Muslim to implement Islam in politics or to participate in politics in accordance with the principles of Islam because it will help him to carry out his duty as *khalifah*. In fact, the word *khalifah* itself means power and leadership in the Quran.¹¹ Hence, a Muslim cannot separate Islam from politics or politics from Islam.

To highlight the importance and role of politics in establishing God's order in the world, Islamists also argue that God has made some of His prophets kings and leaders, for example, the Prophets Daud (David) and Sulaiman (Solomon) (24:55). Even Muhammad was not only a prophet, but also the political leader of Medina.

Thus, according to Islamist, Islam as a way of life differs from secularism. Secularism segregates the role of religion from matters of society and state, limiting it only to the personal sphere and to places of worship. In contrast, Islam has guidelines for all aspects of life and demands its believers' commitment to all its teachings (21:78–79, 2:102).¹²

Islamists believe that Islam should be the basis of the Muslim's conduct of state. The terminology used to describe the Muslim's political institution was *Dar Al-Islam* (land of

¹¹ Abu Al-A`ala Al-Maududi, *Al-Hukumah Al-Islamiyah*, Al-Mukhtar Al-Islami, Cairo, 1980, p. 90.

¹² Ibid., pp. 39–40; Yusuf Al-Qaradhawi, *Ad-Din Wa As-Siyasah*, retrieved on 30 April 2007 from www.qaradawi.net/site/topics/article.asp?cu_no=2&item_no=4444&version=1&template_id=254&parent_id=1

Islam) or *Ad-Daulah Al-Islamiyah* (Islamic state).¹³ The latter is the contemporary version but carries the same meaning.

The two most important characters of a truly Islamic state agreed upon by many Islamists are: (a) the state is ruled by a Muslim ruler; and (b) *sharia* is the sole basis of the law. They require an Islamic state to fully implement the *sharia* in every aspect of life, which includes the *hudud* law for criminal justice and punishment and abolition of *riba* (usury) practices in economic transactions. Any state that does not fulfil either one of the two criteria is considered a non-Islamic state, even if the ruler is a Muslim.¹⁴

The leader of a *Dar Al-Islam* is traditionally known as *Khalifah* (Caliph) or *Amir Al-Mukmineen* (Emir). Thus, *Dar Al-Islam* is also known as *Khilafah* (Caliphate) or *Imarah* (Emirate).¹⁵

It is important to note, however, that political Islam represents one of many views on the issue of Islam and politics held by Muslims. Some contemporary Muslim scholars and thinkers rejected the idea of Islamic state although they subscribed to the notion of Islam as a way of life.

They argue that the idea of an Islamic state is not founded in the Quran. The Quran does not explicitly mention the establishment of an Islamic state.

Since Islam does not dictate any specific form of political institution for Muslims, they argue, they are free to adopt any system as long as it meets the most basic principle of just governance in Islam.

They argue that the contemporary democratic system does not fundamentally contradict the teaching of Islam. God has appointed and entrusted man as His vicegerent in this world. But, no man can truly claim that he is a true representation of divine's will in public affairs. This means that man is the key determinant in managing worldly affairs and the rule by the majority is an important factor in deciding various tendencies in human beings. Democracy is the best system to provide that.

The secular state in a Muslim country with a multicultural society like Indonesia is acceptable for the sake of societal harmony. Living in a society that is at conflict due to

¹³ Abdul Karim Zaidan, *Kewajiban Menegakkan Negara Islam*, Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Pustaka Fajar, n.d., p. 14.

¹⁴ Muhammad Sulaiman Tubuliyak, *Al-Ahkam As-Siyasiyah Li Al-Aqalliyat Al-Muslimah Fi Al-Fiqh Al-Islami*, Lebanon: Dar An-Nafais, 1997, pp. 15–16; Ismail Lutfi Fatani, *Ikhtilaf Ad-Darain wa Atsaruhu fi Ahkam Al-Munakahat wa Al-Muamalat*, Cairo: Dar As-Salam, 1998, pp. 86–87.

¹⁵ Richard C. Martin (Ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Islam and the Muslim World* Vol. 1., New York: Thomson Gale, 2004, pp. 116–123, 169–170; John L. Esposito (Ed.), *The Oxford Encyclopaedia of Modern Islamic World* Vol. 1, pp. 239–242, and Vol. 4, p. 305, New York: Oxford University Press, 1995.

cultural and religious differences is considered more harmful than living in a harmonious secular state.

The secular state, which is impartial to any religion, is acceptable because invoking Islam in politics will be tantamount to imposing Islam on non-Muslims. This contradicts the idea of “no compulsion in religion”.

State secularism could be a system that protects religion from the corruption of politics and politics from becoming usurped by religion.¹⁶

Contesting Absolutism on the Islamic State¹⁷

One important issue that must be dealt with before contextualizing political Islam is the absolutism of the Islamic state in the mind of a significant number of Islamists.

Islamists argue that God obligates Muslims to rule by God’s laws (*sharia*) (5:44). According to them, the implementation of God’s law, which is obligatory, cannot be fully realized except through a political institution or when a Muslim is in power. The law of *hudud*, for example, can only be implemented by a legitimate Muslim ruler and this clearly necessitates the establishment of, in this case, the Islamic state. This is a fundamental obligation entrenched in the faith, they opined, because Muslim scholars have agreed on a maxim which says: “*ma la yatimmul wajib illa bihi, fahuwa wajib*” (when an obligation cannot be fulfilled without a means, then the means become obligatory). Applying this maxim, they concluded that establishing an Islamic state is an obligation because it is a precondition for the full implementation of the *sharia*.¹⁸

¹⁶ Nurcholish Majid, “Islamic Thought and Religious Understanding” in C. Kurzman (Ed.), *Liberal Islam: A Sourcebook*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1998, pp. 285–286, 292–294; Bassam Tibi, *The Challenge of Fundamentalism; Political Islam and the New World Order*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998, pp. 165–178; M.A Muqtedar Khan, “Sovereignty in Islam as Human Agency”, retrieved on 13 August 2007 from www.ijtihad.org/sovt.htm; “Islamic State and Religious Minority”, retrieved on 13 August 2007 from www.ijtihad.org/islamicstate.htm; Abdurrahman Wahid, “The Unsettled Issue”, 11 April 2004, retrieved on 13 August 2007 from www.gusdur.net/english/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=67&Itemid=67; “Does Islamic System Exist”, 22 July 2002, retrieved on 13 August 2007 from www.gusdur.net/english/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=102&Itemid=67; Muhammad Ali, “Islamic Caliphate Revival Unnecessary, Unrealistic”, *The Jakarta Post*, 10 August 2007; Muhammad Yazid, “Only Democracy, not Caliphate, Unites Muslims”, *The Jakarta Post*, 10 August 2007.

