

The ‘other’ Muhammadiyah movement: Singapore 1958–2008

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This paper provides a critical historical analysis of the Muhammadiyah movement in Singapore. I argue that four processes have been crucial in the emergence and sustenance of the Muhammadiyah within a predominantly non-Muslim society: the symbiotic relationship between the leaders and their followers, the formulation and subsequent reformulation of the ideology of the movement, political opportunities which were judiciously exploited and the availability of a wide array of infrastructures. The Muhammadiyah, as will be shown, provides an informative example of an Islamic movement in Southeast Asia that has transcended the challenges faced by the minority Muslim population by making effective use of the limited resources at its disposal.

Among the major Islamic movements in Southeast Asia that have attracted an increasing scholarly interest in recent years is the Muhammadiyah movement in Indonesia (hereafter referred to as ‘the Muhammadiyah’). Founded in 1912 in the city of Yogyakarta and deemed to be one of the oldest Islamic organisations in the country, the Muhammadiyah today prides itself with more than 29 million members. Because the movement has contributed to the continual development of the social, political, economic, educational and social landscape of modern Indonesia through its many branches, hospitals, universities and schools, it is of no surprise that a large corpus of work has been devoted to analysing its genesis, growth and influence. Previous studies have unravelled the ideology, missionary activities, political behaviour, institutions, female activism and reformist psychology of the Muhammadiyah. There is, at the same time, a whole array of published works on the lives and leadership styles of the ideologues of the movement.¹

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1 The literature on the Muhammadiyah in Indonesia is far too vast to be listed in full here. Some notable works on the Muhammadiyah in Indonesia include: Subhan Mas, *Muhammadiyah: Pintu gerbang Protestanisme Islam: Sebuah presisi modernitas* (Ngoro-Mojokerto: Al-Hikmah, 2005); Syarifuddin Jurdi, *Elite Muhammadiyah dan kekuasaan politik: Studi tentang tingkah laku politik elite*

However, one crucial dimension that is often omitted in this growing body of literature is the fact that the Muhammadiyah has inspired the founding and expansion of similar movements in various parts of Southeast Asia, movements that share its general goals, ideas and symbols, as well as its methods of religious reform. Although an explanation for this oversight is not easy to identify, one possible reason lies in the established perception among a majority of scholars that the Muhammadiyah is primarily an 'Indonesian' phenomenon. Alternatively, it can be argued that the other Muhammadiyah movements that existed in other parts of Southeast Asia have attracted little scholarly attention mainly because of their small following and their undeclared or informal links to their giant Indonesian namesake.

It is imperative, therefore, to direct our attention to the Muhammadiyah movements beyond Indonesian borders. This article examines the origins and growth of the Muhammadiyah movement in Singapore, which, like the other Muhammadiyah movements in present-day Thailand, Myanmar and Malaysia, calls for a more in-depth analysis and treatment. This is not only because of the paucity of works about it, but also because it has maintained a strong presence for more than five decades since its founding, whilst operating effectively within a predominantly non-Muslim society.² As Abdur Rahman Doi has perceptively observed, Islamic movements in non-Muslim majority contexts are often faced with the likelihood of premature closure or collapse due largely to the lack of support from a large proportion of the populace and limited resources at their disposal.³ To cap it all, the worldwide battle against 'radical and militant Islam' following the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979 has placed Islamic movements in a more vulnerable position than ever before. Movements that propagated a more critical stance towards state secularism and the relegation of Islam to the private sphere have been subjected to strict government controls, which in many instances have led to the disruption of their activities. Little wonder then that among the many Islamic movements that were established in Singapore since the 1930s, most experienced relatively brief life spans; some were as short-lived as merely a few months of activism and public engagement.⁴

lokal Muhammadiyah sesudah Orde Baru (Yogyakarta: Gadjah Mada University Press, 2004); *M. Amien Rais dalam Sorotan Generasi Muda Muhammadiyah*, ed. Abd. Rohim Ghazali (Bandung: Mizan, 1998); Abdul Munir Mulkhan, *Pemikiran Kyai Haji Ahmad Dahlan dan Muhammadiyah dalam perspektif perubahan sosial* (Jakarta: Bumi Aksara, 1990); Alfian, *Muhammadiyah: The political behavior of a Muslim modernist organisation under Dutch colonialism* (Yogyakarta: Gadjah Mada University Press, 1989); and Mitsuo Nakamura, *Crescent arises over the banyan tree: A study of the Muhammadiyah movement in a central Javanese town* (Yogyakarta: Gadjah Mada University Press, 1976).

