

Book Reviews

Secularism and Spirituality: Seeking Integrated Knowledge and Success in Madrasah Education in Singapore

*Noor Aisha Abdul Rahman and Lai Ah Eng, eds.
Singapore: Institute of Policy Studies &
Marshall Cavendish Academic, 2006. 191 pages.*

This compilation provides a systematic overview of the development and challenges of Islamic education in Singapore. After the introduction by Noor Aishah and Lai Ah Eng, Chee Min Fui focuses on the historical evolution of madrasah education (chapter 1) and Mukhlis Abu Bakar highlights the tension between the state's interest and the citizens' right to an Islamic education (chapter 2). In chapter 3, Noor Aishah elaborates on the fundamental problem of the madrasah's attempt to lay the educational foundation of both traditional and rational sciences. Azhar Ibrahim surveys madrasah reforms in Indonesia, Egypt, India, and Pakistan in chapter 4, while Afiza Hashim and Lai Ah Eng narrate a case study of Madrasah Ma'arif in chapter 5. Tan Tay Keong (chapter 6) examines the debate on the national policy of compulsory education in the context of the madrasah, and Syed Farid Alatas (chapter 7) clarifies the concept of knowledge and Islam's philosophy of education, which can be used to assess contemporary madrasah education.

Formal madrasah education in Singapore began with the establishment of Madrasah Iqbal in 1908, which drew inspiration from Egypt's reformist movement. This madrasah was a departure from traditional Islamic education, which was informal and focused only on the traditional sciences and Arabic. The madrasah's importance and popularity in Singapore was attested to by the fact that at one point, Madrasah al-Junied was "the school of choice for students from the Malay states, Indonesia and the Philippines" (p. 10). After the Second World War, there were about 50-60 such schools, mostly primary, with about 6,000 students using Malay as the medium of instruction. The number declined with the introduction of Malay-language secondary schools in the 1960s.

Although the Singaporean Council of the Islamic Religion was set up in 1966, it was able to register, manage, and approve the religious schools' curricula in 1990. During this period, the Council for the Development of the Singapore Muslim Community emerged to help revive madrasah education. Today, the country's six full-time madrasahs, supplemented by a number of part-time madrasahs, provide religious instruction for those Muslims who attend the national schools.

Madrasahs have become more popular among Singapore's Muslims in recent years. This has caused the government great concern in the context of nation-building and national integration, for madrasahs are perceived as segregating students belonging to an exclusive racial group. These schools came under public scrutiny in 1999, when the prime minister highlighted their high dropout rates and low success rates on the "O" level examinations. This was followed by the issue of compulsory education in 2000, which "sparked off heated debates on the role of madrasah and their continued existence" (p. 21). A settlement was reached when the government decided that "children may be given exemption to receive their primary education in designated institutions which would include the madrasah" (p. 22). However, they would be required to sit for the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE), and "the madrasah had to meet a certain minimum standard in PSLE." If it failed to do so, it would be closed. A regulation was also passed to "cap the new total intake of students into the madrasah at 400 a year" (p. 22). Tan alludes to this as "a rare case in which the government rolled back a policy initiative after its announcement" (p. 161).

This work is important because little is known about Islamic education in Singapore. In addition, it provides an account of a non-Muslim majority government's attempt to control its Muslim minority through education. It provides a good example of how Muslim minorities could resist an aversive education policy through amicable means rather than violence, provided they are united and articulate.

However, the book does have a few problems. For example, it is most puzzling that Noor Aishah considered the madrasahs' attempt at a synthesis to be dualistic (chapter 3). In fact, the attempt should be lauded and a call for revising the curriculum ought to be made. In chapter 4, Azhar argues that the traditional Muslim scholars' classification of knowledge complicates curriculum reform, but does not explain why (p. 101). Does one blame the classification or the wrong interpretation of its purpose? His survey of madrasah education in several Muslim countries is good, but why did he not study Malaysia, which has a more advanced system? This chapter is ambitious in its attempt to cover a great deal of ground and, in consequence, was unable

to articulate with deeper insight the lessons to be gained. In addition, one is disappointed because nothing much on curriculum comparison was offered. Chapter 7 would have been better if it had been placed at the beginning, where it could have provided the framework for criticizing the madrasah. Being the final chapter, it stands in isolation.

The book raises issues more than it attempts to clarify them. For example, was the government's definition of compulsory education as including only the national schools, and not others in the system, fair? Why were the madrasahs prohibited from offering the English Mother Tongue 3 (EM3) track, as is the practice in national schools? This would be appropriate for weaker students and thus help them achieve the benchmark. Should the number of madrasah students be capped even if they prove effective in the future? Why were the madrasahs singled out when there are also Chinese-language schools? What about other non-performing national schools? Why did the government not study the reasons for preferring a madrasah education and try to remedy the situation through the national schools? On the other hand, the madrasah administration should consider the new policy as a wake-up call to streamline its direction in order to prove its effectiveness.

In conclusion, this work is well written and has a good flow, despite being a compilation. It identifies the problems and is thus recommended to specialists in the disciplines of multicultural, Islamic, religious, and minority education.

Rosnani Hashim
Institute of Education
The International Islamic University Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia