



Creative Religious Governance of the Singaporean State

Phramaha Kriangsak Witheechai ^{a*}, Phramaha Prawit Jamnil ^b

^a Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, ^b Wachiramakut School, Bangkok,

*Email: kriangsak.wit@mcu.ac.th

Abstract: Religious diversity poses a challenge to state administration, yet Singapore has managed to approach religion in a creative manner. This article seeks to explain the state's practices in creatively governing religion, through legislation and the establishment of central agencies that link religious organizations with the state. While some laws emphasize strict control, they are not applied indiscriminately. Instead, the state focuses on raising awareness of the dangers of religious conflict. The approach to religion is marked by a polite understanding of the diversity within each faith and promotes religious principles with the primary objective of fostering national unity. This is considered a model of creative religious governance by the Singaporean state.

Keywords: religious governance, creativity, Singapore, state and religion, unity, religious conflict

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1. Introduction

Cultural and religious diversity often appears to be a challenge for state governance. However, Singapore has managed to approach religion creatively, emphasizing unity as a crucible for cultural diversity while respecting religious diversity within all multicultural groups. Singapore does not view diversity as something to be eliminated; rather, it sees such diversity as a valuable cultural heritage that contributes to creativity across various sectors, including education, media, and social services (Lai, 2008). In forging unity among its citizens, the state has utilized religious institutions as tools to promote national cohesion, emphasizing its support for equitable ownership of cultural identity among each group (Tan, 2007).

Nevertheless, although Singapore shows respect for religious diversity, challenges sometimes arise that result in social unrest or conflict. The nation continues to use national unity as the key framework for engaging with religion, a creative approach in itself. This is evident in the ongoing promotion of positive interactions among communities and religions, which is an important mission for sustaining cultural



diversity and fostering unity among Singapore's citizens (Lai, 2008).

Singapore is a secular state, aiming to integrate and ensure social equality. Thus, in terms of religious policy, Singapore strives to maintain neutrality, consistent with promoting equality for all religions. Even while maintaining this neutrality, the state takes a professional stance by strictly adhering to legal frameworks—a crucial standard of secularism in Singapore (Neo, 2016).

Though Singapore is not a perfectly liberal country, in pursuit of national unity, it continues to support religious freedom for its people. This illustrates that Singapore is not entirely liberal, which might be a key factor enabling the state to function effectively, particularly regarding religious freedom (Neo, 2017). This approach reflects a clear balance between religious freedom and state control. The government continues to permit and facilitate religious practice, as long as it does not provoke religious conflict. Should any issues arise that could lead to religious discord, the state must intervene and prevent escalation, steering the situation back towards national unity—a key objective (Thio, 2017).

Holding a firm position within strict legal frameworks and promoting religious equality demonstrates the state's strong commitment to achieving national unity. It shows that the state acts as both the initiator and model in the journey toward national solidarity, thereby strengthening and protecting the state itself. Conversely, the legal framework emphasizes secular laws and norms over religious ones, highlighting the complex relationship between state and religion in adhering to Singapore's constitution.

Singapore's balanced integration of openness to religious freedom and clear state regulation is a compelling case study for other nations looking to adopt creative approaches to religious affairs. Such methods can lead to peace and unity, even amid multicultural societies. To provide insight into key issues, this article aims to describe the religious context of Singapore, reflecting the formation of the state and its ethnic and religious diversity, as well as historical circumstances that led the country to prioritize religious diversity in order to overcome past religious conflicts (such as racial/religious riots). Ultimately, this has resulted in various state practices that serve as mechanisms for the creative and widely accepted governance of religion among all Singaporeans.