2 James L. Peacock made some brief references to the Muhammadiyah movement in Singapore but did not explore its links with the Muhammadiyah in Indonesia. Very little discussion is devoted to exploring the movement's origins and growth which could well inform the ways in which 'reformist psychology' was disseminated in Singapore. See James L. Peacock, *Muslim puritans: Reformist psychology in Southeast Asian Islam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978). Some information on the Muhammadiyah movements in other parts of Southeast Asia can be found in the following websites: <http://imbalo.wordpress.com/2009/05/03/muhammadiyah-di-thailand-terbentuk/> and <http://pcim-kualalumpur.com/> (last accessed on 29 Jan. 2011).

3 Abdur Rahman Doi, 'Duties and responsibilities of Muslims in non-Muslim states: A point of view', *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 8, 2 (1987): 42–61.

4 Eugene K.B. Tan, 'Norming "moderation" in an "an iconic target": Public policy and the regulation of religious anxieties in Singapore', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 19, 4 (2007): 443–61; and Syed Muhd

The Muhammadiyah in Singapore is thus a particularly fascinating Muslim collective that cries out for some form of systematic empirical attention because it has defied the inexorable law of decline as observed by Doi. The relatively long duration of its existence through the colonial and postcolonial periods allows us to address larger questions pertaining to the histories of Islamic movements in Southeast Asia in places where Muslims were minorities: what were the various conditions that brought about the birth of Islamic movements? How were these movements organised and sustained? What challenges did the movements face, and how were they overcome? Did these movements achieve their main objectives? Were there shifts in the aims and ideologies of these movements? In attempting to answer these questions through the history of the Muhammadiyah in Singapore, I seek to bring to light the healthy spirit of activism on the part of Muslims in Singapore, which will allow for comparison with Muslim minorities and Islamic movements in other parts of modern Southeast Asia.

The historiography of post-Second World War (or 'post-war') Singapore is a second domain to which this paper seeks to contribute. In a recent article, Loh Kah Seng has brought to our attention the importance of approaching the study of the post-war period 'at the interface between social and political history' in order to fully understand 'manifest politics in its full historical context'. His critique is directed largely towards an emerging strand of revisionist historiography which he considers to be generally 'elitist' in perspective.⁵ Whilst acknowledging the analytical value of such insights for the purposes of this article, I contend that a more comprehensive study of post-war Singapore could be achieved by drawing connections between the 'ideational' spheres and the 'social' as well as the 'political' spheres of history. By the 'ideational' sphere, I am referring to the formulation, promotion and revision of ideas by members of grassroots movements. These ideas, I argue, provide grassroots movements with the rationale and justification for their work and engagement.

Studying the Muhammadiyah in Singapore through the interface between social, political and ideational histories compels the historian to consider the interconnections between the roles and flows of ideas and developments within the social and political spheres. By adopting a wide and multi-faceted vantage point, we could learn more about how the elites and subaltern members of a given religious movement were affected by the shifting contours of society and politics, and how the ideas they promoted influenced the societal and political institutions they sought to transform. The Muhammadiyah in Singapore affords such a perspective, similar to other movements in the post-war period, as will be shown later. The ideational, social and political contexts in which these movements operated compelled them to keep themselves attuned to global developments, while simultaneously demonstrating a high degree of dynamism and commitment in their engagement with local challenges.

With these objectives in mind, the following pages will provide a critical analysis of the genesis and development of the Muhammadiyah in Singapore from 1958 to

Khairudin Aljunied, *Colonialism, violence and Muslims in Southeast Asia: The Maria Hertogh controversy and its aftermath* (London: Routledge, 2009), p. 13.

⁵ Loh Kah Seng, 'Kampong, fire, nation: Towards a social history of post-war Singapore', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 40, 3 (2009): 613–43, here 614.

2008. Four intertwined processes have enabled this movement to prolong its relevance and vitality in a multicultural society dominated by non-Muslims. The first of these is the symbiotic relationship between the leaders of the movement and their followers. The *esprit de corps* among the rank and file was instrumental in the forging of networks and links with other movements and organisations, both locally and globally. Added to this is the crucial role played by key members of the Muhammadiyah in the formulation, revision and dissemination of the ideology of the movement. Third, from time to time the Muhammadiyah judiciously exploited political opportunities insofar as these opportunities did not compromise the general goals of the movement. The fourth factor is in the availability of a wide array of infrastructures, which served as bases for the dissemination of the ideology of the movement, and as arenas where new members could be recruited and funding could be sought. In illustrating these processes within a chronological framework, this article focuses on three key phases: the genesis and formalisation phase (1940s–1958); the expansion phase (1958–83); and the popularisation phase (1983–2008). These phases were not distinct or separate — they overlapped and flowed into one another.

