

The Role of Islamic Education and Citizenship Development Project in Singapore

Fuad Mahbub Siraj,^a Sunaryo,^b Taufik Hidayatullah,^c Aan Rukmana,^d
Ridwan Arif^e & Pipip Ahmad Rifai Hasan^f

Abstract

Education in Singapore has been a key pillar of national development to address resource constraints and ethnic fragmentation in order to build a cohesive national identity. The education system is designed not only to produce globally competitive human resources but also to promote social integration, inter-ethnic tolerance, and loyalty to the state. In practice, the success of Singapore's national education system is not evenly distributed across ethnic and religious groups and the analysis indicate an initial gap in academic achievement between the Malay-Muslim community and the majority ethnic group, which has implications for social mobility and economic representation. This article examines the role of Islamic education in the citizen formation project in Singapore, situating it within the context of the interaction between the state, education, and the Malay-Muslim minority community. In a secular nation-state oriented toward meritocracy, English, and economic development, Islamic education faces both structural challenges and opportunities for negotiation. Through a qualitative approach grounded in a literature review and historical-sociological analysis, this article demonstrates that Islamic education functions not only as a means of transmitting religious teachings but also as an instrument of civic integration and a medium for reproducing Islamic identity. The article's findings verify that Islamic education operates in the intermediary (negotiated) space that reconciles state interests with the aspirations of the Muslim community. This article's contribution lies in understanding the dynamics of Islamic education as an arena for integration, identity formation, and state control within the context of Muslim minorities in Southeast Asia.

Keywords: Islamic education, citizenship, madrasah, Malay-Muslim, Singapore

Introduction

Education is among the most strategic instruments in the formation of citizens in a modern state. Through education, the state not only transmits knowledge and skills but also shapes its citizens' values, loyalties, and ideological orientations.¹ In Singapore, education has been a key pillar of national development since independence in 1965, addressing resource constraints and ethnic fragmentation to build a cohesive national identity.² The education system is designed not only to produce globally competitive human resources but also to promote social integration, inter-ethnic

^a Fuad Mahbub Siraj (corresponding author), Universitas Paramadina, Jakarta, Indonesia. Email: Fuad.siraj@paramadina.ac.id.

^b Sunaryo, Universitas Paramadina, Jakarta, Indonesia. Email: sunaryo@paramadina.ac.id.

^c Taufik Hidayatullah, Universitas Paramadina, Jakarta, Indonesia. Email: Taufik.hidayatullah@paramadina.ac.id.

^d Aan Rukmana, Universitas Paramadina, Jakarta, Indonesia. Email: aan.rukmana@paramadina.ac.id.

^e Ridwan Arif, Universitas Paramadina, Jakarta, Indonesia. Email: ridwan.arif@paramadina.ac.id.

^f Pipip Ahmad Rifai Hasan, Universitas Paramadina, Jakarta, Indonesia. Email: rifai.hasan@paramadina.ac.id.

¹ Hussin Mutalib, *Islam in Singapore: The Legal and Political Framework* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2012). 45-46.

² Kenneth Paul Tan, *Singapore: Nation-Building and Citizenship in a Globalised State* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011). 12-18

tolerance, and loyalty to the state.³ However, in practice, the success of Singapore's national education system is not evenly distributed across ethnic and religious groups. Government statistics and analysis indicate an initial gap in academic achievement between the Malay-Muslim community and the majority ethnic group, which has implications for social mobility and economic representation. This inequality makes education, including Islamic education, a strategic arena where issues of social justice and national integration are tested, with real consequences for social cohesion and the Muslim community's position as inclusive citizens.

Islamic education in Singapore is delivered through several channels: full-time madrasahs, part-time education in mosques and private religious schools, and non-formal programmes for Muslims of all ages. MUIS (Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura) plays a central role in formulating and overseeing the curriculum through systems such as the *Singapore Islamic Education System* (SIES) and L.I.V.E. (*Learning Islamic Values Everyday*), which emphasises the mastery of moral values and religious literacy in the context of modern life. Official data shows that madrasah participants achieve a high pass rate in the Primary School Examination (PSLE), with a rate of around 98.6% in the last five years, reflecting the institution's efforts to align with general education standards in Singapore.⁴ In addition, scholarship initiatives such as the Syed Isa Semait Scholarship (SISS) and the MUIS Scholarship demonstrate efforts to build Muslim leadership that is religiously competent and ready to contribute in various social sectors.⁵

The urgency of this study stems from the structural dilemma inherent in Islamic education in Singapore. On the one hand, Islamic education is expected to maintain the religious and cultural identity of the Malay-Muslim community; on the other, it must adapt to a secular, meritocratic, and economically oriented state framework that demands high academic standards and equal access for all citizens. This tension makes Islamic education a complex negotiation space between religious values, community aspirations, and state agendas—where failure to balance these three elements has the potential to widen social disparities or hinder balanced integration.

Furthermore, although a number of studies have discussed Islam and the Muslim community in Singapore, studies that position Islamic education as an active instrument in the project of forming modern citizens are still relatively limited. Lily Zubaidah Rahim⁶ is an early researcher who discussed the impact of national policies on the Malay-Muslim community in the context of power relations in Singapore. Hussin Mutalib⁷ describes how the Singaporean government regulates Islamic education through regulations, institutional support, and efforts to ensure that madrasahs comply with national standards without eroding the religious identity. Mutalib positions Islamic education policies as a reflection of the modern state's management of pluralism. Mohd Roslan Mohd Nor⁸ highlights the dynamics of Islamic education in tradition and modernity. Abdul Rahman⁹ attempts to trace the organisational structure, curriculum, and orientation of madrasahs

³ Lily Zubaidah Rahim, *Muslim Secular Democracy: Voices from Within* (London: Routledge, 2012). 101-105

⁴ MUIS, "Consistent Performance for Madrasahs in Their Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) Results" (Singapore, 2022).

⁵ MUIS, *Introduction of MUIS Scholarship Expands Opportunities for Local Full-time Madrasah Students* (Singapore: MUIS, 2025).

⁶ Lily Zubaidah Rahim, *The Singapore Dilemma: The Political and Educational Marginality of The Malay Community* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1998). 13-23.

⁷ Hussin Mutalib, *Singapore Malays: Being Ethnic Minority and Muslim in a Global City-State* (Abingdon, Routledge, 2012). 123-126.

⁸ Mohd Roslan Mohd Nor et al., "Survival of Islamic Education in a Secular State: The Madrasah in Singapore," *Journal for Multicultural Education*, Vol. 11, no. 4, (2017): 239.

⁹ Abdul Rahman et al., "Islamic Education System in Singapore: Current Issues and Challenge," *Jurnal Pendidikan Islam* 8, no. 2 (2019): 197-222.

in Singapore, stating that madrasahs initially functioned as community institutions that later transformed to follow the demands of formal education. Moh In'ami focused on Contextualising *Adab* in Islamic education from the perspective of Al-Attas.¹⁰ Hayadin highlights contemporary changes in Islamis higher education in Indonesia.¹¹ Abdul Razak discussed the progression of Islamic institution in Sarawak before the formation of Malaysia.¹² Siti Khadijah Hashim discussed architectural elements and building design aspects in the development of Islamic educational institution.¹³ Mohd Anuar Mamat highlights rules of conduct for teacher and students in education from Syekh Muhammad Khatib Langgien's perspective from the *Kitab Dawa al-Qulub min al-Uyub*.¹⁴ Norhana Abdullah highlights development of human capital through the Islamic education.¹⁵ By highlighting Islamic education as a strategic arena, this article aims to critically analyse its role in Singapore's citizenship project and in the reproduction of Muslim identity as a dynamic minority. Within this framework, Islamic education is not simply a means of religious instruction, but a dialectical arena where religious identities, community aspirations, and state policies interact and sometimes conflict—resulting in a complex, multi-identity, and evolving conception of citizenship.

Methodology

This article adopts a qualitative research design based on a narrative literature review. A narrative review is particularly suitable for examining complex socio-political and educational phenomena that require contextual interpretation rather than statistical aggregation. A narrative review is particularly suitable for examining complex socio-political and educational phenomena that require contextual interpretation rather than statistical aggregation.¹⁶ Data were collected through analysis of books, journal articles, official reports, and publications from religious and educational institutions relevant to the theme of Islamic education and citizenship in Singapore. A historical approach was used to trace the development of Islamic education, while a sociological approach was used to analyze its relationship to state policy and the social dynamics of the Malay-Muslim community. The analysis was conducted thematically, placing the empirical findings within the theoretical framework of citizenship, the nation-state, and minority education. This approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of Islamic education as a social institution situated within a power relationship between the state and the Muslim community.

¹⁰ Moh In'ami, Bambang, and Ismail Suardi Wekke, "Contextualising Adab in Islamic Education from the Perspective of Al-Attas," *Journal of Al-Tamaddun* 20, no. 1 (2025): 145–58.

¹¹ Hayadin et al., "Contemporary Changes in Islamic Higher Education in Indonesia: Dynamic Encounter between Modernisation and Tradition," *Journal of Al-Tamaddun* 20, no. 1 (2025): 189–200.

