

**FULL-TIME MADRASAH EDUCATION IN
SINGAPORE: A STUDY OF THE STUDENT
ENROLMENT POLICY AND ITS IMPLICATIONS**

BY

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A thesis submitted in fulfillment of the requirement for the
degree of Master of Art in Islamic Thought And Civilization

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ABSTRACT

Full-time madrasahs in Singapore are regulated by the secular government, despite being classified as private schools. As they cater for Muslim students only, the Ministry of Education (MOE) has categorised them as private school and denied them from getting any government aids. They also imposed strict policies towards their administration by requiring madrasahs to pass a benchmark at least twice during each three-year assessment period to open for Primary One enrolment. New students are restricted to only 400 each year. To meet this benchmark, madrasahs enforce challenging placement tests for all its applicants to get the best students. These policies cost the Muslim community their right to obtain madrasah education for their children while having to compete with one another for a place in one of the madrasahs. The rest of the community are required by the law to enrol their children into national schools and have to settle for Islamic education on part-time basis only. Many studies have analysed these policies and their impacts on the madrasahs, but none has examined the problems and challenges they have created for madrasah applicants and how they have affected the Muslim community. This research conducted qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection to study the impacts of these policies on the madrasahs, the Muslim community and Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura (MUIS), the government agency running the madrasahs. It analyses the feedbacks from the Muslim community via questionnaires on the madrasah education system and interviews with MUIS officers to understand their position as madrasah administrators. Although the study invited madrasahs to take part, many refused to give their feedbacks. Based on its findings, the study indicated that the root cause of the problems stems from the lack of government support. To alleviate this longstanding issue, the study suggests converting madrasahs from private schools to government-aided schools to resolve their financial and staffing woes. The study also calls for the community to be more proactive in keeping themselves informed of madrasah issues and for MUIS to be transparent in its madrasah policies and its objectives aligned with the community. Madrasahs can improve on their entrance tests to make it less stressful for the young applicants. The outcome of the study is a humble attempt to raise awareness of the recurring madrasah problems to the society and preferably those in positions of power to consider improving the current system. Ultimately, its primary goal is to return to Singaporean Muslims their rights to attain holistic education in full-time madrasahs.

ABSTRACT ARABIC

ملخص البحث

يتم تنظيم المدارس الإسلامية بدوام كامل في سنغافورة من قبل الحكومة العلمانية، على الرغم من تصنيفها كمدراس خاصة. نظرًا إلى أنّ هذه المدارس تلبي احتياجات الطلاب المسلمين فقط، فقد صنفتها وزارة التربية والتعليم (MOE) على أنّها خاصة وحرمتها من الحصول على مساعدة حكومية. إضافة إلى ذلك، فرضوا سياسات صارمة تجاه إدارتها من خلال مطالبة هذه المدارس باجتياز المعيار مرتين على الأقل خلال كل فترة تقييم مدتها ثلاث سنوات من أجل السماح لها بقبول الطلاب الجدد للصف الأول الابتدائي. يقتصر عدد الطلاب الجدد على ٤٠٠ طالب فقط كل عام. لاجتياز هذا المعيار، تجري المدارس الإسلامية اختبارات صعبة لتحديد مستوى جميع المتقدمين للحصول على أفضل الطلاب. هذه السياسات تمنع المجتمع الإسلامي عن حقوقهم في الحصول على التعليم الإسلامي من هذه المدارس لأنبائهم بينما يضطرون إلى التنافس مع بعضهم بعضا للحصول على مكان في إحدى المدارس. يُطلب من بقية المجتمع الإسلامي بموجب القانون، تسجيل أطفالهم في المدارس الوطنية وعليهم تناول التعليم الإسلامي بدوام جزئي. قامت العديد من الدراسات بتحليل هذه السياسات وتأثيرها على المدارس الإسلامية، لكن لم يفحصوا المشكلات والتحديات التي أوجدتها للمتقدمين إلى المدارس الإسلامية وآثارها على السكان المسلمين. قام هذا البحث بالأساليب النوعية والكمية لجمع البيانات لدراسة آثار هذه السياسات على المدارس الإسلامية والمجتمع الإسلامي والمجلس الإسلامي بسنغافورة (MUIS)، الوكالة الحكومية التي تدير المدارس الإسلامية. مع ذلك، يقوم هذا البحث بتحليل التعليقات الواردة من المجتمع الإسلامي عبر استبيانات حول نظام التعليم في المدرسة ومقابلات مع عمّال MUIS لفهم موقفهم كمسؤولين عن تدير المدارس الإسلامية. رغم أنّ