A few general comments on the political, social, religious and demographic landscape of Singapore are in order. Located between Malaysia and Indonesia with a total land area of 700 square kilometres, Singapore was one of the most important British colonies in Asia when the Muhammadiyah was established in 1958. Singapore had a highly developed colonial infrastructure, a system of laws and a civil service, all of which have been continued by the People's Action Party (PAP) since its ascent to power in 1959. The PAP government has been described by media analysts, scholars and international activists as driven by economic pragmatism, strict authoritarianism and dominance by an elitist technocracy. Its brand of secularism – inherited from its colonial predecessor – has been termed 'strategic secularism'.⁶ This entails a rhetorical commitment to neutrality in all affairs concerning religion and religiosity while adopting a policy of intervention in selected aspects of the administration of Islam, Sikhism, Hinduism and Christianity which the government deems necessary to prevent religious disharmony.⁷

In demographic terms, Muslims constitute no more than 15 per cent of the total population of over four million people in Singapore and this figure has remained constant for over 100 years. While most Muslims of Singapore are classified as ethnic 'Malays' and are generally Sunni, the Muslim minority community also includes Indians, Arabs, Chinese, Europeans and Eurasians, along with a small minority subscribing to the Shiite school of thought.⁸ The Shiite community in Singapore consists mainly of persons from Indian backgrounds. As of recent years, the Shiite influence is gaining ground from Malays from a variety of ages and professions. Lacking an entrenched power base, Muslims in Singapore have often had very few opportunities

6 Lily Zubaidah Rahim, 'Governing Islam and regulating Muslims in Singapore's secular authoritarian state' (Asia Research Centre Working Paper No. 156, Murdoch University, Australia, 2009), p. 2.

7 Diane K. Mauzy and R.S. Milne, *Singapore politics under the People's Action Party* (London: Routledge, 2002).

8 Leow Bee Geok, *Census of population 2000: Demographic characteristics* (Singapore: Dept. of Statistics, 2001) and Kamaludeen Mohamed Nasir, Alexius A. Pereira and Bryan S. Turner, *Muslims in Singapore: Piety, politics and policies* (London: Routledge, 2009).

to participate in the mainstream political process and the shaping of public policies under the successive colonial and postcolonial governments. Such imperatives have meant that Muslim movements have had to devise creative programmes and implement multi-faceted strategies in order to ensure their survival. The Muhammadiyah, as will be argued, provides an instance of a Muslim movement in a secular state that has overcome the limits of social demography by broadening its activities and ideology, and by readjusting its *modus operandi* in accordance with evolving ideational, political and social contexts.

The genesis and formalisation of the Muhammadiyah in Singapore (1940s–1958)

The beginnings of the Muhammadiyah movement in Singapore can be traced to the immediate post-war period, when three Muslim religious teachers began to conduct classes in mosques and houses in various places in Singapore. Hailing from Sumatra and the Riau Islands, and heavily influenced by the reformist ideas that had gained ascendancy in their villages, the three men – Rijal Abdullah, Abdul Rahman Harun and Amir Esa – saw Singapore as a fertile ground for proselytisation given the cosmopolitan nature of the island's population. There is very little evidence to suggest that these men were members of the Muhammadiyah in Indonesia, although it is more than plausible that they were in close touch with the movement there. Young men in their twenties, the three teachers belonged to the massive flow of Indonesian migrants and wayfarers who came to Singapore in search of employment and a better life in the aftermath of the Indonesian revolution in 1949.⁹ At the same time as Rijal Abdullah began to conduct his classes at Masjid Paya Goyang near the central area of Singapore, Amir Esa and Abdul Rahman Harun attracted more than two dozen devoted students from Kampung Melayu and Lorong Tai Seng, respectively.

Their methods of teaching were similar to those of the Muhammadiyah and the *Persatuan Islam* (PERSIS) in Java, Indonesia.¹⁰ Each of the teachers would read passages from the Quran and the Hadith, as well as key texts, such as Hasan Bandung's *Soal Berjawab* and Haji Abdul Malik Karim Amrullah's (Hamka) *Tasauf Modern*, with the sole aim of admonishing their students to return to the true teachings of Prophet Muhammad (*Kembali Kepada Sunnah*) while adapting to the changes brought about by modernity. The curriculum included theology, Quranic exegesis, Islamic jurisprudence, the science of Hadith, Islamic history and *Bid'ah* ('Innovations') in Islam. Unlike most Islamic schools at that time, students were allowed to debate with their teachers and were given full liberty to teach what they had learnt to their families and friends. The three men and their students were bound together by the shared belief that Muslims in Singapore had subscribed to an erroneous interpretation of the faith. Members of this nascent movement held

9 Constance M. Turnbull, *A history of Singapore, 1819–1988* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 220–67.