¹² Abdul Razak Abdul Kadir, Awang Nib Zuhaieri Awang Ahmad, and Hadenan Towpek, "Perkembangan Institusi Islam Di Sarawak Sebelum Pembentukan Malaysia (Progression of Islamic Institution in Sarawak before the Formation of Malaysia)," *Journal of Al-Tamaddun* 18, no. 1 (2023): 1–14.

¹³ Siti Khadijah Hashim and Alice Sabrina Ismail, "Elemen Seni Bina Dan Unsur Reka Bentuk Bangunan Dalam Perkembangan Institusi Pendidikan Islam (Architectural Elements and Building Design Aspects in the Development of Islamic Educational Institutions)," *Journal of Al-Tamaddun* 20, no. 2 (2025): 1–22.

¹⁴ Anuar Mamat, Mohd, "Adab Guru Dan Murid Dalam Pendidikan Menurut Perspektif Syekh Muhammad Khatib Langgien: Analisis Terhadap Kitab Dawā' Al-Qulūb Min Al-'Uyūb (Rules of Conduct for Teachers and Students in Education from Syekh Muhammad Khatib Langgien's Perspective: An An)," *Journal of Al-Tamaddun* 18, no. 1 (2023): 45–58.

¹⁵ Norhana Abdullah @Ng Siew Boey, "Development of Human Capital through the Islamic Education of Our Brothers (Mu'alaf) in Terengganu," *Afkar: Jurnal Akidah & Pemikiran Islam* 25, no. 1 (2023).

¹⁶ M.J Grant and Andrew Booth, "A Typology of Reviews: An Analysis of 14 Review Types and Associated Methodologies," *Health Information & Libraries Journal* 26, no. 2 (2009): 94–102.

Theoretical Framework

The study of Islamic education and citizen formation in Singapore is based on the assumption that education is a strategic instrument for the state in shaping citizenship subjects. In modern citizenship theory, T. H. Marshall views citizenship as a social construct encompassing civil, political, and social rights, which are formed and reproduced through state institutions, including education.¹⁷ Education serves as a vehicle for internalising the values, norms, and ethos necessary for the sustainability of the modern state. In the Singaporean context, the national education system is designed to produce competitive, disciplined, and loyal citizens through the principles of meritocracy, the use of English, and the instilling of multicultural values. This framework positions Islamic education to adapt to the project of forming a secular and pragmatic citizenry.¹⁸ Thus, Islamic education cannot be separated from the state's agenda of forming a nationally "integrated" Muslim citizenry.

The theory of the nation-state also provides an important foundation for understanding the position of Islamic education in Singapore. Benedict Anderson explains that the nation is an imagined community formed through modern mechanisms such as education, language, and bureaucracy.¹⁹ Through a centralised curriculum and education system, the state constructs a national narrative aimed at uniting a multiethnic society. However, in practice, uniform education policies often have an uneven impact on minority groups. In a pluralistic society like Singapore, Islamic education and madrasas must negotiate with the state's demands to maintain institutional recognition. The alignment of madrasa curricula with national standards demonstrates how Islamic education is directed to support political stability and social cohesion, while simultaneously limiting the space for autonomy in religious education.²⁰

The perspective of minority education enriches this analysis by positioning minority groups as active actors. James A. Banks asserts that the education system in a multicultural society tends to reflect the interests of the dominant group, so that minority groups must develop strategies of adaptation and negotiation to maintain their cultural and religious identities.²¹ In this context, Islamic education in Singapore functions not only as a pedagogical institution but also as a space for the reproduction of Malay-Muslim identity.

Furthermore, Michel Foucault's approach to the relationship between knowledge and power enables a critical reading of the state's regulation of Islamic education. Foucault views education as a disciplinary mechanism that shapes subjects through surveillance, normalisation, and regulation.²² State policies toward madrasas—including curriculum standards and evaluation—can be understood as a form of power exercised to shape Muslim citizens in accordance with the rationality of the modern state. However, as Foucault emphasised, power is not total and always leaves room for resistance. Islamic education in Singapore demonstrates this dynamic through various forms of adaptation, compromise, and innovation undertaken by the Muslim community in upholding its religious values.

¹⁷ T. H. Marshall, *Citizenship and Social Class* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1950). 10-11.

¹⁸ Rahim, *The Singapore Dilemma: The Political and Educational Marginality of The Malay Community*. 45-47.

¹⁹ Benedict Andeson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991). 6.

²⁰ Hussin Mutalib, *Islam, Muslims and the State in Singapore* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1995). -87-90.

²¹ James A. Banks, *An Introduction to Multicultural Education* (Boston: Pearson, 2008). 29-31.

²² Mitchel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977). 170-177.