¹⁷ See Muhammad Haniff Hassan, “Contesting Islamists’ Absolutism on the Islamic State”, *IDSS Commentaries* 52/2006, 14 June 2006.

¹⁸ Taufiq Al-Wa`ii, *Ad-Daulah Al-Islamiyah Baina At-Turats Wa Al-Mu`asarah*, Beirut: Dar Ibn Hazm, 1996, pp. 16–17; Muhammad Qutb, *Hawla Tatbiq Asy-Sharia*, retrieved on 30 April 2007 from www.tawhed.ws/r?i=1588; Yusuf Al-Qaradawi, *Ad-Din Wa As-Siyasah*, retrieved on 30 April 2007 from www.qaradawi.net/site/topics/article.asp?cu_no=2&item_no=4460&version=1&template_id=254&parent_id=1

However, some Islamists push the argument further by asserting that Muslims who do not subscribe to or who challenge their view on Islam and politics run the risk of committing what they term *nawaqidh ash-shadatain* (acts that nullify a Muslim's testimony of faith)—a serious allegation amounting to charging a Muslim of being an infidel. This is because, to their mind, God has stated clearly that those who do not rule by His law, “are they that are the unbelievers”.

Such absolutism has contributed to the idea of *takfir* (ruling a Muslim an apostate) and *takfir* movements. Making judgement that a person or group is *kufir* (apostate/infidel) is not the right accorded to any individual or group but to an Islamic judicial authority. If there is no Islamic judicial body that is able to determine the apostasy of a person, that right is not transferable to any other party. Contemporary experience in Muslim community has shown that many have fallen into extremism and violence because of the *takfir* view they hold.¹⁹

However, a critical study on the issue of Islamic state and the Islamists' idea shows that there is no direct statement in the Quran or the *hadiths* (Prophet's tradition) that relates to such an obligation. The Islamists' argument is essentially one way to interpret the verse and it is not the only one. As such, the claim that establishing an Islamic state is a principle of faith that cannot be challenged is inaccurate. If one applies the methodology used in Islamic studies, issues that have no definitive ruling (*hukm qat'ii*) from the Quran or the *hadiths* (Prophet's tradition) are bound to have divergent interpretations or views unless there is a precedent of *ijma'* (consensus of Muslim scholars).²⁰ But, in this case of the issue of the Islamic state, there is none.

Looking at many rulings in *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence), one could find many cases that do not conform to the above maxim. For example, *zakat* (tithe) and *haj* (pilgrimage) are among the five pillars of Islam that are fundamentally obligatory upon Muslims; but no Muslim scholars hold the view that saving money or acquiring wealth as a means and with specific intention to pay *zakat* or to perform *haj* is obligatory, failing which those Muslims are considered as sinners. The use of the maxim to interpret the above verse does not produce an absolute ruling that the establishment of Islamic state is obligatory.

Thus, the establishment of Islamic state should not necessarily be viewed from the perspective of the said maxim but it can be viewed from the perspective of *zakat* and *hajj*

¹⁹ See Abdullah bin Nasir Ar-Rashid, *Al-Khuru'j `Ala Al-Hakim*, retrieved on 30 April 2007 from www.tawhed.ws/c?i=165; Abu Basir At-Turtusi, *Fasl Al-Kalam Fi Masalah Al-Khuru'j `Ala Al-Hukkam*, retrieved on 30 April 2007 from www.tawhed.ws/r?i=798.

²⁰ Qutob Mustafa Sanoo, *La Inkar Fi Masail Al-Ijtihad*, Kuala Lumpur: Dar At-Tajdid, 2004, pp. 15–20, 23–24.

obligations in Islam. Since both perspectives are based on interpretation, they cannot be said to be absolute ruling on the issue.

Furthermore, the legal maxim of “*ma la yatimmul wajib illa bihi, fahuwa wajib*” itself is an *ijtihad* by Muslim scholars based on their interpretation only of Quranic verses and *hadith*. Thus, any ruling based on it cannot be absolute.

While the Islamists have the right to interpret the text the way they did, framing it in an absolute term that demarcates the faithful and the unbelievers is unacceptable; it is a violation of jurisprudential reasoning and must be corrected.

The narrowness of the interpretation is unacceptable because it limits the option for Muslims. There is no place for those who view Islam’s positive role in politics as the construction of the best possible framework for government—one best suited for Islamic principles and the contemporary situation. To the Islamists, a government is considered unIslamic, even if only one of the two characteristics as mentioned above is not met, regardless whether it possesses other positive aspects that are in line with Islamic teachings.

This paper argues that absolutism on the obligation to establish an Islamic state needs to be corrected because, as demonstrated above, it has no basis from the perspective of the methodology used in Islamic studies. The disagreement as to whether an Islamic state is obligatory or not, falls under the area Muslim scholars regard as *majal al-khilaf*—an area where disagreement is inevitable and permissible. In this respect, the jurisprudential maxim that should be applied here is *la inkar fi masail al-ijtihad* (no denial to permit an opinion in issues that are open to independent judgement).²¹

In conclusion, Islam allows Muslims to “agree to disagree” on the obligation of establishing an Islamic state and any disagreement that arises thereof should not be the cause of hostility between the differing parties.

While offering the argument that the establishment of Islamic state could be non-obligatory in Islam, this paper does not suggest that establishing an Islamic state is *haram* (prohibited) or a heresy. It only means that Muslim who view Islam as inseparable from politics have more options to ensure Islam’s positive role in politics, and to realize its potential for positive contributions towards mankind in the political sphere than what the Islamists could offer.

²¹ Ibid., p. 81.

The absolutist nature of the Islamist's position become indefensible when we examine the various opinions and interpretations of Muslim scholars of the various *mazhabs* (school of jurisprudence) on the issue over the past 1,400 years.

Can Political Islam or Islam Itself be Contextualized?