10 James L. Peacock, *Purifying the faith: The Muhammadiyah movement in Indonesian Islam* (Menlo Park: Benjamin/Cummings, 1978) and Howard M. Federspiel, *Islam and ideology in the emerging Indonesian State: The Persatuan Islam (PERSIS), 1923–1957* (Leiden: Brill, 2001).

the belief that the solution to this problem lay in a careful study of Islamic scriptures combined with intensive *da'wah* ('preaching') efforts.¹¹

By the mid-1950s, teachers, labourers, street hawkers, clerks, police officers and housewives had come under the tutelage of the three men and were contributing money to them. The rapid increase in the number of students was accompanied by opposition from the general Muslim public. Rumours began circulating that the three men were propagating the teachings of the *Kaum Muda*, a reformist movement that was led by Sayyid Sheikh Al-Hadi in the early twentieth century.¹² It was further alleged that the machinations of the new movement would lead to the eradication of certain age-old practices, such as *Maulid* (the celebration of the Prophet's birthday), as well as *tahlil* and *talkin* (the recitation of Quranic verses to bring blessings to the living as well as the deceased). Another long-standing practice that was severely criticised by the Muhammadiyah as un-Islamic, and which subsequently received counter-responses from Muslims on the island, was the *Mandi Safar* ('bathing in the month of Safar'). During the month of Safar in the Islamic calendar, Muslims in Singapore who subscribed to this practice would congregate at beaches to pour seawater over their heads in the belief that this ritual would protect them from disasters.¹³

Rijal Abdullah, Amir Esa and Abdul Rahman Harun were also accused of being closely affiliated with a heterodox movement, the Ahmadiyyah. They were thus labelled as *sesat* ('deviant'), *qadiani* ('followers of the Ahmadiyyah movement') and *bukan mazhab Shafii* ('not from the Shafi'ite school of Islamic jurisprudence'), among other accusations. The use of the 'Ahmadiyyah' and 'not from the Shafi'ite school' as tropes to berate the members of the Muhammadiyah deserves a little elaboration here. A minority within the predominantly Sunni Muslim community in Singapore, the Ahmadiyyah movement has been at the centre of controversy since the 1930s owing to their belief that the founder of their movement, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, was one of the Prophets of Islam. This was regarded by most Sunni Muslims in Singapore as running against the fundamental principles of Islam which states that Muhammad was the 'Seal of Prophecy'. Even so, the close association made between the Ahmadiyyah and the three men must have emerged less from the ideological affinities between them than the fact that they both called for the use of independent reasoning to interpret Islamic texts. This was seen as improper by the majority of Muslims in Singapore. But if such a criterion alone was not enough to differentiate mainstream Muslims from 'deviant' cults, the long association with the Shafi'i school of Islamic jurisprudence that prevailed in maritime Southeast Asia and around the Indian Ocean since the seventh century made it impossible for any Muslim on the island at that time to officially declare that he/she belonged to a different school of Islamic jurisprudence. In other words, to make explicit that one was

11 Persatuan Muhammadiyah Singapura, *Muhammadiyah 50 Years, 1957-2007* (Singapore: Muhammadiyah, 2007), p. 13. For a discussion of claim making as a feature of social movements, see Charles Tilly, *Social movements, 1768-2004* (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2004), p. 3.

12 William Roff, *The origins of Malay nationalism* (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1967), pp. 56-90.

13 S. Singaravelu, 'The Malay-Tamil cultural contacts with special reference to the festival of "Mandi Safar"', *Asian Folklore Studies*, 45, 1 (1986): 67-78.

'non-Shafi'ite' in that context was to place oneself at the margins of the dominant interpretation and practice of Islam.¹⁴

More importantly, these labelling processes had little success in dissuading the followers of the three teachers from propagating the new teachings among their families and friends. Posters providing information on the religious classes were put up in public places. Booklets and pamphlets explaining the pitfalls of innovations and the correct teachings of Islam were distributed to the general public, but such efforts were met with intense antagonism from some quarters of the Muslim community — some of whom defiled the movement's headquarters at 624 Lorong Tai Seng with urine and faeces. Things came to a head when Yasin Amin Sahib, who was one of the students of Abdul Rahman Harun, took it upon himself to admonish a prayer congregation at Masjid Wak Tanjung of the crucial need to return to the true teachings of Muhammad and abolish *tahyul* ('superstition'), *khurafat* ('heresies') and *taqlid buta* ('blind following'). Yasin was forcibly evicted from the mosque and assaulted by members of the congregation.¹⁵