Within this framework, Islamic education in Singapore can be understood as a space for identity negotiation between the demands of the state and the aspirations of the Muslim community. Madrasahs and Islamic educational institutions function not only as educational institutions but also as arenas for the reproduction of Islamic values and Malay-Muslim identity. Curriculum adaptation, integration of general subjects, and state involvement through MUIS demonstrate an ongoing process of negotiation between national interests and religious autonomy.

History and Development of Islamic Education in Singapore

In the early stages of its development, Islamic education in Singapore was largely shaped by the role of Islamic scholars from various regions, particularly Southeast Asia, West Asia, and the Indian subcontinent. These scholars contributed significantly to the transmission of Islamic knowledge and to the foundation of religious education traditions within the Singaporean Muslim community. Important figures noted for their significant influence include Shaykh Khatib Minangkabau, Shaykh Tuanku Mudo Wali Aceh, Shaykh Ahmad Aminuddin Luis Bangkahulu, Shaykh Syed Usman bin Yahya bin Akil (Mufti Betawi), Shaykh Habib Ali Habsyi from Kwitang Jakarta, Shaykh Anwar Seribandung from Palembang, Shaykh Mustafa Husain from Purba Baru Tapanuli, and Shaykh Muhammad Jamil Jaho from Padang Panjang. Their presence not only enriched the network of Islamic knowledge across regions but also strengthened the social legitimacy of Islamic education in Singapore during its early development.²³

In line with the development of Islamic education in other Muslim regions, the Islamic education system in Singapore has evolved into two main approaches: the traditional and the modern. The traditional system is rooted in the *pondok* (Islamic boarding school) or *surau* (Islamic boarding school) system, which bears similarities to the *pondok* system in Malaysia and Patani, as well as the *pesantren* (Islamic boarding school) in Indonesia.²⁴ This system emphasises the direct transmission of religious knowledge through teacher-student relationships, mastery of classical texts, and the formation of a religious ethos.²⁵ Meanwhile, the modern system adopted a form of formal education influenced by the Egyptian and Western educational systems, which was then institutionalised as madrasahs, Arabic schools, or religious schools with a more systematic curriculum.²⁶

To date, four major madrasahs have been the main pillars of Islamic education in Singapore. Madrasah al-Junied al-Islamiyyah, founded in 1927 by Prince al-Sayyid Umar bin Ali al-Junied of Palembang, is known as an institution that has integrated religious education with general science from the outset. Madrasah al-Ma'arif, established in the 1940s, was taught by scholars who had graduated from al-Azhar University and the West Asian region, and thus has a strong scientific orientation within the international Islamic tradition. Madrasah Wak Tanjung al-Islamiyyah was established in 1955, while Madrasah al-Saqaf (or al-Sago) had previously been established since

²³ Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid, *Islam in Singapore: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2012). 41-46.

²⁴ Bakri, Mohamad Fikri Mohd, Muhammad Farhan Ishak, and Adlin Shaimi Baharom. "Sejarah Perkembangan Institusi Pendidikan Islam di Aceh Dari Abad Ke-16 Sehingga Abad Ke-19," *Al-Muqaddimah: Online Journal of Islamic History and Civilization* 9, no. 2 (2021), 50.

²⁵ Azyumardi Azra, *Pendidikan Islam: Tradisi Dan Modernisasi Di Tengah Tantangan Milenium III* (Jakarta: Kencana, 2012). 89-93.

²⁶ Mohammad Abdul Rahman, *Muslim Education in Singapore: Policies and Practices* (Singapore: MUIS Press, 2001). 52-55.

1912 on the waqf land of Sed Muhammad bin Sed al-Saqof. These four madrasahs played an important role in shaping the character of modern Islamic education in Singapore.²⁷

Education is often used as a primary benchmark for assessing a country's progress. However, in the context of Singapore, educational developments demonstrate significant structural pressures on the Muslim and Malay communities. These pressures are reflected in the disparities in educational attainment and economic progress between the Malay-Muslim community and other ethnic groups, particularly the Chinese community, which constitutes the majority of Singapore's population. These differences are not merely individual but rooted in social and economic structures that have been in place since the country's early days of development.²⁸

This situation received increasing attention in various studies and public discourses that developed in the 1980s. According to the 1980 population census, the Malay community was found to lag behind other ethnicities in socio-economic indicators. This situation prompted Muslim organisations to reinvigorate public discourse that emphasised the importance of education and professionalism as the main strategies for overcoming backwardness. This call was consistently conveyed within the framework of Islamic values and principles, positioning education not only as a means of social mobility but also as a religious obligation.²⁹