هذا البحث دعا المدارس الإسلامية للمشاركة، فقد رفض الكثيرون لإعطاء ملاحظاتهم. وأشار البحث، بناء على نتائجها، إلى أن السبب الجذري للمشكلات ينبع من عدم وجود دعم حكومي. تخفيفاً لهذه المشكلة التي طال أمدها، يقترح هذا البحث تحويل المدارس الإسلامية من المدارس الخاصة إلى المدارس المدعومة من الحكومة لحل مشاكلها المالية والتوظيفية. علاوة على ذلك، يدعو هذا البحث إلى أن يكون المجتمع أكثر نشاطاً على اطلاع بقضايا المدارس الإسلامية وأن يكون MUIS صادقاً في سياسات المدارس الإسلامية وأهدافها المتوافقة مع المجتمع. إنّ نتيجة البحث محاولة متواضعة في زيادة الوعي لمشاكل المدارس الإسلامية المتكررة في المجتمع ويفضل أن يكون من في مواقع السلطة أن ينظر في تحسين النظام الحالي. في النهاية، الهدف الأساسي لهذا البحث هو إعادة المسلمين السنغافوريين حقوقهم في الحصول على التعليم الإسلامي في المدارس الإسلامية بدوام كامل.

APPROVAL PAGE

I certify that I have supervised and read this study and that in my opinion, it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a thesis for the degree of Master of Art in Islamic Thought And Civilization.

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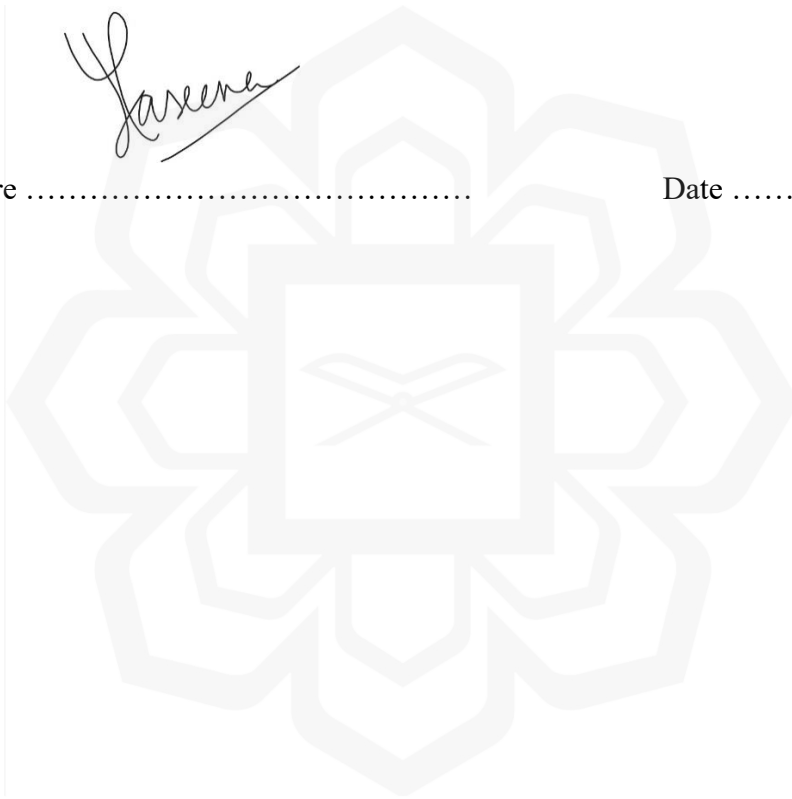
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This thesis is dedicated to my family, relatives and everyone who values the importance of authentic Islamic education.



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In the name of Allah, The Most Beneficent, The Most Merciful. All praises be to Allah, Lord of the Universe, for giving me the inspiration and guidance to conduct this study and the perseverance to overcome the many trials and challenges that came throughout the research. May Allah's blessings and peace be upon Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, His servant and Messenger.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

aLIVE	Learning Islamic Values Everyday
AMLA	Administration of Muslim Law Act
AMP	Association of Muslim Professionals
CCES	Committee on Compulsory Education in Singapore
CE	Compulsory Education
CIRES	Comprehensive Islamic Religious Education Systems
EM	English and Mother Tongue
GCE	General Certificate Education Examination
IBDP	International Baccalaureate Diploma
IUM	International Islamic University Malaysia
IPC	Institution of a Public Character
IPIP	PERGAS Institute for Islamic Education
JC	Junior College
JMS	Joint Madrasah System
KBE	Knowledge Based Economy
MCCY	Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth
MUIS	Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura
MENDAKI	Council for the Development of Singapore Muslim Community
MOE	Ministry of Education
NIE	National Institute of Education
NUS	National University of Singapore
PERGAS	Singapore Islamic Scholars and Religious Teachers Association
PAP	People's Action Party
PSLE	Primary School Leaving Certificate
REAP	Religious Education Advisory Panel
RIMA	Centre For Research on Islamic and Malay Affairs
ROMM	Registry of Muslim Marriages
SAP	Special Assistance Plan
SIES	Singapore Islamic Education System
STELLAR	Strategies for English Language Learning and Reading