This event, together with other incidents of abuse and violence, prompted Ali Hainin, who was a teacher at a local school and a regular attendee of the classes of Abdul Rahman Harun, Amir Esa and Rijal Abdullah, to agitate for the unification and formalisation of the three classes into a single movement. The three religious teachers eventually met and decided upon the best way to continue their teachings. During a mass meeting held on 25 May 1957, it was agreed that a new missionary organisation was to be formed, called Persatuan Muhammadiyah Singapura (hereinafter referred to as the Muhammadiyah). The founders of the Muhammadiyah clarified from the very outset that, although the new organisation shared the same name and reformist and modernist ideas as the Muhammadiyah in Indonesia, the Muhammadiyah of Singapore was not an official branch of the Muhammadiyah of Indonesia. In other words, the new organisation would not seek or receive any monetary support from the Muhammadiyah in Indonesia, with the exception of books and printed materials — items that the organisation would solicit from other movements overseas as well.¹⁶ This was a strategic move to allay the anxiety of the colonial government about the establishment of a pan-Islamic movement. To be sure, the British were keeping a close watch on the Muhammadiyah, partly because of incidents of violence involving the members of the movement and petitions sent to the government from other Muslims in the colony requesting the closure of the classes of the three religious teachers. Due to the lack of proper information, British intelligence officers

14 'Supplement no. 3, Malayan Security Service, Political Intelligence Journal No. 8/1948', The National Archives, London (hereafter TNA), CO 537/3751. For a discussion of the controversies surrounding the Lahore Ahmadiyya movement in Singapore, see Sharifah Zaleha Syed Hasan, 'Versions of eternal truths: Ulama and religious dissenters in Kedah Malay society', *Contributions to Southeast Asian Ethnography*, 8, Dec. (1989): 43–69.

15 Interview with Cikgu Ali Hainin, 7 Sept. 2008 and Haji Ali Hainin, 'Penggumulan Tokoh-Tokoh dan Penjanaan Pemikiran Gerakan di Kalangan Muhammadiyah Singapura', in *Suara Muhammadiyah*, 1 (1997): 35–41. See also Djamal Tukimin, 'Beberapa Pemikiran Tentang Reformasi Islam dan Hubungannya dengan Muhammadiyah' (Masjid Jihad, Singapore, 1977), p. 8.

16 'Abdul Rahman Harun to HAMKA, 19 January 1963', Abdul Rahman Harun's private papers (in author's possession).

described the Muhammadiyah as puritanical and a derivative of the ‘Wahabi’ movement in Saudi Arabia.¹⁷

Cognizant that Muslims were members of a minority community and that their rights were duly protected by the colonial state, the founders of the movement stressed to those present at the 1957 mass meeting that Singapore was neither *Darul Islam* (‘the House of Islam’) nor *Darul Harb* (‘the House of War’). Instead, they explained that Singapore was *Darul Da’wah* (‘the House of Propagation’), and that the choice of the term ‘Muhammadiyah’ indicated that the members of the organisation would hold true to the teachings of Muhammad and that they were obligated to teach Muslims and non-Muslims in Singapore about the Islamic way of life.¹⁸ Among the unique features that the Muhammadiyah in Singapore shared with the Muhammadiyah in Indonesia were the logos and the commitment to the reform of religious practices among Muslims. But the pioneers of the new movement were unambiguous that this was a new locally based movement founded by those who aimed at reforming and uplifting the plight of Muslim minorities on the island and not elsewhere. Personal acquaintances and communication between members of the Muhammadiyah in Singapore and Indonesia would be maintained insofar as these did not transgress the legal limits defined by state authorities. The Muhammadiyah in Singapore was formally approved as a legitimate body by the Registry of Societies on 25 September 1958. What was once a disparate group of teachers and students advocating a set of opinions and beliefs had become a formalised and organised socio-religious movement.

The expansion phase (1958–83)

Not only were the paths towards formalising the Muhammadiyah in Singapore beset with innumerable impediments and difficulties, but the steps towards expanding the influence and reach of the movement in the ensuing years proved to be a challenging and arduous task. In common with many Islamic activists operating in other parts of the Muslim world during this time, the members of the Muhammadiyah realised that what was needed at this developing stage were leaders who could function not only as symbols, managers and mobilisers, but also as role models, ideologues, visionaries and brokers who could connect their collectives with other movements, organisations and political parties, in order to perpetuate the aims and goals of the Muhammadiyah.¹⁹ Muhammadiyah presidents who were elected during this crucial phase of the movement’s history strove to fulfil these multiple functions. Among the persons who took up the mantle of leadership from 1958 until 1983 were

17 ‘Special Branch Intelligence Summary for April 1960 (No. 4/60)’, TNA, FO 1091/107.