To some Muslims, the notion of one God, one Holy Book, one *qiblah* (direction of prayer), one *ummah* and brotherhood and one Islam means there is only one viewpoint or one way to practise Islam or one viewpoint in all issues and under any conditions, regardless whether they are Europeans, Asians, Americans, Singaporeans or Saudis.

While the underlying intention of “one view fits all” is noble in that it promotes unity among Muslims, such perspective can also lead to certain problems. One could make the grave mistake of applying the rulings made by classical *ulama* today when one does not understand the context in which the opinions were formed one hundred years ago. Or one could fail to understand the context or fails to incorporate the context in making the Islamic ruling.

This mistake could lead to extremism, as the subscriber of such view would accuse those whose views differ from his due to the different context or consideration as lesser Muslims. The “one view fits all” perspective will inevitably cause the imposition of one's view on others, which does not fit the pluralistic nature of God's creations.

This paper tries to provide a different perspective. It argues that the notion of European or Singaporean Muslim is not fundamentally wrong in Islam. Instead, one of the fundamental characteristics of Islam is being contextual in practising the religion,.

Islam is a faith built on its contextual setting. It takes into account the reality of the time, individual and other factors in determining the rules and in practices of the faith. Hence, the ruling for a certain matter may be different due to differences in reality. A good Muslim is not only one who is able to uphold the fundamentals of the religion but is also able to contextualize the teachings when the need arises.

The very revelation of the faith supports this idea. Islam was revealed gradually to Prophet Muhammad over 23 years. The main reason behind this incremental approach was to ensure that the revelation catered to the context and the development of the Muslim society then.

The practical implications of pragmatic revelation are the emergence rather than the sudden imposition of religious practices. A good example would be the implementation of alcohol prohibition in Islam. Consumption of alcohol was a deeply entrenched habit among

the pre-Islamic Arabs. It would have been difficult to immediately and totally prohibit them from drinking alcohol. Islam started by criticizing the habit first. Later on, it prohibited Muslims from consuming alcohol when they wanted to perform prayer. Only 15 years after the revelation of the Quran did Islam finally prohibit Muslims from consuming alcohol totally.

Revelations came as and when appropriate. During the first 13 years after the prophethood of Muhammad, before the migration to Medina, most of the revelations were on matters pertaining to faith and conduct. This was to suit the context of a young religion whose followers were a weak and powerless minority under persecution in Mecca. Once Muslims became a governing faith and after the migration to Medina, the faithful needed to translate religion into societal rules. Thus, much of the revelations on criminal justice and business transactions occurred only after the migration.

The contact with the governing society necessitated dealing with and changing of laws. Islam allows for this through the doctrine of abrogation. Some of the *sharia* laws were abrogated due to the changing circumstance of the Muslim society. In the case of the alcohol consumption, *sharia*'s earlier stance of mere dissuasion was abrogated in favour of complete prohibition.

Although the above discussion points to the gradual implementation of Islam in the time of the Prophet, it is argued here that one of many reasons for such gradualism is to adapt the *sharia* to the changing context that Muslims were in then.

Individuals need to have space to live and worship. The Quran enjoins Muslims to practise the religion “to the extent of its ability” (2:286). This implies that Islam recognizes the constraints faced by Muslims in practising the religion; Islam acknowledges that human beings may be inherently limited in their capacity. Thus, Muslims are only obliged to strive the best that they can and not beyond limits which are against logical and rational constraints. This is the essence of contextualism in Islam. To demand from Muslims beyond what is realistic and practical is against the principle of justice—a fundamental attribute of Islam—and God Himself.

The *sharia* allows for flexibility. *Rukhsah* refers to a provision in the *sharia*, which allows exemptions from a general rule, in the event that the rule involves or causes a debilitating difficulty. The exemption is specific to the need. *Rukhsah* allows the *sharia* to cater to the varying context faced by man.

For example, although drinking alcohol is prohibited in Islam, it is permissible for a stranded traveller who has lost his way and cannot find any water to drink except alcohol. If

his situation is so critical that he will die without that drink of alcohol, then the rule of drinking alcohol has changed from prohibited to compulsory because Islam does not allow a human being to endanger himself and cause destruction to his body. In Islam, the obligation to preserve one's life must be given priority over the prohibition of alcohol.

Context is always part of the *ulama*'s consideration in issuing *fatwa* (religious ruling). One who studies the opinion of the early *ulama* will find that they changed their *fatwa* from place to place, time to time and for one person to another. That is to give due consideration to different situations vis-à-vis space, time and person.

In Singapore, the Fatwa Committee of the Islamic Religious Council issued a *fatwa* disallowing organ transplants in 1973. The *fatwa* was later changed in 1986 because advancements in medicine have changed the basis for the *fatwa*.

Because contextualization is a fundamental characteristic of Islam, Muslim thinkers and religious scholars increasingly recognize differences between Muslims who are the majority and minority in a given society. Minority Muslims are a different segment of Muslim *ummah* in that their different context require different solutions and approaches for their problems. Thus, this gave rise to special *fiqh* (jurisprudence) for minority Muslims and the establishment of European Council for Fatwa and Research.

The idea has also got off the ground in Europe, America and other countries with the greater efforts made by minority Muslims to integrate with the mainstream society in the non-Muslim countries where they live. The new generation of Muslim migrants are increasingly making attempts to sink their roots in the country that they live in and to disassociate themselves from the past and historical context of their forefathers. A prominent figure in this work is Tariq Ramadan who wrote *To be a European Muslim*.

But, like any other religion, Islam possesses fundamentals that are absolute and unchangeable. What remains in contention are the absolutes that may not be changed. In the event that absolutes are not feasible, exactly when *rukhsah* may be applied and how is contextualization to be carried out.

Muslims living in any part of the world must be careful before accepting the view of those who do not understand their context and situation because an uncontextualized viewpoint can make it difficult to practise the religion. It can offer unpractical and unrealistic expectation or viewpoint, become inflexible towards changing situation and environment, and waste valuable resources to inappropriate priorities. Islam is an easy religion and its purpose to is not make life difficult for man (The Quran, 22:78, 2:185).

Factors to consider in the Singapore context²²

Having argued that contextual understanding and practice of Islamic teachings and ideas has basis in the religion, this paper contends that political Islam has to operate within its own ecology.

