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Book Review:
On Muslim Activism in Singapore

Islam in a Secular State: Muslim Activism in Singapore
by Walid Jumblatt Abdullah (Routledge, 2021).

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Since the 1970s, a growing global phenomenon has attempted to subordinate national identities to sit below a broader Islamic identity. This Muslim re-assertiveness has been documented even in places where Muslims represent a minority, such as Singapore.[1] Based on two recent surveys, at least 93 percent of ethnic Malays in Singapore perceive being Muslim as important to their identity[2], while Muslim respondents were most likely to identify as extremely religious. This is in stark contrast to other ethnic and religious communities.[3] Considering that Singapore is located in a Muslim-majority region and described by Huxley as a "Chinese nut in a Malay nutcracker", it is of utmost importance that the state is able to manage Muslim assertiveness towards policies that might challenge their religious interests, without compromising on national security and

[1] Hussin Mutalib, 2012, p. 66.
[2] Mathew Mathews, Leonard Lim, and Shantini Selvarajan, 2017, p. 24.
[3] Mathew Mathews, Leonard Lim, and Shantini Selvarajan, 2019, p. 24.

economic growth.[4] Although one can argue that this indicates a perennial sense of insecurity, it is a natural trait of any sovereign state, particularly in a multi-religious and multi-ethnic society.

Due to the ambivalent nature of religion as both a cohesive and divisive force, states have constantly sought to manage religions in attempts to preserve social fabric and maintain order. In Singapore, one of the state's governing strategies has been to adopt secularism as a national ideology to ensure that religion plays a minimal role in the common space. Contrary to the idea of France's Laïcité, which deliberately removes religious institutions from society, the Singaporean government would like to believe that Singapore's model is "secularism with a soul".[5] Although religion should not play a determinative role in public life**,** the state recognizes that religion can positively affect social well-being and economic prosperity.[6]

In a secular state such as Singapore, then, to what extent can Muslim actors navigate their way in a constricted political system? Moreover, how can they maximize their influence? Actors here denote Muslim activists who are involved in any political or social reforms.[7] At the heart of Walid Abdullah's *Islam in a Secular State: Muslim Activism in Singapore* is a compelling narrative on state-society relations between Muslim activists and the secular state. The common denominator throughout this work is the emphasis on the ways in which Muslim activists strategically navigate the political system to maximize their cause and not face reprisal from the state. On the one hand, if Muslim activists cross the 'out of bounds' (OB) markers of the state, they are unlikely to successfully push the state to revise a particular policy, and the author highlighted the *tudung* issue as an example.[8] On the other hand, the absence of public lobbying also does

[4] Tim Huxley, 1991, p. 208.
[5]Li-Ann Thio, 2012, pp. 446–469.
[6] Alami Musa, 2017, p. 15.
[7] Walid Abdullah, 2021, p. 25.
[8] Ibid, 223.

not incentivize the state to embark on a different path. According to Abdullah, this is the conundrum that activists face when pursuing their causes,[9] as naturally, those who align closest to the state make the most gains in the system.[10] This assumes that all activists, regardless of their background, are political actors who make pragmatic choices out of self-interest.

The book's structure is pleasingly clear. The first two chapters provide a contextual understanding of Singapore's political arena and situate Muslim activism in its broader context by looking at strategies employed by Muslim activists around the world to navigate within their respective political systems. Abdullah highlights that one primary strategy pursued by many states, regardless of their political systems, is that of co-opting individuals and groups. Co-optation provides actors with a stake in the system and strategically silences dissenting voices by turning them into supporters of the government.[11] According to Abdullah, no political party does this more skillfully than the Political Action Party (PAP) government of Singapore. Abdullah provides examples of actors from different Muslim activists factions which have been co-opted by the state to either join PAP or the civil service.[12] These examples support the author's hypothesis that under a paternalistic state, activists, regardless of their background, are rational actors who make pragmatic choices to pursue their causes even if it means compromising certain principles. They do so because this is the only way for them to benefit from the political system.