18 A lucid discussion of Darul Da’wah and its applicability in the Western context is found in Tariq Ramadan, *Western Muslims and the future of Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 65–79. So committed were Muhammadiyah members to realising this ideal that one of the founders of the newly established organisation even invented a new surname: ‘Al-Muhammadi’. See ‘Ucapan Alu-aluan Yang Dipertua Agong Muhammadiyah (Abdul Rahman Harun Al-Muhammadi)’, Abdul Rahman Harun’s private papers.

19 Carrie Rosefsky Wickham, ‘Interests, ideas and Islamist outreach in Egypt’, in *Islamic activism: A social movement theory approach*, ed. Quintan Wiktorowicz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), pp. 231–50. See also Hakan Yavuz, *Islamic political identity in Turkey* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

Rijal Abdullah (1958–59), Osman Taib (1959–60), Hussein Taib (1960–63) and Abdul Rahman Harun (1963–83). Granted that there were varying management styles and that different levels of support were received from members and sympathisers, we may nevertheless discern a few broad features of the leadership of these presidents which permitted the expansion of the Muhammadiyah in Singapore.

First, all of these leaders possessed a high degree of commitment to the cause of the Muhammadiyah. They were unpaid volunteers who were compensated only for the money they spent in the course of their work for the movement. Because much of their time was dedicated to teaching and missionary work, all four men were generally poor and obtained their income through donations from members, as well as from part-time paid employment. The other significant feature of these leaders was the exhibition of an acquaintance with the Islamic sciences and the contemporary challenges faced by Muslims the world over. Having been trained in the modern-style Islamic schools in Indonesia and being well read in various fields of secular knowledge, the leaders were able to impress upon their followers the claim that the Muhammadiyah was a progressive movement which could harmonise the contradictions between Islam and modernity.²⁰

To be added to this were good management skills and tenacity on the part of the movement leaders. A coherent organisational structure that demanded strict obedience to the central leadership was established upon the formalisation of the movement, and this was subsequently improved by their successors. An informal intelligence network was also created to detect attempts to subvert the movement. Training courses conducted by prominent Muslim scholars from the region such as Hamka were also organised on a quarterly basis to build the intellectual capacity and confidence of the members.²¹ The leaders were also activists who inspired and galvanised the wider membership through the display of moral courage and real action beyond mere rhetoric. This was not without obstacles. A case in point is Osman Taib, who took it upon himself to preach to members of the Khadijah Mosque in eastern Singapore, even though he knew that the congregation there adhered to the Sufi *tariqah* ('way'). Several arguments ensued regarding the rituals and practices that contravened the spirit of the *Sunnah* ('the Prophetic Way and Tradition'). Although Osman had attracted some following from the congregation, his critics petitioned the parliamentary secretary to the Ministry of Community Development, appealing for Osman to be barred from the mosque. Letters of complaint were later forwarded to the minister for labour and law requesting that the Muhammadiyah be dissolved; however, these efforts were hampered by neutrality on the part of the government.²²

Still, the role played by these top-rung leaders in the expansion of the Muhammadiyah must not be overstated. Robert D. Benford has pointed out the 'elite bias' of the contemporary literature on grassroots movements, at the expense of the contributions of other members in the rank and file. This is particularly the case when researchers depend upon interviews with leaders and printed sources,

20 Peacock, *Muslim puritans*, pp. 143–75.

21 'Jawatankuasa Penyiayat', Abdul Rahman Harun's private papers and *Suara Muhammadiyah*, 1 (1975): 3.

22 'Special Branch Intelligence Summary for May 1960 (No. 5/60)', TNA, FO 1091/107.

such as newspapers and other documents generated by a given movement.²³ While Benford's critique of elite bias is instructive, his points regarding problems of source materials deserve some further refinement. My study of the publications and other relevant materials of the Muhammadiyah during the period of expansion and thereafter suggests that the elite bias is counterweighted by an unceasing recognition on the part of the leaders of the vital role played by non-elite members of the movement. The leaders emphasised the importance of attending to the welfare and concerns of the members, and ensured that the efforts of ordinary members were duly commended, no matter how small. Evidence for this emphasis can be found in the formalisation of the *Jabatan Keanggotaan* ('Members Department') that kept detailed records of the personal particulars, interests, occupations, memorable days and outside involvements of each and every member. In almost every sermon delivered by Muhammadiyah presidents during Eidul Fitri and Eidul Adha celebrations, and in the editorials of *Suara Muhammadiyah* magazine from the 1970s to the late 1980s, explicit mention was made of the importance of each and every member of the Muhammadiyah. For example, an editorial in the 1977 issue of *Suara Muhammadiyah* described the rank and file of the Muhammadiyah as the driving force behind the growth of the movement. The rise in the number of committed members indicated that the Muhammadiyah had slowly gained the trust of the Muslim community in Singapore.²⁴

