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MUSLIM MINORITIES IN THE PHILIPPINES AND SINGAPORE

Ensuring a thriving community

By [Taharudin Piang Ampatuan](#) , [Shiran Ali](#) and [Yang Razali Kassim](#)

THE Philippines, a Christian-majority country with a restive minority population of 10 million Muslims, can take a leaf from Singapore's experience in dealing with its Muslim population.

The Philippines has already lost two opportunities to make peace with its Moro Muslims in the south: The 1976 Tripoli Peace Agreement and the 1996 Indonesia Peace Accord.

Both of these accords failed to produce a just political settlement due to corruption, bad governance and, most significantly, lack of political accommodation. These are all issues which Singapore has addressed successfully.

Singapore's leadership has made available what it calls 'political space' for its minorities. Combined with a firm commitment to meritocracy and a willingness to allow Muslims to nurture their own identity within the context of a multicultural society, this space has enabled Singapore's Muslims to identify



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strongly with the country's success.

The starting point for meritocracy in Singapore is the education system. It is of a high quality and reinforces the idea that one succeeds or fails on the basis of one's ability, not ethnic or religious identity.

Although there were some reservations within the Malay/Muslim community about meritocracy in the initial years, they now generally subscribe to it. Their acceptance has been made easier by the Government's effort to ensure that its citizens receive equal access to education and social welfare.

Indeed, as some foreigners have observed, the other races in Singapore may well in the future envy the cohesiveness and progressiveness of the Republic's Muslim community.

The Philippines has many policies to promote meritocracy, but their implementation has been lacking, especially in the autonomous region.

Not all the blame for this can be attributed to the central government. Educational institutions that cater to Muslims are wanting in performance. There are many reasons for this, but the most critical is the quality of their educators.

The English language proficiency of many teachers in the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) is equivalent to that of Grade 2 and 3 students in public elementary schools nationwide. Only 5 per cent of all teachers in the region are qualified to teach, according to a study conducted by the United States Agency for International Development.

Given the lack of educational opportunities, it is not surprising that a large number of Moro professionals cannot pass the national civil service examination.

As a result, most of them are not eligible for jobs that require expertise in the public sector. If employed, their employment would be of a temporary nature.

The lack of qualified personnel limits the ability of the ARMM to address the serious lack of economic development in the region and its high poverty rate.

This talent deficit affects the private sector as well, where the stereotypes that seem to 'favour' Christians over Muslims remain common. These have created an understandable victim culture, with Muslims blaming the state for their parlous condition.

The situation in Singapore is different. Singaporean Muslims use their 'collective unity' to improve themselves individually as well as a community.

For instance, the community has gained statutory permission through the Muslim Religious Council of Singapore (Muis) to raise funds for the construction of mosques as well as to collect zakat (tithes) to help the poor and for welfare programmes.

Some of Muis' practices would be problematic in the Philippines, given its doctrine of the 'separation of church and state'.

A recent case involving halal certification illustrates the point. The Philippine Supreme Court ruled in favour of a private Muslim organisation against the Office on Muslim Affairs, challenging the latter's legitimacy as a government entity ruling on religious matters.

The Singapore Government, rather than being deterred by the technicalities of the law, provides Muslims 'elbow room' to practise their religion.

It recognises that for most people, religion and ethnicity are central to their

lives. Rather than trying to exclude religious and ethnic identities totally from the public sphere, the state found legal ways to incorporate them.

This has allowed Singapore to weld potentially divisive ethnic and religious identities into a unified multicultural state.

This can be seen in the interactions of Singaporean Muslims with the larger society. First, they see opportunity and benefit in Singapore being a secular state that practises multiracialism and multiculturalism.

Keeping an equal distance from all religious groups, the state does not impose any one religion on the population, but allows all religions to flourish. The Muslim community accepts these principles as a source of strength.

Second, Muslim students can excel in the state school system, just like students of other religions. Those who wish to attend a madrasah are not prevented from doing so, although local madrasahs have been strongly encouraged to upgrade themselves to ensure their long-term viability.

Third, statutory bodies such as Muis and Muslim civic organisations such as the Association of Muslim Professionals, Mendaki, Pergas and Darul-Arqam focus on integration and helping the Muslim community to develop.

These efforts have produced a unique Singapore Muslim mindset - one that can balance the desire to establish a Singaporean Muslim identity with the demands of a multi-religious, multicultural and multiracial society.

In Singapore, the minority Muslim community is an active participant in development. This is not to say that life for the Singaporean Muslim is perfect or problem-free. But the system does provide avenues for the peaceful redress of grievances.

The peaceful and law-abiding temperament of the Singapore Muslim community also plays a part in engendering this mutual accommodation between the community and the state.

By contrast, in the Philippines, the on-going conflict has created a heightened sense of the 'otherness of the other'.

Though Moro and Singaporean Muslims live in different contexts, they have a lot to learn from each other.

Perhaps Singapore should consider exporting its experience with its Muslim population to other countries with Muslim minorities.

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