Efforts to raise awareness of the importance of education, which had actually been voiced since the 1970s, were significantly strengthened in 1981 with the establishment of the Majelis Pendidikan Anak-Anak Muslim (MENDAKI). This institution was specifically established to improve the quality of education for Muslim children in Singapore. Widespread support from the Malay-Muslim community, as well as recognition from the Singapore government, led to MENDAKI's elevation to a foundation in 1982. This occurred after MENDAKI successfully organised the Muslim Children's Education Congress, a significant forum that even featured the Prime Minister of Singapore as a keynote speaker.³⁰

MENDAKI's existence has accelerated the production and dissemination of scientific studies focused on the education of Muslim minorities. Various research findings and ideas were presented at seminars and conferences, and published in reports and journals by MENDAKI, MUIS, and JAMIYYAH. One important early publication was *A Collection of MENDAKI Papers*, which was published in 1982. In addition, MUIS launched the journal *Fajar Islamin* in 1988, which aimed to analytically and objectively examine the social, economic, and political dynamics affecting the Muslim community in Singapore.³¹

The educational disparity between the Malay-Muslim and ethnic Chinese communities can be further traced through differences in historical economic conditions. The Chinese community had a relatively stable economic base before the war, enabling it to pass on economic stability and better access to education to the next generation. In contrast, in the 1960s–1970s, approximately sixty percent of the Malay community's per capita income was considered low, while the proportion of the ethnic Chinese population living in poverty was even smaller. This economic disparity directly affected educational access and achievement between ethnic groups.³²

²⁷ Rahman. 56-63.

²⁸ Rahim, *The Singapore Dilemma: The Political and Educational Marginality of The Malay Community*. 72-75.

²⁹ Rahim.81-84.

³⁰ MENDAKI, "Report on Muslim Education in Singapore" (Singapore, 1982). 1-5.

³¹ MUIS, *Fajar Islam* (Singapore: MUIS, 1988). 3-6.

³² Department of Statistics Singapore, *Population Census 1970* (Singapore: DOS, 1971). 34-36.

This disparity is clearly reflected in the distribution of secondary education pathways. In 1983, the majority of Malay students were channelled into lower-level secondary schools, while the proportion of Chinese students in the same pathway was relatively smaller. In addition to economic factors, language issues also worsened the situation of Malay students. Around half of Malay students in 1965 were still enrolled in Malay-language education. When English was later established as the primary language of national education, many Malay students struggled to adapt, impacting their educational continuity through to secondary and tertiary levels.³³

This situation persists at the university level and in the workplace. Malay graduates from Malay-language educational streams face limitations in accessing professional and science programmes taught in English. As a result, their employment opportunities after graduation are even more limited. Although some Chinese also face similar obstacles, they have alternative economic sectors that use Chinese, thus still having greater scope for socio-economic mobility. This situation explains why, structurally, the socio-economic position of the Malay-Muslim community remains at a disadvantage compared to other ethnic groups in Singapore.³⁴

Islamic Education and State Policy

State policy towards Islamic education in Singapore is not only administrative but also strategic in managing social pluralism. The Singapore government views madrasas as minority institutions with the potential to influence Malay-Muslim integration significantly. Therefore, all policies related to madrasas are designed to ensure a balance between the preservation of religious identity and national interests. One important policy is the curriculum setting. Madrasahs are required to balance religious instruction with secular subjects, including Mathematics, Science, English, and Economics. This approach ensures that madrasah graduates not only understand Islamic values but also can compete in the modern labour market and actively participate as productive citizens.³⁵ In addition, the Singapore government actively monitors the language of instruction in madrasas. Since the 1960s, the use of Malay in teaching has been gradually shifted towards English, particularly for secular subjects. This policy was designed to reduce the limited access of madrasah graduates to secondary and tertiary education, while ensuring their integration into the English-based economy. However, this language shift has created identity challenges, as the younger generation of Muslims must balance cultural heritage with professional demands.³⁶

Besides the curriculum and language, the government also implements standardisation of madrasah evaluation and accreditation. Bodies like MUIS act as supervisors and mediators between madrasas and the government, ensuring that Islamic educational institutions meet national education quality standards. This standardisation, while improving academic quality, is sometimes perceived as a form of state control of religious education, which can create tension between state authority and the autonomy of the Muslim community.³⁷

Other relevant policies are education funds and subsidies. The government provides limited financial support to madrasahs, particularly for high-achieving students. This subsidy is intended to encourage active participation in formal education, while also reducing the socio-economic gap between the Malay-Muslim community and other ethnicities. However, due to budget constraints

³³ Ministry of Education Singapore, *Education Statistics Digest 1980–1985* (Singapore: MOE, 1986). 18-21.