It is this symbiotic relationship between the leaders and the members that allowed the Muhammadiyah to extend and forge ties with other prominent personalities and collectives, based on shared ideals and sympathies. Linkages with another prominent Islamic movement in Singapore – the All-Malaya Missionary Society (or Jamiyah) movement – were first made in the 1960s by individuals who were active members of both Jamiyah and the Muhammadiyah. Founded in 1931 by Maulana Abdul Alim Siddique (a Sufi-Indian scholar), the initial aims of Jamiyah were to propagate Islam and to combat Christian missionary activities. The movement rapidly expanded the breadth of its activities in the decades following its founding and became renowned in the 1950s as one of the leading religious bodies in Singapore and Malaya which provided welfare, pilgrimage (*haji*) and religious guidance services.²⁵ Jamiyah started to support the activities of the Muhammadiyah through funding and moral support, beginning with the election of Abu Bakar Maidin as the president of Jamiyah in 1964.²⁶

This gave much impetus to the expansion of the youth wings of the Muhammadiyah called Pemuda Muhammadiyah and Aisyiyah, which made headway in the 1970s in recruiting members from tertiary institutions and inducting youths who were associated with gangsterism and vice. Dzulfiqhar Mohammed and Ahmad Khalis Abdul Ghani, two recruits who were former students at the

23 Robert D. Benford, 'An insider's critique of the social movement framing perspective', *Sociological Inquiry*, 67, 4 (1997): 421.

24 *Suara Muhammadiyah*, 2 (1977): 3.

25 Petra Weyland, 'International Muslim networks and Islam in Singapore', *Sojourn*, 5, 2 (1990): 219–54.

26 'Message from Mr Abu Bakar Maidin, President of Jamiyah Singapore, in Muhammadiyah Association', *Muhammadiyah Education Service* (Singapore: Muhammadiyah Association, 2003), p. 8.

National University of Singapore, became Muhammadiyah executive members in the late 1970s and the 1990s, respectively. Jumat Osman, Abu Talib Karbi and Abdul Aziz Mohamed were disinterested in religious matters before they were encouraged to join the movement. After they became active members, other Muhammadiyah members sponsored their further instruction in Islamic studies in Indonesia and Mecca in the 1980s.²⁷ The members of the movement who were based in various branches across the island helped attract new recruits in their neighbourhoods, including men and women of different ages, with a variety of occupations, ethnicities and experiences. Hussein Yaacob and Abdul Salam Sultan are notable examples of Muslims from working class backgrounds who rose up the ranks from passive followers to becoming presidents of the Muhammadiyah in Singapore. By the early 1980s, the membership of the Muhammadiyah swelled from just 350 in 1958 to more than 2,000 core members who operated in different branches across the island.²⁸

It follows then that the symbiotic relationship between the leaders and their followers was one of the factors that enabled the Muhammadiyah to withstand splits and ideological fissures among the rank and file during this period of expansion. The first major split in the movement occurred only in 1971, when a group of Muhammadiyah youth members led by Djamal Tukimin, Zain Ahmad, Osman Nasir and Hasan Ghani decided to form the *Himpunan Belia Islam* (HBI or Muslim Youth Assembly), an organisation which was formalised in 1973 and dedicated to the reformation of Muslim youths in Singapore. HBI derived its inspiration from the *Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia* (ABIM, or Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia) which was led by the charismatic student activist, Anwar Ibrahim. Much like ABIM, HBI activities included leadership camps, religious classes, forums, talks and the publishing of a semi-academic journal, the *Assyahid*, as well as classic Islamic texts.²⁹ The central leadership of the Muhammadiyah encouraged its young members to take part in HBI activities, as the HBI was seen as an organisation that shared the Muhammadiyah's aims of reviving the Prophetic traditions. However, due to the influence of the currents of Shi'ism that emanated from Iran in the late 1970s which held sway over Muslim movements in Southeast Asia, a large number of HBI members abandoned the ideology they shared with the Muhammadiyah.³⁰ In 1982, more than a dozen youth members of the Muhammadiyah adopted the Shiite ideology. While some abandoned the movement in favour of HBI, others spread doubts within the rank and file of the validity of the Sunni version of Islam. This was strongly rebutted by most members of the Muhammadiyah through the publication of booklets explaining the falsehoods of Shiite doctrines and the sacking of HBI members from the Muhammadiyah.³¹

27 Personal communication with Ustaz Abdul Aziz, 20 Oct. 2009.

28 *Suara Muhammadiyah*, 2 (1983): 3.