2. The Religious Context in Singapore

The Singaporean government has classified its citizens into four main categories based on religious beliefs, which are: 1) Confucian – Chinese, 2) Muslim – Malay, 3) Hindu – Indian, and 4) Christian – Anglo-Saxon. This clear categorization has resulted in the perception that there is no distinction between “race” and “ethnicity.” The proportion of ethnic groups within the population over the years has been carefully managed through various policies, with continuously updated data—similarly

to the granting of citizenship rights. This has enabled the accurate determination of Singapore's population composition: Chinese (74.2%), Malay (13.3%), Indian (9.2%), and Others (3.3%) (Ministry of Social and Family Development, 2014). Contemporary Singaporean society still consists of large groups of adherents to each of the four main religions: Buddhists (33.3%), Christians (18.3%), Muslims (14.7%), Taoists (10.9%), Hindus (5.1%), and followers of other religions (0.7%). These statistics highlight the country's religious diversity (Goh, Daniel P. S. 2009).

Historically, the Singaporean state has demonstrated varying attitudes toward religion and its relationship with religious organizations, particularly between 1965 and 1970. During this period, the state described religion as the fundamental ideology of Singaporeans, but positioned and divided religions to ensure that they would not pose an obstacle to economic development. Before gaining independence in 1965, Singapore experienced several riots, such as the Maria Hertogh riots—stemming from court decisions biased against Muslims and the “forced conversion” of Muslims to Christianity. The resulting dissatisfaction led to riots that left 18 people dead and hundreds injured. The second major incident occurred in July, during communal riots between Malays and Chinese amidst celebrations for the Prophet Muhammad’s birthday, which resulted in 36 deaths (from murder) and several hundred injured (Hill, 2000, p.9).

As a result of these riots, the Singaporean government made a clear commitment to “secular modernization,” with specific national goals such as meritocracy and multiracialism, to achieve educational objectives in a “neutral space.” The goal of secular modernization was to push religion back into the private sphere of each community. By framing these communal clashes as riots motivated by religious rivalry rather than by religious inspiration, the labeling of incidents as “religious riots” significantly strengthened the credibility of separating religion from the state. These events underscored the significance of religion under the larger category of “race,” effectively promoting individualism and the pursuit of personal economic success, which became new focal points for nation-building.

However, in the 1980s, the state began to realize that the mission of individualism and secular modernization bore risks associated with foreign cultural influence. The pursuit of material wealth and the focus on English-medium “Western” education were believed to introduce the “evils” of Western decadence in the form of hippie culture—“promiscuity, anarchy, weakness, and drug addiction.”

The Singaporean state has always been deeply concerned with issues of religion and race, partly due to the threat of communism in the mid-1940s and the Natah riots of 1950, which are well-documented. As a result of such anxieties, religion and ethnicity in Singapore have been meticulously regulated through laws and state policies. This is among

the key reasons for the management and control of Singapore's religious identities, which must now be implemented within policies for Singaporeans of diverse cultural backgrounds.

3. Mechanisms of Religious Control by the Singaporean State

Singapore employs a variety of approaches to control religion, integrating legal mechanisms, bureaucratic systems, and societal frameworks. The country adopts a pragmatic approach to religious control, seeking a balance between state power and religious freedom. The state defines boundaries between religion and politics to ensure that religious practices do not violate public order or individual rights (Musa, 2023). In terms of its methods, Singapore uses a legal and bureaucratic framework comprising the following elements:

1. Enactment of the Administration of Muslim Law Act (AMLA): This act serves as the central governing legislation for Islam in Singapore, providing a legal framework for the administration of Muslim personal law. It establishes institutions such as the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS), which oversees Islamic affairs and ensures compliance with state policies (Steiner & Steiner, 2015).
2. State Fatwa: Singapore appoints fatwa authorities, individuals with profound Islamic religious knowledge, to issue rulings on Islamic religious matters. State-sanctioned fatwas serve as an additional mechanism for the government to oversee Islamic practices and are integrated into the secular legal framework to ensure that Islamic religious directives align with the interests of the state (Pasuni, 2022).
3. Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act (MRHA): This act grants the government extensive powers to regulate religious activities and control political expressions linked to religion. Its purpose is to maintain social harmony and prevent religious conflict (Tey, 2008). Apart from enacting laws to keep religious activities within the bounds aimed at fostering national unity, Singapore maintains a flexible approach toward regulating various beliefs. This allows the state to employ either a 'soft' or 'hard' approach, depending on the context and the level of risk posed to societal harmony. Such flexibility enables the government to support religious practices while simultaneously using religion as a tool for political control (Musa, 2023). Through these practices concerning religions and belief systems, Singapore is often described as a 'soft authoritarian' state, where legal pluralism and religious diversity are managed through strict state oversight. This includes controlling religious sites, restricting proactive dissemination of religious publicity, and promoting state-approved multiculturalism (Turner & Turner, 2015).