However, this requires an appreciation and understanding of the ecology in which Muslims exist and the roles of the elements and organisms within that ecology. Muslims also need to distinguish the more significant elements and their roles. Their oversight may eliminate *maslahat* (benefit) and produce *mudarat* (detriment).

Once Muslims are familiar with all the important elements, they are to be measured against the standards of Islam with regards to the principles and the *siyasaḥ syar'iyah*²³. These principles serve to guide the *ummah* in their practice of Islam, with clear awareness of the elements within their own environment or the ecology as a whole.

For example, if Muslims were to regard the minority position of Muslims as an important element of the ecology here, we should place it against the standards of Islam and produce principles of operationalizing Islam relevant for the minority position of Muslims in Singapore.

But, what are the elements that shape the ecology of Islam in Singapore? This is a question that requires in-depth study and research, which is beyond the scope of this writing.

Nevertheless, until research is conducted and a consensus reached, we may consider the following as some of the elements that shape the ecology of Islam in Singapore.

1. There are 400,000 Muslims in Singapore representing 15 per cent of the population. Nevertheless, Muslims form the largest minority group.
2. Muslims in Singapore are predominantly Malays. This is unlike the Muslim minority groups in America or Europe, which are less homogenous. In these countries, the Muslim population consists of people from different cultures and countries of origin.
3. The dominant group is made up of Chinese who are mainly Buddhists.
4. The government practises democracy that, in general, provides the citizens with a fair amount of freedom. While there have been criticisms of our democratic system and the existing government, we can safely say that our government does not practise the

²² See Muhammad Haniff Hassan, *Muslim...Moderate...Singaporean*, Alkhair Mosque Management Board and PERDAUS, 2003, pp. 18–20.

²³ *Siyasaḥ Syar'iyah* means Islamic Public Administration Policy.

dictatorship style of government typical of former Yugoslavia. Neither are the Muslims here persecuted for their religion or race, like the Muslims in Chechnya.

5. In practising secularism, the government ensures a non-partisan approach when it comes to religious matters. This is to ensure religious harmony. While Islam is critical against secularism as a philosophy, we should distinguish the secular practices in Singapore from that practised by Kamal Atarturk.
6. Singapore has a society that is cosmopolitan, open and urban by nature. These characteristics have been fortified by the effects of globalization. As a result, Singaporeans are affected by events happening around the world; they not just influenced by internal factors or their immediate environment. Globalization offers Muslims in Singapore a wealth of resources and opportunities, as well as unbridled access to information and misinformation.
7. Although Muslims in Singapore are still lagging behind economically, they have the benefit of living in an advanced developing economy and financial centre.
8. Singaporeans are generally affluent with a relatively high gross income.
9. Muslims in Singapore are surrounded by other Muslims groups that together form a majority in this region. For example, Indonesia has the largest Muslim population in the world.
10. Muslims in the region have been experiencing a revivalism—a return to the fundamentals of Islam.

Contextualizing Islamists' view towards secularism²⁴

Dealing with secularism has been one of many pertinent issues that practising Muslims have to grapple with in today's context, especially Muslims who live in a non-Muslim countries like Singapore.

Because the idea of the Islamic state is central to political Islam and is regarded as a major obligation to be fulfilled so Muslims can live fully in an Islamic way, secularism is always anathema to Islamists. Its manifestation, however, ranges from quiet rejection to outright hostility. Therefore, contextualizing Islamists' view towards secularism in the context of Muslims in Singapore is important.

²⁴ Adaptation from Seminar Paper 1 presented in Convention of Ulama organized by PERGAS on 13 – 14 September 2003 written by the writer of this paper. The paper was translated to English and published in *Moderation in Islam in the Context of Muslim Community in Singapore*, Pergas, Singapore, 2004, pp. 108–115.

While secularism refers to the segregation of the role of religion from the affairs of society and the state, within secularism itself, there are various models and schools of thought. Hence, there are varied opinions on the exact nature of the relationship between secularism and religion. These range from moderate to extreme, depending on the extent they allow religion to play a role in the life of man. Briefly, the two distinct schools of thought are the following:

(a) The first limits the role of religion to within the individual and personal spheres of life, and to the place of worship, without being against it. It even recognizes the role of religion in building character in man.

(b) The second altogether denies any role for religion, and is against all basic religious concepts such as the existence of God, the Hereafter, Heaven and Hell. It strives to separate or eliminate religion from man's life.

Understanding that there are various schools of thought within secularism and analysing each one independently is important in deriving the appropriate judgement and treatment for any one of them.²⁵ Such an understanding will allow Muslims to determine the *maslahat* (benefit) and *mudarat* (detriment) of a particular school of thought more accurately.

Being practical and contextual in nature, Islam drives us to recognize the following realities:

1. Singapore is a multi-racial and multi-religious society. Diversity makes social relationships fragile and open to various conflicts. Such conflicts may in turn spark chaos and present various difficulties not only in daily life but also in practising religion.
2. Generally, the Muslim community enjoys reasonable freedom in practising their religion. The Singapore government is basically not anti-religion.
3. The socio-political realities of the Muslim community here indicate that the possibility of practising the comprehensive Islam in the Singapore context is remote. Due to the remoteness of this possibility, we need to choose more appropriate and beneficial priorities.
4. Secularism in the Singapore context is in the form of a non-partisan (neutral) government that is impartial to any religion in order to ensure inter-racial harmony.

The existence of a Muslim community under the rule of a non-Muslim government or a government that is not fully Islamic in nature is not new. There are at least three precedents:

²⁵ S. Abid Hussein, *The Destiny of Indian Muslims*, New York: Asia Publishing House, 1965, pp. 170–175, 195–202.

1. Some of the companions of the Prophet lived in Ethiopia under the patronage of a non-Muslim authority with Prophet Muhammad's blessing. In the beginning, their stay there was to seek asylum from the persecution they faced in Mecca. However, they continued to stay there for six years after Prophet Muhammad established the Islamic state of Medina.²⁶
2. Najasyi (Negus) remained as the king of non-Muslim Abyssinia (Ethiopia), although he had embraced Islam²⁷. Ibn Taimiyah wrote:

And Najasyi (Negus), he certainly could not have judged with the laws as contained in the Quran ... Therefore, Najasyi and the likes of him are people who are happy in heaven, although they did not commit to the *sharia* of Islam to the extent they were not capable of, because they ruled with what they were capable of.²⁸
3. Prophet Yusuf (Joseph) served as a Minister under a non-Muslim King (12:55–56).