³⁴ Rahim, *The Singapore Dilemma: The Political and Educational Marginality of The Malay Community*. 103-107.

³⁵ MUIS, “Annual Report 1985” (Singapore, 1985). 12-15.

³⁶ MENDAKI, “Report on Muslim Education in Singapore.” 5-8.

³⁷ Rahim, *The Singapore Dilemma: The Political and Educational Marginality of The Malay Community*. 180-182.

and the state's priority of meritocracy, not all madrasahs receive adequate support. Consequently, smaller or newer madrasahs often struggle to provide adequate facilities, qualified teachers, and a comprehensive curriculum.³⁸

These policies collectively reflect the Singapore government's strategy to make Islamic education an instrument of social integration and minority oversight. This approach differs from Muslim-majority countries like Malaysia and Indonesia, where Islamic education is often given greater autonomy. In Singapore, every Islamic education policy is always linked to the state's interest in maintaining social stability, multiethnic cohesion, and national competitiveness, so that the madrasah operates in a *negotiated space* between community aspirations and state demands. Implicitly, this policy shows that Islamic education is not only an educational tool, but also a political and social negotiation arena. How madrasahs balance religious and secular curricula, Malay and English, and traditional values with the demands of modernity will determine the Muslim community's ability to fully participate in Singapore's citizenship project. This underscores the urgency of research into the relationship between Islamic education and state policy, particularly for Muslim minorities in the context of a multiethnic, secular state.

Islamic Education in the Citizenship Formation Project

Islamic education in Singapore not only functions as a means of transmitting religious knowledge but also as a strategic instrument for citizen formation projects. In the context of a multiethnic and secular state, the ideal citizen in Singapore is understood as an individual who can balance ethnic and religious identity with loyalty to the state.³⁹ Madrasahs and Islamic educational institutions play a role in forming Muslim citizens who are both religious and economically productive. The modern madrasah curriculum is designed to teach Islamic values such as morality, social responsibility, and work ethic, while ensuring academic competencies relevant to national needs, including English, mathematics, and science. Thus, Islamic education becomes a means to produce a generation of Muslims who can contribute to national development without losing their religious identity.⁴⁰

Besides the curriculum, Islamic educational institutions also function as spaces for citizenship socialisation. For example, madrasahs often hold extracurricular activities that encourage social awareness, community cooperation, and an understanding of national values. These activities strengthen students' attachment to national identity while still instilling Islamic values.⁴¹ However, Islamic education in the project of forming citizens faces structural challenges. First, limited access to language and resources makes it difficult for some madrasah students to compete in higher education and the job market. Second, state policies emphasising English and meritocracy sometimes create tensions with traditional Malay-Muslim identities. This demonstrates that the project of citizenship formation for minorities is never linear; it is always a product of negotiation between community aspirations and state demands.⁴²

On the other hand, the Singapore government uses Islamic education as a tool for social integration. Through institutions such as MUIS (Islamic Religious Council of Singapore) and MENDAKI (Muslim Children's Education Council), the government encourages madrasahs to

³⁸ Rahim. 190-192.

³⁹ Mutalib, *Islam in Singapore: The Legal and Political Framework*. 112.

⁴⁰ MUIS, *Fajar Islam*. 3-5.

⁴¹ Rahim, *The Singapore Dilemma: The Political and Educational Marginality of The Malay Community*. 121-124.

⁴² Rahim. 136-139.

adapt their curricula, raise academic standards, and prepare students for active participation in socio-economic life. This approach reflects the country's strategy to minimise marginalisation of minorities without sacrificing the principles of secularism and national cohesion. The project of forming citizens through Islamic education also shows the dimensions of regional comparison. Compared to Malaysia or Indonesia, where Islamic education is given greater autonomy, and madrasas can develop as centres of religious knowledge, Singapore emphasises control and standardisation, integrating Islamic education into a strict national framework. This resulted in a unique model in which Islamic education serves as both a tool for identity preservation and socio-economic adaptation for Muslim minorities.

Overall, Islamic education in Singapore affirms that the formation of Muslim citizens does not occur solely through secular education, but through a combination of religious education, a secular curriculum, and socio-religious activities guided by state policy. This process demonstrates the importance of education as an arena for negotiating identity and citizenship, where Muslim minorities learn to balance religious aspirations with the demands of modernity and national integration.

Structural Challenges and Educational Inequality

Islamic education in Singapore, despite modernisation through madrasahs and support from institutions such as MUIS and MENDAKI, continues to face complex structural challenges. These challenges are not only internal to the madrasahs but also result from the socio-economic context, national policies, and the dynamics of ethnic pluralism. These factors create educational inequality between the Malay-Muslim community and other ethnic groups, especially the Chinese, who are the economic and academic majority.