Legal control of religion to ensure it does not undermine national unity, however, has led to deeper issues, reflecting a profound mistrust in the electorate's ability to manage religious freedom responsibly. As a result,

legal instruments are extensively used to regulate ethnic and religious relations (Tey, 2008), especially concerning the Muslim community. This sometimes leads to internal conflicts within the Muslim community; although the state provides support and protection, increased surveillance and control can lead to feelings of alienation (DEMİRCİ, 2022) (Rahim, 2012).

While Singapore's religious control mechanisms are effective in preserving social harmony, they also raise concerns about religious freedom and autonomy. Heavy-handed state controls, such as the MRHA and AMLA, can unduly restrict religious expression and associated political activities, particularly for minority groups like Muslims. This tension between control and freedom is a key feature of Singapore's model of religious governance and reflects broader challenges in balancing state authority and individual rights in a multicultural society.

4. Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act (MRHA)

The Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act (MRHA) is a significant legal measure in Singapore, designed to regulate relationships between ethnicities and religions by granting considerable powers to administrative authorities to control political expression and activities that might threaten religious harmony. This law reflects Singapore's approach to managing its diverse religious landscape, characterized by strong state intervention to maintain social order and prevent conflicts. The MRHA is part of a broader legal framework aimed at separating religion from politics and ensuring that religious activities do not undermine the secular nature of the state.

The MRHA gives authorities discretionary power to intervene in religious matters, allowing them to issue orders to restrain individuals or groups deemed to threaten religious harmony (Tey, 2008), with a broad scope intended to proactively address potential conflicts and ensure that religious activities do not spill over into the political domain (Rahim, 2012). The MRHA arose from recognition of the importance of religious diversity, which can be a major cause of conflict or a catalyst for national unity. The context of religious diversity is therefore a vital factor in Singapore's political development under multicultural and multireligious conditions. The MRHA thus reflects the government's intention to control political expression linked to religious activities, indicating a broader assertion of state authority, with the government exercising significant control over social issues to preserve stability (Tey, 2008). This action underscores the political leaders' distrust of voters, aiming to restructure voting behavior and party politics by limiting the influence of religious organizations (Tey, 2008).

However, the image of the MRHA as a tool for placing religion within the framework of national unity has important implications for religious organizations—especially those with political involvement—as it restricts their capacity to participate in politics, thus limiting their

influence on public policy and governance (Tey, 2008). These restrictions are part of a broader strategy to inoculate politics from religion, ensuring that religious activities remain within the bounds of unity defined by the state (Rahim, 2012).

It can be seen that although Singapore grants individuals the freedom to practice religion voluntarily, adherence to religious principles is regulated if it poses a risk of provoking conflict that may undermine national unity. The Singaporean government acts as both regulator and supporter of religious organizations to ensure that their activities align with the state's vision of fostering creative coexistence. Thus, the relationship between state and religion is often characterized by cooperation and mutual support. However, the state and religious organizations can still communicate and negotiate if the aims of a religious organization do not align with the interests of the state (Tang, 2022). The Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act can therefore be regarded as a crucial legal instrument that enables the government to regulate ethnic and religious relations, curtail political expression and activities, and safeguard religious harmony (Tey, 2008).

5. Religious Organizations and Legal Status

Obtaining legal status is essential for religious organizations to operate effectively in religious affairs. This status allows organizations to own property, hire staff, and participate in various activities. Therefore, different religious organizations have duly registered themselves. Under international human rights norms, this registration process reflects Singapore's commitment to maintaining universal neutrality (Đukić, 2020). The registration of religious organizations is not primarily a mechanism for social control; rather, it is necessary for the proper legal functioning and operations of these organizations (Đukić, 2020). This can be seen, for example, in the case of the Malay Muslim community, which has a special constitutional status and established organizations such as MUIS, which plays an important role in supporting the interests of Muslims and in harmonizing Islamic teachings with Singaporean law (Zulkifli et al., 2023). MUIS also provides guidance to the government on Islamic religious matters, demonstrating ongoing cooperation between state policies and religious organizations (Putri et al., n.d.).