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Demand for madrasah education in Singapore has always been high. As full-time madrasahs incorporate both Islamic and academic subjects in their curriculum, many Muslims prefer to enrol their children in these schools to attain a holistic education. However, the authorities have placed a strict quota on the number of students allowed to study in madrasahs. Their constricting policies have denied parents their right to choose the type of education they want for their own children.

This research critically examines the situation in Singapore where the Muslim community has been restricted from enrolling their children into full-time madrasahs. Policies regulating the madrasahs have resulted in disconcerting implications towards the Islamic education system. These schools have limited vacancies for the Primary One cohort, making their selection process for new students challenging and tedious. If applicants failed to get accepted, they are not allowed to try at other madrasahs and are required by law to register into national schools. Many have turned to other Islamic institutions for their religious education needs but on a part-time basis. However, even more have chosen not to pursue their Islamic studies to concentrate on their academic education.

1.1 BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

Singapore is a multi-religious, multi-ethnic and multi-racial society with a diversified population. In 2019, the Department of Statistics reported the Chinese race formed

74.4% of the resident population. As per Figure 1.1, the Malays stood at 13.4%, Indians at nine percent and the rest are minorities like Eurasians, etc. (Population Trends, 2019).

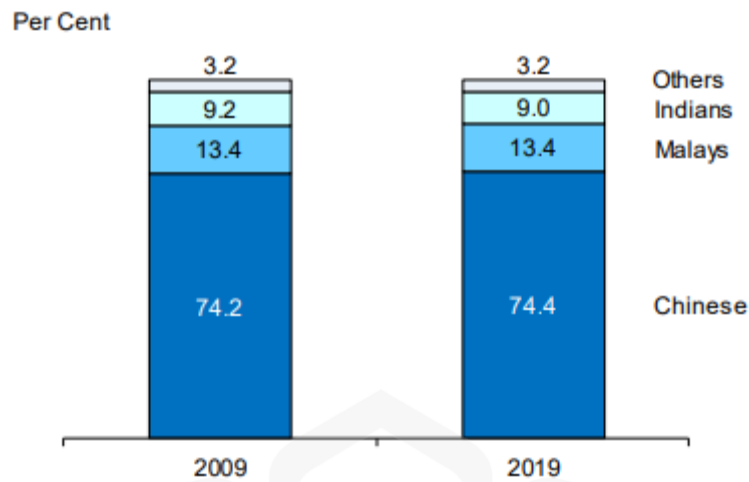


Figure 1.1. Resident Population Aged 15 years and above by Race

The Muslim community is only 14% of all the religious groups, making it a small minority in the vastly Buddhist/Taoist nation of 43%. Over 99% of Malays are Muslims, while a small percentage of 21.3% is from the Indian race. As such, the Malay race is often synonymous to being Muslims, where the terms ‘Malay’ and ‘Muslim’ are used interchangeably in the country. While it was once the indigenous majority, the Malay race and simultaneously, Muslims, became the minority ever since Singapore was incorporated into the Straits Settlement. Being a minority race and religious group in a predominantly secular state has its challenges. This can be seen clearly in the education aspect for the Muslims of about 340 000 out of 5.7 million people (General Household Survey, 2015).

Over the years, religiosity amongst Singapore’s Muslim community has been increasing. With the advent of globalisation and social media, the propagation of religious knowledge has been widespread and the masses can easily access them.

However, there is a need to attain true knowledge from reliable sources, one of which is through the madrasahs. As the people value the importance of religious studies, hundreds of applicants, and between 1998 to 2000, more than a thousand children had applied to the six full-time madrasahs (Hussin, 2004). Despite the growing demand, the Ministry of Education (MOE) has been adamant to allow only 400 students to obtain madrasah education for the Primary One cohort each year. They also implemented policies regulating the madrasahs that imposed many restrictions, from being denied resources like subsidies and financial assistance to even losing the autonomy to set their own curriculum and teaching methods.