These precedents exemplify the realities of Muslim lives in an environment where Islam cannot be practised in total. They also demonstrate that Muslims facing non-ideal situations are granted *rukhsah* (exemptions). In these precedents, the Muslims contributed their best efforts to safeguard the common good, that is, to ensure justice and freedom. Furthermore, the Quran and Sunnah (the Prophet's tradition) did not comment negatively on any of these three incidents.

Although Muslims are obliged to practise Islam comprehensively, their inability to do so does not mean that their faith or status in the eyes of God will be lower than that of other Muslims; they are obliged to struggle only within the constraints imposed upon them.

Muslims in Singapore are not the only minority living under the rule of non-Muslims. Muslims in India face the same reality as secularism was also adopted into the National Constitution of India. Likewise, secularism there is not the secularism which is anti-religion. Rather, it is the secularism similar to that which took shape in the other countries of Western Europe, especially in England.

²⁶ Ismail bin Katsir, *Al-Bidayah Wa An-Nihayah*, Vol. 3, Beirut: Maktabah Al-Ma`arif, 1984, p. 205.

²⁷ Al-Bukhari related that Prophet Muhammad commented of Najasyi's (Negus) death as follows, "*Today died a pious man.*" This *hadith* (the Prophet's saying) is a proof that Najasyi (Negus) had embraced Islam, otherwise Prophet Muhammad would not have done the *solat ghaib* (last prayers in absence) for him. It is also an argument (*dalil*) for Muslims to live among non-Muslims, if they are not afraid for their religion. See Ismail bin Katsir, *Al-Bidayah Wa An-Nihayah*, Vol. 3, Beirut: Maktabah Al-Ma`arif, 1984, p. 77. See Sulaiman Muhammad Tubuliyak, *Al-Ahkam As-Siyasiyah Li Al-Aqalliyat Al-Muslimah Fi Al-Fiqh Al-Islami*, Lebanon: Dar An-Nafais, 1997, p. 51.

²⁸ Taqiy Ad-Din bin Taimiyah, *Majmu' Al-Fatawa*, 1372H, Vol. 19, Riyadh: Matabi' Ar-Riyadh, p. 218–219.

It allows full freedom to Muslims similar to that for believers of other religions. They have the right to believe, practise, teach and propagate their religion (Islam). The constitution includes several values central to Islam, such as spiritual freedom, freedom of thought, and the universal spirit of brotherhood which does not discriminate against race and colour; and upholds justice in the legal, social and economic aspects as basic rights. It also allows Muslim citizens of India the opportunity to propose changes to anything in the national constitution or the norms of the nation itself, which may seem, to them, to be contrary to the values of Islam, and to ask for other Islamic values to be acknowledged and ratified.²⁹

Azzam Tamimi also writes:

Today it is estimated that about one third of the Muslims in the world are minorities in the countries they live in. Under normal circumstances, where the majority of the population in a given country are Muslims, it is the duty of Muslims to endeavour to establish Islam in their lives at the individual and collective levels, at society and state levels. However as the minority, the best option for the Muslim community, in the opinion of leading Islamic scholars of today, would be to work towards the establishment of a secular democratic government that will respect human rights and guarantee security and freedom of expression and belief. In this case, Muslims serve their interests by being party to consolidating the civil society in which they live in. Doing so would be the best guarantee for their freedom of worship and freedom of choice ...

One of the great accomplishments of secularism is the space it provides for pluralism and a reasonable degree of coexistence. Muslims should recognise that the presence of millions of them in majority non-Muslim societies today for the first time in such big numbers, is the fruit of several factors including the secularist revolution, which liberated the state from the hegemony of the church. In fact, until an Islamic shura (consensual) system of government is established, the second best alternative for Muslims is a secular democratic. Under such a system of governance, it is agreed to respect the fundamental rights of all people without discrimination, without commitment

²⁹ S. Abid Hussein, "Kaum Muslimin Di Negara Sekuler India" in J. Donahue and J. Esposito (Eds.), *Islam & Pembaharuan Ensiklopedia Masalah-masalah (Islam in Transition, Muslim Perspectives)*, Jakarta: C.V Rajawali, 1984, p. 304.

to religious frames of reference. What matters in such a system is that despotism is checked.³⁰

Based on the above, while the Islamists do not accept the principles of secularism, such a stand need not necessarily produce hostility and confrontation against Singapore as a secular state. Islamists can coexist and accept this situation so long as the freedom of religion is guaranteed in the Constitution of Singapore and international conventions without jeopardizing their principles.

Contextualizing the Aspiration for an Islamic State³¹

As mentioned above, Islamists must acknowledge the context of Muslims living in Singapore and its reality. Appreciating such context does not go against the principle of Islam; in fact, it is part of Islamic teachings. Hence, the aspiration for an Islamic state should be considered in that light.

Islamists should understand that politics is but one of the various facets of Islam that need to be presented and established. In a situation where Muslims have so much to say about Islam but are limited by resources, it is important that they stress the right priorities in presenting Islam to the public.

Rejecting or denouncing the notion of Islamic state as an integral part of Islam is against the Islamists' belief system. Nevertheless, speaking of an Islamic state and setting the objective of establishing it in Singapore does not serve the priorities either. Pursuing such an agenda is contrary to the character of Islam as a practical and realistic religion for all mankind.

In the Singapore context, the priority of Muslims, Islamists included, is to safeguard the free and peaceful environment, which allows them to practise the basic obligations of the religion in the spirit of democracy and to promote a civil society.

The story of Najasyi provides good lesson for Muslims in Singapore. Although Najasyi was a Muslim, he could not come out openly as a Muslim; nor could he implement the laws of Islam because of opposition from his people. Yet, upon Najasyi's death, Prophet

³⁰ Azzam Tamimi, *Islam & Secular Society*, retrieved on 5 May 2004 from www.iipt.com/web/papers/society.htm

³¹ Adaptation from Seminar Paper 1 presented in Convention of Ulama organized by PERGAS on 13 – 14 September 2003 written by the writer of this article. The paper was translated to English and published in *Moderation in Islam in the Context of Muslim Community in Singapore*, pp. 117–127.