Singapore's approach to religion aims to ensure religious freedom, but within a framework that emphasizes racial and religious harmony. It also stems from legal pluralism and multicultural policies designed to protect religious freedoms while upholding the fairness of the law (Thio, 2017). The Singaporean government also encourages religious organizations to participate in social services, promote self-reliance ethics, and reduce dependency on welfare. This cooperation is facilitated through government grants as stipulated by law (Thio, 2009). Although Singapore's regulatory framework for religious organizations is designed to preserve unity and accommodate diversity, it also reflects

a degree of state paternalism—a significant level of government control over the registration and operation of religious organizations that can be seen as a way to ensure alignment with national interests, possibly limiting the autonomy of these organizations. This approach highlights the delicate balance that Singapore maintains between religious freedom and state control, with the goal of preserving social harmony in a diverse society.

The registration and regulation of religious organizations in Singapore are deeply linked to prudent policies aimed at maintaining religious harmony and accommodating a multicultural society. The government plays a key role in supervising religious organizations to ensure that they align with the state's vision of the public good, while also respecting religious diversity. This regulatory framework is designed to prevent religious domination in the state while allowing religious participation in public life, particularly in social services. The registration process for religious organizations is crucial for them to obtain legal entity status, which is necessary for acquiring property, hiring personnel, and applying for government licenses. This process is intended to be simple, prompt, and transparent, even though at times it may be used too formally to control the number of religious organizations that are officially recognized. The key points below outline Singapore's registration process for religious organizations:

6. Creative Regulation of Religion by the Singaporean State

Singapore's approach to religious regulation is characterized by its unique blend of secularism and state intervention, with the aim of maintaining religious harmony in a highly diverse society. The state adopts a pragmatic form of secularism that allows engagement with religious communities while retaining oversight of religious practices and institutions. This approach is clearly evident in the regulation of Islam, the management of inter-religious harmony, and the use of legal frameworks to control religious behavior. The state's creative religious regulations are designed to balance religious freedom with social cohesion, ensuring that religious practices do not disrupt Singapore's multicultural fabric.

The Singaporean government holds an official responsibility to protect and promote Islam, as stipulated in the Constitution. This includes the administration of Muslim personal laws and religious affairs through governmental and judicial institutions (DEMIRCI, 2022; Steiner & Steiner, 2015). The Administration of Muslim Law Act (AMLA) is the principal legal instrument regulating Islamic law in Singapore, providing a framework for governing Muslim personal law and establishing the Syariah Court (Steiner & Steiner, 2015). Additionally, religious rulings (fatwas) are issued by official agencies, thereby incorporating religious directives into the legal and secular bureaucratic system. This ensures that religious practices are aligned with state policy (Pasuni,

2022).

Despite having regulations on religion, the Singaporean state remains flexible, exercising both creative and decisive control as the situation demands. This flexibility allows the government to be religion-friendly while still retaining the authority to regulate religious activities when necessary (Musa, 2023). The recognition of public holidays based on important dates of various religions highlights the state's approach of embracing diversity and respecting religious identities, rather than controlling them in a way that disregards religious variety (Jamal, 2016). Hence, to achieve religious freedom and national unity, the state enacts a variety of laws that respond to cultural diversity. Both strict and soft laws are used to regulate religious conduct, fostering moderation and resilience against radicalism (Tan, 2009), which is a key aspect of Singapore's religious policy. This ensures that all religions have freedom of belief, provided that such freedoms do not threaten the nation's social harmony (Thio, 2017).

