



RSIS COMMENTARIES

RSIS Commentaries are intended to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy relevant background and analysis of contemporary developments. The views of the authors are their own and do not represent the official position of the S.Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced electronically or in print with prior permission from RSIS. Due recognition must be given to the author or authors and RSIS. Please email: RSISPublication@ntu.edu.sg or call (+65) 6790 6982 to speak to the Editor RSIS Commentaries, Yang Razali Kassim.

No. 176/2013 dated 26 September 2013

Funding Mosque Building in Singapore: A Legacy of Mr Lee Kuan Yew

By Mohamed Alami Musa

Synopsis

Mr Lee Kuan Yew's simple but profound idea to set up a Mosque Building Fund not only enabled the Muslim community to build modern mosques in all housing estates but created a deep impact on their lives domestically and reputation abroad.

Commentary

THERE WAS a very important conference held last week to discuss “The Big Ideas of Mr Lee Kuan Yew”. Among the topics were his views on good governance and the role of the state; the rule of law and the importance of bilingualism; as well as his geopolitical thinking and approach to foreign policy.

One contribution which has not been mentioned may not be a big idea but created a deep impact on the lives of the Singapore Muslim community and also made a mark globally, especially in the Islamic world.

New mosques for old

I am referring to the ingenious idea of Mr Lee Kuan Yew in 1974 to institute a Mosque Building Fund (MBF) - the first of its kind at the time and probably the only one in the world. The MBF idea may appear to be a matter of simple administrative policy but it had great significance and strategic implications.

Singapore underwent an extensive urbanisation programme in the late Sixties and Seventies. Slums and squatter settlements had to be cleared to make way for public housing and industrial estates. Inadvertently 18 mosques or suraus (prayer houses) had to be phased out, which continued until 1985. The Muslim community was unhappy. There was therefore a need to build new mosques to make up for the lost places of worship.

The mosque issue was the first confronting the government and was politically sensitive. The second issue was equally complex from a policy implementation perspective. The government faced difficulties to get Muslims affected by urbanisation to resettle in the new HDB estates that were being built. They saw these estates, especially the early ones like Toa Payoh, Queenstown and Jurong, as largely Chinese areas. This reluctance to resettle in such HDB estates needed to be overcome. It was then thought that the solution was to build a big and modern mosque in each of the HDB estates as a way to attract Muslims.

However, as Singapore is a secular state, the government could not as a matter of policy build places of

worship or fund them. The community had to build these mosques using its own funds. But funding was a big problem and the community's initial efforts to raise its own finances were not successful. Funding was therefore the third practical problem to be resolved.

A simple yet profound idea

These three issues presented a dilemma for community leaders. Mr Lee Kuan Yew offered a way out with a simple yet profound idea that solved these three issues in one stroke. In a meeting at the Istana in 1974, attended by the then Minister in charge of Muslim Affairs, Othman Wok, Malay MPs and officials of the Islamic Religious Council (MUIS), Mr Lee suggested setting up the Mosque Building Fund (MBF).

Every Muslim worker in Singapore would make a small monthly contribution of 50 cents to a central fund. The worker could opt out if he chose to. The CPF Board was appointed to be the collection agency, charging an administration fee for the service. This arrangement was legislated through an amendment of the Administration of Muslim Law Act (AMLA) in 1975.

Although this move drew initial scepticism from several quarters, the overall response was very encouraging. Only 40 individuals opted out when MBF was launched in 1975. The results were impressive. The first mosque funded by MBF (in Toa Payoh) was completed soon after in 1977, followed a few months later by another new mosque in Queenstown. The community immediately saw the benefits of having this funding arrangement. The rest, as they say, is history.

Catalyst for community development

As it turned out, the MBF over time presented more opportunities to the community and enabled the mosque building programme to be implemented in more strategic ways.

The size of the MBF grew significantly from a mere \$0.6 million in 1975 to \$19 million in 2012. A total of \$166 million had been collected since MBF started, allowing 23 modern mosques to be built in all the major housing estates.

The MBF idea, the brain-child of Mr Lee Kuan Yew, was indeed a huge success. It is an iconic achievement of the Singapore Muslim community that has caught the attention of foreign Muslim leaders, visitors, and scholars studying Muslim communities worldwide. It is iconic for three reasons – it shows the benefit of a Muslim community working hand in hand with the government (even though it is secular); it shows that with unity, a small community like the Singapore Muslims can achieve a lot; and it shows that community self-reliance leads to a strong sense of ownership of its institutions.

Observers and visitors were impressed with the MBF idea. During meetings with them, I would always mention, half in jest, that Mr Lee Kuan Yew should go down in Singapore's history books as the non-Muslim leader who had in spirit "built" the most number of mosques!

Over time, the MBF catalysed the Muslim community's development. Firstly, such a centralised fund raising mechanism presented new opportunities to the community. The MBF was expanded in scope in 1981 when it was used to partly fund self-help efforts by Mendaki (the Education Self-help Foundation) to give a leg up to poor students and disadvantaged families. Mendaki has today made a huge difference to the lives of the community – thanks to the expanded Mosque Building & Mendaki Fund (MBMF).

Secondly, the existence of a centralised Fund provided MUIS, as the Islamic authority, the impetus to think long-term in mosque building. There is therefore much thought put into it, even carefully developing various design types to meet the changing needs of the local community. From the early days, when mosques were simple buildings for worship, their designs have evolved to reflect the desire to incorporate the ethnic identity of the community, the contemporary urban façade of Singapore and, now, to meet the high expectations as well as multi-faceted needs of an increasingly successful Muslim community.

The MBF may not qualify as one of Mr Lee Kuan Yew's big ideas that warrant the attention of thinkers, scholars and leaders. Nevertheless, it has made a profound difference to the Muslim community in Singapore's nationhood.