Muhammad described him as a pious man and a brother to the believers. He had remained in Abyssinia as king to protect the companions who migrated there and to uphold the level of justice that he was able to. The Prophet commanded that prayers be carried out for Najasyi. If he was not considered a Muslim, Prophet Muhammad would not have commanded that prayer for him as it is a last rite of honour specifically for Muslims.³²

In a *hadith*, Prophet Muhammad described Najasyi as a pious man. This was a tacit endorsement for Najasyi's actions.

Coming to Terms with Living in a Non-Islamic Country

Accepting reality and embracing the above contextual position requires Muslims to come to terms with living in a non-Islamic country and environment. With a proper knowledge of Islam, coming to terms with the issue should not be a problem at all. Many of Prophet Muhammad's companions travelled far away from Muslim communities and lived with other communities to spread the message of Islam. This was how Islam eventually spread all over the world. The arrival of Islam in Malay Archipelago and China were clear examples.

Without living with other communities, Islam could not have spread peacefully to China, this region and many other parts of the world. Thus, it is illogical to view that living in a non-Islamic environment is fundamentally unIslamic and wrong.

Admittedly there are *ulama* who rule that living in a non-Islamic country is not permissible but most of them are from the Hanafi school of jurisprudence. Syafi'i and Hanbali schools of jurisprudence allow residency in a non-Islamic country. However, their ruling is conditional on the extent that the religion, as well as the self-worth and property of Muslims, may be placed in jeopardy by so doing.

If a Muslim is weak, such that he is not able to practice his religion and is afraid his religion may be jeopardized in a non-Muslim country, then it is *haram* (forbidden) for him to reside there, regardless whether he had moved from a Muslim country to a non-Muslim country or if he embraced Islam in a non-Muslim country. It is obligatory for him to migrate. If he is unable to do so immediately, then it is not obligatory till all obstacles to migrate are

³² See Ismail bin Katsir, *Al-Bidayah Wa An-Nihayah*, Vol. 3, p. 77. See Sulaiman Muhammad Tubuliyak, *Al-Ahkam As-Siyasiah Li Al-Aqalliyat Al-Muslimah Fi Al-Fiqh Al-Islami*, Lebanon: Dar An-Nafais, 1997, p. 51.

gone. If a Muslim is able to practice his religion and is safe in a non-Muslim country, then it is *mubah* (permissible) for him to stay.³³

Their stand is based on the verses in the Quran, which say:

When angels take the souls of those who die in sin against their souls, they say: "In what (plight) were ye?" They reply: "Weak and oppressed were we on earth." They say: "Was not the earth of Allah spacious enough for you to move yourselves away (from evil)?" Such men will find their abode in Hell,— what an evil refuge! Except those who are (really) weak and oppressed—men, women, and children—who have no means in their power, nor (a guidepost) to their way. For these, there is hope that Allah will forgive: for Allah does blot out (sins) and Allah is Oft Pardoning, Oft Forgiving. He who forsakes his home in the cause of Allah, finds in the earth many a refuge, wide and spacious ... "(The Quran 4:97–100)

A close study of the verses will show that they cannot be used as the indisputable argument for forbidding residence in a non-Islamic country because it is possible to interpret it in another way—to allow living there. The *ulama* who allow Muslims to live in non-Islamic countries view that *hijrah* (migration) is obligatory only for those who are not able to practise their religion.³⁴ Therefore, one who is able to practise his religion may remain in a non-Islamic country. As the Quran says, "Except those who are (really) weak and oppressed, men, women and children—who have no means in their power, nor (a guide post) to their way" (4:98–99).

The view was supported by the practice of Prophet Muhammad. He allowed several of those who embraced Islam later to remain in Mecca and not migrate to Medina. It was related that a companion of the Prophet by the name of Abu Nu`aim embraced Islam. When he wanted to migrate, his tribe appealed to him not to as he contributed towards caring for the orphans and widows of his tribe. In return, his tribe promised to defend him should others threaten him. He postponed his migration. After he finally moved to Medina, Prophet

³³ Cited by Muhammad Sulaiman Tubuliyak, *Al-Ahkam As-Siyasiyah Li Al-Aqalliyat Al-Muslimah Fi Al-Fiqh Al-Islami*, p. 49. See also Al-Jassas, *Ahkam Al-Quran*, Vol. 2, Beirut: Dar Al-Kutub Al-`Ilmiah, 1994, p. 305; Al-Kuhji, *Zad Al-Muhtaj Syarh Al-Minhaj*, Vol. 4, Qatr: Idarah Ihya' At-Turats Al-`Arabi, 1987, p. 329; Taqiy Ad-Din bin Taimiyah, *Majmu' Al-Fatawa*, Vol. 28, p. 240; An-Nawawi, *Raudhah At-Talibin*, Vol. 10, Beirut: Al-Maktab Al-Islami, 1985, p. 282; Ibn Qudamah, *Al-Mughni*, Vol. 10, Beirut: Dar Al-Fikr, 1992, p. 505.

³⁴ Ismail bin Katsir, *Tafsir Al-Quran Al-Azim*, Vol. 1, Dar Al-Fikr, place not cited, 1980, pp. 543–545.

Muhammad responded to his story, “My people chased me out and wanted to kill me, whilst your people protect and defend you.”³⁵

This *hadith* demonstrates that if a Muslim is not afraid that his religion will be jeopardized, he is allowed to stay with his people who are non-Muslims.

As mentioned above, Najasyi stayed with his people in Abyssinia as a Muslim ruler living among non-Muslims. So was it with the companions of the Prophet who sought protection there. They only came back to be with the Prophet six years after the Islamic state of Medina was established.³⁶

A companion by the name of Fudaik said to Prophet Muhammad, “Indeed, many people allege that anyone who does not migrate will be destroyed.” Prophet Muhammad said, “O Fudaik! Establish prayers, pay *zakat*, avoid evil doing, and stay wherever you like with your people.” Fudaik said, “I assume that Prophet Muhammad also said ‘(Then) you are as those who migrated’” (related by Ibn Hibban and Al-Baihaqi).

Prophet Muhammad said,

Invite them [new converts to Islam] to move from their place to the place of the Muhajirin (those who have migrated). Tell them that if they do so, for them the rights of the Muhajirin, and on them, the responsibilities of the Muhajirin. If they refuse and choose their place of abode, tell them they are the same as the Bedouin Arabs among the Muslims. The laws of Allah are just as applicable to them, but not for them the booty of war. (Related by Muslim)

This illustrates that for those who embrace Islam in a non-Islamic country, it is only recommended for them to migrate to a Muslim country. If they do not do it, there is nothing wrong with that.