Chapter 3 lays out the book's theoretical framework to comprehend how Muslim actors operate within what he calls a competitive authoritarian state. Unlike a fully authoritarian state, limited political opportunities exist that fundamentally determine the successes of these

[9] Ibid, 73.
[10] Ibid, 25.
[11] Ibid, 56.
[12] Ibid, 22.

actors in navigating the political terrain.[13] Contrary to the assumption that these actors are purely ideological, Abdullah argues that a movement can only materialize insofar as the political opportunities allow them to do so. For example, liberal Muslims can remain liberals as long as the political opportunities benefit them evenly. This reflects the dominating nature of the state that accordingly shapes civil society's activism regardless of their orientation. Therefore, it can be argued that the existence of political opportunities takes precedence over ideological capital.

In addition, this chapter introduces some of the state legal instruments designed to manage Muslim activists to protect the country's social fabric. For example, the Asatizah Recognition Scheme is a powerful tool at the disposal of the state, used to manage the political influence of religious elites, more so after 11 September 2001, when we saw increased securitization of Islam and Muslims globally.[14] Perhaps an indirect consequence of muscular securitization is that it may cause religious scholars to engage in self-censorship and withhold their opinions on socio-political matters out of fear that it would affect their livelihoods.

In the book's remaining chapters, Abdullah uncovers Muslim activists' different positions, exploring the *ulama,* liberal Muslims, and conservative Muslims. He explicates some of their challenges and gives several case studies which illustrate the political opportunities available to each actor. Abdullah contends that liberal Muslims have made the most gains in the Singaporean system simply because they play by the rules of the game and do not infringe the OB markers set by the state. In that sense, they fit the state's definition of a 'good Muslim'.[15] However, I would question this framing, as it fails to capture the nuances of these actors fully. Alfian Sa'at, who identifies as a liberal, has been given some space to operate in Singapore even though he is a well-known critic of the state and

[13]Ibid, 84.
[14]Kamaludeen Nasir, 2007, p. 52.
[15] Walid Abdullah, *Islam in a Secular State*, 208.

constantly questions its OB markers. Even Tommy Koh, a prominent member of the ruling party, has spoken out in support of Alfian and regards him as a loving critic of Singapore (rather than being anti-Singapore).[16] In fairness, Abdullah clarifies that Alfian's situation is an exception rather than the rule, should we consider the situation of activists who have run afoul of the state, such as Kirsten Han and PJ Thum, who have been on the receiving end of the state's strong-arm actions.[17]

Perhaps it is due to the selective methodological approach of the book that it is unable to capture these complexities fully. Although the author has adopted a scientific approach, such an approach can be nominal in explaining the lived experience of Muslims as it focuses on technical specificities and fails to interrogate the broader factors such as language, history, and culture. These broad factors shape the ontological realities of Singapore Muslims, so an interdisciplinary approach would further enrich the book's deliberations.

In closing the book, Abdullah draws readers' attention back to the state's overarching approach to activism as well as its preferred Muslim identity in maintaining state stability. All this makes for hard-hitting and uncomfortable reading, which is what Abdullah wants to achieve. Although he indicates that he makes no normative judgment on what civil society should be or do, it seems Abdullah wants to force readers to see the power plays at work in the process of translation. This is one of the main strengths of the book.

This book is an important contribution to the discourse on Muslims in Singapore, particularly considering that many works present Muslim life in reductive ways, dismissing the community's internal diversities. Instead of pitting one group against the other, this book encourages readers to

[16] Tessa Oh and Ng Jun Sen, "Yale-NUS Dissent Module: Tommy Koh, Arts Figures Back Playwright Alfian Sa'At after Ong Ye Kung Criticism". *Todayonline*, October 05 2019, https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/yale-nus-dissent-module-tommy-koh-arts-figures-back-playwright-alfian-saat-after-ong-ye.

[17] Walid Abdullah, *Islam in a Secular State*, 203.

evaluate civil-state relations from multiple vantage points that make for the development of a mature intellectual space over contentious issues.

More importantly, this book offers nuances and ideas critical of both state and non-state actors, an oft-overlooked yet significant approach. The state and its concomitants should not be regarded as a monolith.[18] In addition, Abdullah forces us to evaluate the actions of actors and the state beyond the traditional binary lens of resistance and subordination.[19] In the context of Muslim activism, more often than not, the actions of its actors are complex and nuanced, and it is through this discursive lens that the intellectual project of the book should be read.

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[18] Joel Migdal, 2001, p. 103.

[19] Walid Abdullah, *Islam in a Secular State*, 26.

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