The Singaporean government places great importance on preserving racial and religious harmony as the cornerstone of its governance model (Eugene, 2007). Religious institutions, such as Buddhist temples, have adapted to state regulations by restructuring themselves as multi-purpose complexes, reflecting the state's influence on religious modification (Eng, 2003). The state regulates religion through AMLA, which sets out the governance framework of Islamic law, including the creation of bureaucratic and judicial institutions that interpret and enforce Islamic law, thereby ensuring state control over religious practices. The government employs legal, political, and social measures to manage the relationship between the secular state and Muslim minorities, balancing power and religious expression (Steiner & Steiner, 2015).

However, the state's actions toward Islam have led to increased scrutiny of Muslims and Islamic activities, causing some anxiety within the Muslim community (DEMİRCİ, 2022). The control of religion via AMLA, which includes establishing bureaucratic and judicial institutions for the interpretation and enforcement of Islamic law, ensures state oversight of religious practices. The government uses a variety of legal, political, and social measures to manage relations between the secular state and Muslim minorities, maintaining a balance between authority and religious expression (Steiner & Steiner, 2015).

The government views religion as a constructive force in Singaporean society. Religious groups have made—and continue to make—significant contributions to the nation. The various beliefs practiced by Singaporeans are sources of spiritual strength and moral guidance. Many religious groups are active in education, community, and social welfare; there are schools that assist the elderly and disabled and run creches for children. Their potential for future contributions in these areas is even greater (Li-Ann, 2009).

combining regulation and respectful accommodation of all faiths so as to gain acceptance from religious adherents. This practice helps the state avoid inflaming conflicts with religious groups, while courtesy minimizes resistance to state policies. Thus, the integration of regulatory control with politeness in the Singaporean state demonstrates clear effectiveness in the management of religious affairs (Witheechai, P.K. 2020).

One of the key mechanisms mediating between the state and religious organizations is MURS (Ministry of Unity and Religious Stability), an agency that plays a creative role in promoting mutual understanding between the government and various religious organizations. The state also employs the MRHA (Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act) as a primary tool for maintaining order and religious harmony. Furthermore, there are clear mechanisms for religious affairs that include the MURS, tasked with coordinating and facilitating mutual development between the state and religious groups. The crucial tool here is the MRHA, which aims to strengthen national unity (Witheechai, P.K. 2020).

In addition to the MRHA, which targets fostering national harmony, there are more stringent laws such as the Internal Security Act and anti-sedition laws. However, these strict laws are used only in cases of real violence, which are rare thanks to the government's emphasis on prevention rather than simply responding after a problem arises. The state's preventive measures often involve invoking memories of alarming past events, like religious riots, as cautionary tales to encourage learning from history and fostering awareness of harmony in the present (Witheechai, P.K. 2020). Beyond merely controlling religion, the state also recognizes the value of religious teachings in promoting national unity by encouraging followers to widely practice principles such as the Confucian and Buddhist emphasis on gratitude, diligence, thriftiness, and endurance. Additionally, the state promotes religious education by introducing systematic religious studies curricula and supporting religious organizations in delivering instruction, under state-endorsed guidelines to ensure that such teachings do not conflict with the goal of national unity (Witheechai, P.K. 2020).

The Singaporean government places great emphasis on maintaining racial and religious harmony, which is considered a cornerstone of its governance model (Eugene, 2007). Religious institutions, such as Buddhist temples, have adapted to state regulations by restructuring themselves into multipurpose complexes, reflecting the state's influence on the reform of religion (Eng, 2003). The Singaporean state regulates religion through the Administration of Muslim Law Act (AMLA), which establishes a regulatory framework for Islamic law. This includes the creation of bureaucratic and judicial institutions that interpret and enforce Islamic law, ensuring that the state controls religious practices. The government employs legal, political, and social measures to man-

age the relationship between the secular state and the Muslim minority, maintaining a balance between authority and religious expression (Steiner & Steiner, 2015). However, such state actions towards Islam have resulted in increased scrutiny of Muslims and Islamic activities, causing some anxiety within the Muslim community (DEMİRCİ, 2022). The regulation of religion through the AMLA, which creates a supervisory framework for Islamic law—comprising the establishment of bureaucratic and judicial bodies to interpret and enforce Islamic law—ensures the state's oversight of religious practices. The government utilizes legal, political, and social strategies to manage relations between the secular state and Muslim minorities, balancing authority and religious expression (Steiner & Steiner, 2015).