This group of *ulama* views that the *hadith* which connote prohibition; does not indicate absolute prohibition. If it was absolute, it will contradict with the above *hadith*. Sheikh Jadal Haq, Sheikh Al-Azhar, issued a decree (*fatwa*):

If a Muslim feels that his religion is safe and he is able to practise it freely in a country with no religion or in a non-Muslim country, it is allowable for him to

³⁵ See Ibn Sa`ad, *At-Tabaqat Al-Kubra*, Vol. 4, Beirut: Dar Sadir, 1985, p. 1381; Majd Ad-Din bin Al-Atsir, *Usud Al-Ghabah Fi Ma`rifah As-Sahabah*, Vol.4, Beirut: Dar Al-Fikr, 1989, p. 570; Ibn Hajar Al-Asqalani, *Al-Isabah Fi Tamyiz As-Sahabah*, Vol. 3, Beirut: Dar Al-Kutub Al-`Arabi, p. 537.

³⁶ Islamil bin Katsir, *Al-Bidayah Wa An-Nihayah*, Vol 4, p. 205.

stay. If he fears for his religion, morals, property or self-worth, then it is obligatory for him to move to a country where he can be safe.³⁷

Based on the above and the reality of Singapore, Islamists should not take living in the country negatively. The fact is there is no country, Muslim or otherwise, that perfectly fulfil all the conditions that will allow Muslims to practise their religion in totality. Wherever a Muslim goes today, he will face a situation that demands his striving to help achieve an ideal Muslim community.

All these strengthen the argument that remaining here, and not migrating, is not disgraceful to Muslims. In fact, there are more opportunities to share the message of Islam here. This gives more opportunities to earn rewards from God, as mentioned in the *hadith*, “By Allah, if Allah guides someone through your efforts that is better for you than a red camel.” (Related by Al-Bukhari)

If Islam allows the Islamists to remain here and if they choose to live here, it is then important for them to build their outlook and basis of thinking on the commitment to stay here. Such a commitment will make them participate constructively in developing the country, without neglecting the responsibility to offer constructive advice and criticism, as is consistent with the practice of democracy, justice and Islam itself.

Revisiting the Concept of the Islamic State³⁸

So far, this paper has argued for a contextual understanding of political Islam for Muslims in Singapore. However, this position only allows Muslims to adjust their practices or attitudes based on the principle of *darurah* (rule of emergency). It only allows tolerance, not acceptance.

It is argued that the Islamists’ view on the Islamic state is rather simplistic. It does not reflect the true nature of Islamic teaching that encompasses moral values such as integrity, justice, equality, economic development, prosperity and meritocracy. Instead, it projects *sharia* as simply a legal code that needs to be enforced. Even if only one criterion is not met,

³⁷ Cited by Muhammad Sulaiman Tubuliyak, *Al-Ahkam As-Siyasiyah Li Al-Aqalliyat Al-Muslimah Fi Al-Fiqh Al-Islami*, p. 54. See *Majallah Al-Azhar*, Vol. 6, 63rd year, Jumada Al-Akhirah 1411H, December–January 1991, p. 618.

³⁸ See Muhammad Haniff Hassan, “Getting a measurement of Islamic governance”, *The Straits Times*, 24 May 2006.

a government is considered unIslamic even if it is just, clean and capable of providing worldly prosperity to its citizens.

Such a view defies the complexity of today's reality. For example, apart from the two fundamental criteria proposed by the Islamists, many Western countries bear many positive characteristics that are Islamic in nature. Justice in Islam requires that these be given due recognition despite the absence of the two criteria or the presence of other unIslamic practices.

This paper, then, would like to suggest an alternative to the above views, which is to construct a perspective on the Islamic character of a state through an index, which could be called, for now, the index of Islamic government. The concept is similar to various indexes currently available to measure, for example, economic performance, competitiveness, democratic practices, human-rights preservation and corrupt practices.

The index should contain detailed characteristics of a government deemed to be Islamic based on the comprehensiveness of the *sharia*. It goes beyond the two characteristics held by the Islamists and adds value to the contemporary democratic system. It should contain a point system, which could include different weightage for different characteristics or category of characteristics. The end result is a percentage point measure of the "Islamicness" of a state.

This approach offers a close reflection of the true *sharia* and the complexity of the contemporary system. The end result would change the mindset of looking at the issue through a binary black and white perspective only. Depending on the result, the index helps Muslims to see a state as, for example, 70 per cent Islamic or 30 per cent unIslamic, rather than simply Islamic or not.

While the index is most useful to measure Muslim countries—the main concern of Muslims—it could also be used to measure non-Muslim countries. On that respect, it would not be a surprise that many non-Muslim countries score better in the index than Muslim countries. Singapore, for example, could possibly be more Islamic than a Muslim would realize.

The index and its results would help to provide Muslims with a clear view on what has been achieved. Since the running of a state is a human endeavour and humans are not perfect, the results would provide Muslims with a more realistic expectation of a state. On that note, a state that is 70 per cent Islamic could not be simply dismissed as not Islamic because it is 30 per cent unIslamic. With clear characteristics provided by the index, Muslims can also have a clear indication of the need to improve state that scores less than satisfactory.

It is argued that this approach could help reconstruct the Muslim's mind in searching for a state that suits their religious belief. It develops a more holistic view of what is Islamic and what is not, and is potentially helpful in promoting a harmonious coexistence and constructive participation in the political system.

Conclusion

What has been said should not be assumed to be an effort to silence the Islamist voice and stifle its activism. By appreciating realities, Muslims do not necessarily become passive in society or apprehensive about engaging in matters pertaining to politics.

Good Muslims, Islamists or not, should not condone evil-doing in the society. But, based on the above arguments, two main important points need to be noted.

First, even in the worldview of the Islamists, the Islamic state is but one of many obligations to be fulfilled by Muslims. Thus, based on reality, Islamists should engage in the political domain of society on issues of justice, corruption, rule of law, respect of human rights, civil liberties, cultural, and social and economic development, which are important in Islam instead of aspiring to establish an Islamic state. These are the practical and relevant issues for the minority Muslims living in non-Muslim countries. They are also important priorities in Islam and represent common goals for any politically inclined citizens.