By taking this freedom and right away from the Muslims on how they want to educate their children and the environment they are exposed to, the young generation of Singapore Muslims would miss out on obtaining sound and solid religious knowledge on a full-time basis. This would affect them tremendously, from their lifestyle and future to their religiosity and beliefs. Since they are denied of holistic madrasah education, other options available would be to either seek full-time religious education abroad or settle with part-time alternatives to fulfil their needs. Even then, they would have to choose wisely to select the right institutions that suit their requirements. While more religious institutions and organisations have emerged to provide complementary and even alternative religious courses to meet the rising demand, it can be argued that a full-time madrasah education may not be easily replicated. These substitutes may not be able to emulate the quality of education and the conducive learning environment provided by the madrasahs.

This study is initiated to explore the policies imposed on the madrasah sector, how they have affected the Muslim community and how the policymakers have justified implementing them. It looks into how the madrasahs have flourished and are able to rise

to the challenges, from once being shunned upon by the society to becoming respectable institutions producing wholesome graduates proficient in both religious and academic studies and becoming productive members of the community. The research also examines the alternative sources of religious education available and compares how these institutions measure up to the full-time madrasah curriculum.

With this information, the researcher hopes that the authorities who manage and regulate policies surrounding the madrasah sector will review and re-evaluate the current situation, thereby realigning their views on the madrasah institution to be in line with the stance of the Muslim community. With a fresh outlook, only then can there be productive exchanges between the people and the authorities. This would pave the way for them to formulate strategies that can improve the system and revamp existing policies that are encroaching on the smooth running and administration of the madrasahs.

The focus on the madrasah sector resonates deeply with the researcher, along with many concerned Muslim families in Singapore who have gone through and will continue to undergo the overwhelming process of preparing their children for madrasah education. Among the main concerns include training their children for the placement tests, time and resources sacrificed to coach them, being denied their rights to choose madrasah education because of the nation's policies, restrictions imposed on madrasahs which affect their students, missed opportunities from failing to enter madrasahs and how they affect their futures and so on. By concentrating on these issues, it is hoped that the Muslim community would be more aware of their rights and options, understand the challenges faced by those involved in the madrasah sector and appreciate the importance and influence of full-time madrasah education. When both the authorities and the community get together to understand the needs of one another, they would then

be able to effect change to improve the current situation for the betterment of both the society and the country.

1.2 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The Muslim community places great importance on Islamic education as Islam is a way of life. According to the Qur'an, it guides man to the best and just path (17:9). It is not merely the performing of rituals and acts of worship as how the secular government views religion to be. It nurtures man and regulates their affairs so that they become productive and upright members of the community. The government has a narrow perception of the role of the madrasah as an institution to simply produce future religious teachers and scholars. Their limited assessment has led to the regulating of policies that impose various constraints on these schools. Many aspects of their administration have been affected, from restrictions in enrolment, having to revamp their curriculum to be on par with MOE syllabus on top of their religious curriculum, facing financial difficulties from being categorized as a private institution which excluded them from various government aids, suffering from lack of resources and infrastructure, and so on. With all these challenges, the madrasahs are strained to produce graduates that can meet the demands of the policymakers, while struggling with their own limitations. These unnecessary hardships should not be imposed on the madrasahs, a religious institution that the Muslim community holds with high regards as they are established to mould the young generation into ideal Muslims who can contribute to the society and the nation.

When children applying for madrasahs are turned away solely due to the quota, the freedom and right of the Muslim community to choose the type of education they prefer for their children are being denied. These children are needlessly deprived of

obtaining a holistic education that would shape their future. In the end, these potential leaders of the community would have missed out on valuable life-changing opportunities and experiences that a madrasah education can offer. Most would resort to part-time alternatives which may not result in the best Islamic education that they could have attained. Some may even lose interest and delay their religious studies until after they have completed their academic education or even much later in life. This would result in squandered opportunities to instil proper Islamic values, ethics and knowledge that could have been nurtured from young if they were from madrasahs. The lack of religious structure might also trigger a different set of problems like social ills and vices due to the absence of religion as their pillar of strength and moral compass to guide them during their development years and throughout adulthood.

1.3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study will answer the following questions:

1. What are the expectations and objectives of madrasah education from the government's standpoint and what factors led them to impose stringent policies towards the madrasahs?
2. Can madrasah education produce students who are ready for the workforce, similar to students from national schools?
3. What are the sentiments of the Muslim community towards the policies imposed on madrasahs and how do their perceptions of madrasah education differ from the government?
4. Will students turned down from madrasahs and sought part-time religious studies from other institutions able to attain quality education at par with those from madrasahs?