1. Socio-Economic Factors

The majority of Singapore's Malay-Muslim community faces economic constraints that impact access to education. Historical data show that in the 1960s–1970s, approximately 60% of the Malay population was economically disadvantaged, while the Chinese community had a lower percentage of the poor, approximately 40%. This economic inequality directly impacts:

- Access to higher education: Students from low-income families often face limitations in covering education costs, transportation, and learning materials.
- Quality of education at home: Limited family resources reduce the ability of Malay-Muslim children to obtain additional guidance or support materials.
- Social mobility: Opportunities to improve social status through education are more limited than for other ethnic groups.

2. Differences in Language and Curriculum

Since Singapore's independence in 1965, English has been the official language of education. This presents challenges for madrasah students who were initially taught in Malay. Many Malay students struggle to adapt to the modern English-language curriculum, particularly in secular subjects such as Science and Mathematics.⁴³ As a result, some students are forced to drop out of secondary education or face difficulties in pursuing higher education. This language barrier also creates a competency gap compared to ethnic Chinese students, who are generally more fluent in English from the outset.

⁴³ Hamid, *Islam in Singapore: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*. 64.

3. Dependence on Traditional Madrasas

Madrasahs in Singapore have a long history as religious educational institutions. However, some small or new madrasahs face resource constraints, such as:

- Inadequate learning facilities
- Shortage of highly qualified teachers
- The curriculum is not fully integrated with national standards.

This condition creates differences in the quality of education between large madrasahs such as Al-Junied Al-Islamiyyah Madrasah and newly established small madrasahs, thereby creating inequality among Muslim students.⁴⁴

4. State Standardisation and Control

The Singapore government policy, through MUIS and MENDAKI, introduced standardisation and supervision towards madrasahs. The goal is to ensure that madrasahs produce graduates who are competent and integrated into society. However, this standardisation also presents structural challenges, because:

- Some madrasahs feel they have lost their autonomy in determining their religious curriculum.
- Adapting to national standards sometimes puts pressure on teachers and students to balance religious and secular education.
- Students must adapt to formal exams and standards-based evaluations, which differ from traditional patterns of religious education.⁴⁵

5. Social Pressure and Minority Aspirations

Educational inequality is also exacerbated by social pressure experienced by the Malay-Muslim community. Studies in the 1980s showed that awareness of socio-economic backwardness pushed the community to improve education, but this pressure also created academic and social stress for students. The Muslim community was required to pursue higher education and professional skills to keep up with the times, while maintaining their religious and cultural identity.⁴⁶

6. Impact on Citizenship Formation Project

These structural inequalities have direct implications for the project of citizen formation:

- Students who are unable to adapt to English and the national curriculum are at risk of academic and social marginalisation.
- Economic and educational backwardness can limit active participation in social, economic, and political life.
- Madrasahs and supporting institutions such as MENDAKI must work extra hard to reduce the gap through remedial programmes, tutoring, scholarships, and skills training.

In other words, Islamic education in Singapore cannot be separated from the context of structural inequality. This challenge emphasises that the success of Islamic education as a tool for forming citizens depends on the capabilities of educational institutions and state policies in addressing socio-economic, language, and educational access disparities.

⁴⁴ Hamid. 66.

⁴⁵ Rahman, *Muslim Education in Singapore: Policies and Practices*. 95.

⁴⁶ Rahman. 97.

Comparative Analysis: Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia

To better understand the role of Islamic education in Singapore's citizen formation project, it is important to place it within a regional comparative perspective. Malaysia and Indonesia were chosen as comparisons because they both have strong traditions of Islamic education but operate within different nation-state configurations. This comparison highlights the uniqueness of Singapore's case and illuminates how the political and demographic context shapes the relationship between Islamic education and citizenship. In Malaysia, Islamic education has a relatively well-established position within the state structure. As a country with a Muslim-majority and Islam as the religion of the Federation, Islamic education is not positioned as an alternative or marginal system, but rather as an integral part of the national education system. State religious schools, community religious schools, and private madrasahs receive state recognition, both through curriculum, funding, and graduate certification.⁴⁷

In the project of shaping Malaysian citizenship, Islamic education serves as an instrument of legitimising Malay-Islamic national identity. Islamic education not only transmits religious teachings but also reinforces a national ideology that links Malayness, Islam, and citizenship. Thus, Islamic education in Malaysia operates in a symbiotic relationship with the state, in which religious and national interests reinforce one another.⁴⁸ However, this situation also creates its own problems. The dominance of Malay-Islamic narratives in national education often marginalises non-Muslim groups and ethnic minorities. Unlike Singapore, where Islamic education must negotiate for its survival, in Malaysia, criticism has emerged that it is too closely tied to state power and may lose its critical function.⁴⁹