The government sees religion as a constructive force in Singaporean society. Religious groups have made, and continue to make, significant contributions to the nation. The various faiths practiced by Singaporeans serve as sources of spiritual strength and moral guidance. Numerous religious groups are active in community education and social work—operating schools, assisting the elderly and disabled, and running creches for children. Their potential for future contributions in these areas is even greater (Li-Ann 2009).

The Singaporean state operates in the religious sphere with a model that blends control and respect for all religions, ensuring acceptance among their followers. This practice helps the state avoid unnecessary conflicts with religious groups, while politeness and respect reduce resistance to an insignificant level. Thus, the integration of regulation and courteous engagement by the Singaporean government clearly reflects the effectiveness of its religious governance (Witheechai, P.K. 2020).

One of the key mechanisms facilitating coordination between the state and religious organizations is MURS (Ministry of Unity and Religious Stability), an agency playing a creative role in promoting mutual understanding between the government and various religious bodies. The state also uses the MRHA (Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act) as a principal tool to maintain public order and religious harmony. Furthermore, the state has a clear operational framework for religion, with MURS (Ministry of Unity and Religious Stability) acting to coordinate and foster mutual understanding between the government and religious organizations, using the MRHA (Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act) as an important legal instrument aimed at strengthening national unity (Witheechai, P.K. 2020).

In addition to the MRHA, which aims to foster national unity, there are laws that focus on strict control, such as the Internal Security Act and anti-sedition laws. However, these are only invoked in cases of actual serious incidents, which are rare due to the government's focus on prevention rather than waiting for problems to occur before applying

these laws. Preventive measures often involve invoking fearful historical memories, such as past religious riots, as cautionary reminders to promote learning from the past and foster present-day consciousness of unity (Witheechai, P.K. 2020).

The state not only exercises direct control over religion but also recognizes the value in religious teachings that can help promote national harmony. The government encourages followers to practice religious principles widely—for example, the Confucian and Buddhist tenets of filial piety, industriousness, frugality, and perseverance. Moreover, the state promotes religious education by systematically developing religious studies curricula and supporting religious organizations in providing instruction, under guidelines accredited by the state to ensure that such teaching does not conflict with the goal of fostering national unity (Witheechai, P.K. 2020).

Summary

Singapore is swift in dealing with religious conflicts or abnormalities that may cause harm to society. The government is always concerned when religious conflicts arise, since Singaporean society is multicultural. Thus, the state prioritizes preventive and control measures to keep issues from escalating beyond repair, as happened in the past when riots caused casualties as a result of religious conflict or terrorist incidents linked to religion. In addition to strict controls over such situations, the Singaporean government employs every possible measure to strengthen relationships between the state and different religious groups.

Although Singapore appears to strictly control religion, this does not mean it suppresses religious activities entirely. The state carefully exercises discretion in regulating religion and has organizations dedicated to fostering coordination and understanding between the state and religious bodies, such as MURS. There are also laws designed to support this ideology, such as the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act (MRHA). The state emphasizes prevention over legal action, often highlighting frightening images from religious riots to raise awareness about the harm caused by religious conflict. At the same time, this approach paves the way for Singaporeans to accept policies promoting secular modernization and a broader role for the greater society.

The state also intelligently analyzes and manages creative control by assessing the influence of religious practices on Singaporean behavior—values such as filial piety, diligence, frugality, and perseverance as taught in Confucianism. The state seems to support religious practices that contribute to Singapore's development as a modern nation. Creative control is also exercised by promoting religious education through approved curricula and encouraging religious organizations to oversee religious instruction—provided they are certified by the government. While the state does not reject religious education, such

curricula must be state-approved, even if this appears to limit the full independence of religious organizations' operations. The state strives to do its best in pursuit of national unity, encouraging respectful religious practice and supporting the adoption of teachings that promote harmony. This is another strategy for creative religious governance in Singapore.

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