There are also many social issues that cry out for the attention of minority Muslims. Politics is not the only area that Muslims need be concerned with or need to channel their activism to. The comprehensiveness of Islam as viewed by the Islamists themselves, comprises social and political aspects of life. It is not too far-fetched to assume that in the Singapore context, social activism should generally be given priority over political activism. There is nothing to prevent Muslims in Singapore from campaigning against, for example, gambling, casual sex, alcohol and drug consumption and prostitution as long as it is done in accordance with the laws of Singapore.

Political power is not directly related to the Muslims' obligation to live by the *sharia*. Muslims are required to live by the *sharia* in all circumstances, whether they hold political power or not. However, the *sharia* must be understood in its truest meaning and this encompasses rituals, faith, moral values and not simply a legal code to be enforced. Furthermore, Islam does not dictate that all in the *sharia* should be established through legal and enforcement means. Most importantly, the obligation to live by the *sharia* is not unconditional as the Quran says, "So keep your duty to Allah as best you can" (64:16), which

means the effort must be moderated by a realistic view and within existing constraints. In fact, political power does not guarantee that Muslims live totally by the *sharia* because constraints will still exist in various forms as part of God's design of His creations.

The second point concerns the approach in achieving change. In the effort to change realities which do not comply with Islamic principle and teachings, Muslims should adopt a more universal approach and position. In a non-Muslim countries, efforts for change need not necessarily be presented in religious language and merely on the basis of the authority of religion or tradition, but on the basis of rational observation and argument.³⁹

There is another dimension to ensure the success of contextualizing political Islam in non-Muslim countries. Rachid Ghannouchi writes:

The real problem lies in convincing the “other”, that is the ruling regimes, of the principle of “the people's sovereignty” and of the right of Islamists—just like other political groups—to form political parties, engage in political activities and compete for power or share in power through democratic means.⁴⁰

If the political elites harbour the idea that political Islam is inherently a security threat to the country and hence should not be allowed to manifest itself in society in any form, or that Islam and politics should never mixed, then their views are not realistic.

Political Islam is not a monolithic phenomenon. Not all Islamists seek to establish an Islamic state and not all of them seek to establish it by revolutionary or military means.⁴¹

Political Islam is a reality of today and it will experience a growing trend in the future. Thus, it will affect minority Muslims, however one attempts to prevent it.

Opening up space for the emergence of a contextual or moderate strand of political Islam is the best option to prevent all Islamists from being pulled to the extremists' camp.

It is understandable if non-Muslims do not agree with the worldview of the Islamists and the notion of the Islamic state. The question is does this disagreement necessarily have to cause conflict or disharmony, or threat one's survival?

³⁹ S. Abid Hussein, “*Kaum Muslimin Di Negara Sekuler India*” in J. Donahue and J. Esposito (Eds.), *Islam & Pembaharuan Ensiklopedia Masalah-masalah (Islam in Transition, Muslim Perspectives)*, p. 304; Khurram Murad, *Da'wah Among Non-Muslims in the West*, retrieved on 30 April 2007 from www.youngmuslims.ca/online_library/books/dawah_among_non_muslims_in_the_west/p4.htm.

⁴⁰ Rachid Ghannouchi, “The Participation of Islamists in a Non-Islamic Government”, in C. Kurzman (Ed.), *Liberal Islam: A Sourcebook*, p. 95.

⁴¹ Sana Abed-Kotob, “The Accomoditionists Speak: Goals and Strategies of the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt”, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 27(3), 321–339, August 1995.

Even without political Islam, differences between Muslims and non-Muslims remain. Political differences, not related to political Islam, exist in real life. In many countries, democrats and socialists-communists compete with each other for political power without necessarily causing security threats. Admittedly, political Islam may be a problem for political practitioners but a political problem should not be treated as a security problem.

Islamists who are committed to peaceful political and democratic process must be viewed in the context of the pluralistic nature of a society with political players, the civil society and basic rights. Examples of such Islamists are Refah Party in Turkey⁴², the Muslim Brotherhood⁴³ in Egypt and PAS in Malaysia. The ups and downs of their political endeavour and the various hurdles thrown to them by the ruling regimes do not deter them from remaining committed to the democratic and peaceful process.

The political elites should also realize that the emergence of political Islam does not necessarily create an encroachment of religion on the political domain; instead, it may be caused by the encroachment of politics on the religious domain. Since the emergence of secularism, the line that separates the religion and politic has always been ambiguous.

Furthermore, in today's context, modern politics and the forms of power that it deploys have become necessary for the practice of many personal activities. As for religion, to the extent that the institutions enabling the cultivation of religious virtue become subsumed within (and transformed by) legal and administrative structures linked to the state, the (traditional) project of preserving virtues will necessarily be "political" if it is to succeed.⁴⁴

In the Singapore context, the Singapore Islamic Religious Council and the imposition of quotas and Primary School Leaving Examinations (PSLE) on *madrasah* (Islamic school) education part of compulsory education policy are clear cases in point.

While contextualizing political Islam is important, such efforts must also be supported by a positive attitude from the political elites to allow for fruitful dialogue, constructive engagement and civil space.

In conclusion, theologically, contextualizing political Islam is possible. However, its success will depend on the attitude and mindset of minority Muslims and the political elite. It

⁴² See M. Hakan Yavuz, "Political Islam and the Welfare (Refah) Party in Turkey", *Comparative Politics* 30(1), 63–82, October 1997.

⁴³ See Sana Abed-Kotob, "The Accommodationists Speak: Goals and Strategies of the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt", pp. 321–339. See also Jillian Schwedler, "A Paradox of Democracy? Islamist Participation in Elections", *Middle East Report*, No. 209, Behind the Ballot Box: Authoritarian Elections and Oppositional Strategies in the Middle East, pp. 25–29, 41, Winter 1998; Masoud Kazemzadeh, "Teaching the Politics of Islamic Fundamentalism", *Political Science and Politics* 31(1), 52–59, March 1998.

⁴⁴ Charles Hirschkind, "What is Political Islam?", *Middle East Report*, No. 205, Middle East Studies Network: The Politics of a Field, pp. 12–14, October–December 1997.

is also important to mention again here that if the true grievances of minority Muslims, such as discrimination against them based on their ethnicity and religion, are not addressed, the effort to contextualize political Islam in the mind of minority Muslims will not achieve the intended result.

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