Indonesia presents a different configuration. As a Muslim-majority country but not an Islamic state, Indonesia has developed a more pluralistic model of relations between the state and Islamic education. Islamic boarding schools, madrasahs, and Islamic schools have developed relatively autonomously, though they remain under the Ministry of Religious Affairs' state regulatory framework.⁵⁰ In the project of shaping Indonesian citizens, Islamic education plays an ambivalent role. On the one hand, Islamic education serves as a means of internalising Islamic values aligned with Pancasila, such as tolerance and nationalism. On the other hand, the state provides relatively greater space for a diversity of Islamic educational models, including traditional Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) that are not fully integrated with the national education system.⁵¹

Compared to Singapore, Islamic education in Indonesia has greater autonomy in determining its curriculum and ideological orientation. However, this autonomy also presents challenges regarding quality, standardisation, and the relevance of graduates in the modern job market. This suggests that integrating Islamic education into citizenship projects does not always guarantee successful social mobility.⁵² Compared to Malaysia and Indonesia, Singapore presents the most stringent model for integrating Islamic education into its citizen-building project. As a secular state with Muslims as a minority, Singapore places Islamic education within a strict regulatory framework to maintain social cohesion and political stability. Madrasahs are positioned not as

⁴⁷ Osman Bakar, *Islam and Civilisational Dialogue* (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1997). 88-91.

⁴⁸ Shamsul A. B, "A History of an Identity, an Identity of a History," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 32, no. 3 (2001): 355-66.

⁴⁹ Farish A Noor, *Islam Embedded* (Kuala Lumpur: Malaysian Sociological Research Institute Ltd, 2004). 112-205.

⁵⁰ Karel Steenbrink, *Pesantren, Madrasah, Sekolah* (Jakarta: LP3ES, 1986). 23-26.

⁵¹ Azyumardi Azra, *Pendidikan Islam: Tradisi Dan Modernisasi* (Jakarta: Logos, 1999). 55-58.

⁵² Robert W Hefner, "How Indonesian Became a World Leader in Islamic Education: A Historical Sociological of a Great Transformation," *Muslim Education Review* 1, no. 1 (2022). 141-145.

expressions of majority identity, but rather as minority institutions that must continually prove their relevance to the national interest.⁵³

Singapore's uniqueness lies in the following paradox: Islamic education has become politically significant precisely because of its minority position. Every policy related to madrasas, curriculum, and language of instruction has direct implications for discourses of integration, national loyalty, and social security. In this context, Islamic education functions not only as an educational institution but also as a symbol of state-Islam relations in Singapore.⁵⁴ In Malaysia, Islamic education strengthens national identity, and in Indonesia, Islamic education navigates within ideological pluralism. In Singapore, Islamic education operates within the logic of managed *pluralism*, where the state actively manages religious expression so that it does not exceed state-determined boundaries.⁵⁵

This comparison emphasises that demographic configurations, state ideology, and political history largely determine the relationship between Islamic education and citizen formation. Islamic education does not have a universal position within Muslim or non-Muslim nation-states but is always contextual. In the context of citizenship theory, the case of Singapore demonstrates how Islamic education can serve both as an instrument of integration and as an arena for state control. Within the theory of the nation-state, Singapore demonstrates how education is used to preventively manage plurality. Meanwhile, within the theory of minority education, Islamic education in Singapore serves as a concrete example of how minority groups negotiate their identities under strong state regulation.

Conclusion

This article asserts that Islamic education in Singapore is a strategic arena in the project of citizen formation in a multiethnic nation. Unlike Muslim-majority contexts such as Malaysia and Indonesia, Islamic education in Singapore must continually negotiate its existence amidst demands for national integration, political stability, and economic productivity. The urgency of this study lies in its contribution to broadening the discourse on Islamic education beyond mere curriculum and institutional issues to an analysis of the power relations between the state and religion. Islamic education in Singapore demonstrates that citizen formation is not a neutral process, but rather a political project involving value selection, identity regulation, and the management of difference. Thus, this study is relevant not only to the study of Islam and education but also to broader debates about citizenship, minorities, and the nation-state in Southeast Asia. Islamic education in Singapore offers an important lens for understanding how the modern state manages religion in an increasingly complex pluralistic context.

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⁵³ Mutalib, *Islam, Muslims and the State in Singapore*. 156-160.

⁵⁴ Mutalib. 172-175.

⁵⁵ Rahim, *The Singapore Dilemma: The Political and Educational Marginality of The Malay Community*. 201-205.

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