29 See *Assyahid* from the years 1976 till 1985.

30 Some information on HBI is found at <http://www.hbi.org.sg> (last accessed on 13 Jan. 2011). On the impact of the Iranian revolution on Islamic movements in Southeast Asia, see *The Iranian revolution: Its global impact*, ed. John L. Esposito (Miami: Florida International University Press, 1990).

31 Anonymous, *Konsep Taqiyah dalam Syiah Imamiyah: Suatu Komentari* (Singapura: Persatuan Muhammadiyah, 1986) and Anonymous, *Syiah Imamiyah: Pendekatan Ringkas dan Menyeluruh* (Singapura: Persatuan Muhammadiyah, 1986). See also Christoph Marcinkowski, 'Aspects of Shi'ism in contemporary Southeast Asia', *The Muslim World*, 98, 1 (2008): 36-71.

However, strong leadership and good followership were not enough to ensure the longevity of the movement. Indeed, as an integral part of the society which they sought to change, the core members of the Muhammadiyah were compelled to fashion their ideology in ways that resonated with the broader Muslim public. Social theorists such as Quintan Wiktorowicz have used the term 'ideational framing' to describe the process of making sense of the world as a movement's *raison d'être* in order to promote collective action. He has identified several ideational frames that have been employed by Islamic movements worldwide to gain widespread Muslim support. They are: 'to create an Islamic state', 'to create a society that is governed and guided by Islamic law (*syariah*)', asserting that 'Islam is the Solution', blaming 'Western values and practices for a variety of social ills' and asserting that 'regimes are merely extensions of Western interests determined to weaken and control Muslim societies'. The tactics and strategies to achieve these frames vary from discursive means and social programmes to political participation and violent acts.³² Despite their subscription to certain aspects of these ideational frames, the members of the Muhammadiyah in Singapore have been mindful that presenting these ideas in ways akin to Islamic movements overseas would jeopardise the operations of their organisation. Correspondingly, key members of movement saw the need to continuously reformulate the ideational frames of the Muhammadiyah in line with the evolving public perception towards the movement.

The years from 1958 through to the early 1960s witnessed attempts by the students of Rijal Abdullah, Amir Esa and Abdul Rahman Harun to bridge their ideological differences. Five key points were delineated by the early ideologues of the movement which, when taken as a whole, formed the initial ideational frame of the Muhammadiyah. It was stated, first, that the Muhammadiyah needed to exist in view of the declining status of the Muslim community in Singapore and Malaya. Second, Muhammadiyah ideologues asserted that the movement took the Quran and the Sunnah as its sources of reference and did not subscribe to any school of Islamic jurisprudence (*mazhab*). In addition to that, the Muhammadiyah would provide Islamic instruction to its members and the Muslim public. The fourth key point pertains to the role of the Muhammadiyah in guiding mankind towards the *Siratal Mustaqim* ('The Right Path'). Finally, it was stressed that the Muhammadiyah belonged to *Ahli Sunnah Wal Jama'ah* ('the People of the Sunnah and the Community') and would combat any beliefs that ran contrary to the spirit of Islam. It was made explicit that the Muhammadiyah had no links or shared ideology with the Ahmadiyyah, as had been alleged by certain ignorant people and those who were distant from the teachings of the Quran and the Sunnah.³³

It is obvious here that the movement ideologues had given new forms to old ideas and clichés that were common during that period. The rhetoric of the decline to justify the creation of a socio-religious movement was hardly new to the Muhammadiyah. It has been articulated by various community organisations that mushroomed in the post-war period as a means to argue for the necessity of their

32 Quintan Wiktorowicz, 'Introduction: Islamic activism and social movement theory', in *Islamic activism*, ed. Wiktorowicz, p. 16.

33 'Laporan Ringkas Dari Jawatan Kuasa Pengasas: Persatuan Muhammadiyah', Ali Hainin's private papers.

existence, while, at the same time, to illuminate the social problems that besieged the minority Muslim community in Singapore.³⁴ Furthermore, at the time of the establishment of the Muhammadiyah, the Singapore Muslims were certainly aware of the nature of the Quran and the Sunnah as essential sources for the study of Islam, though they were highly dependent upon the interpretations of Muslim scholars and learned men.³⁵ By stressing that the Muhammadiyah upheld the two key texts of Islam above all else, it was intended that members of the movement would take a step further to exercise independent reasoning when they faced issues pertaining to their religious beliefs. Above all, by differentiating the Muhammadiyah from the Ahmadiyah and asserting that the movement fell under the category of *Ahli Sunnah Wal Jama'ah* – a term that resonates well with the majority Sunni Muslims to describe the mainstream understanding of Islam – movement members and potential sympathisers were assured from the outset that the Muhammadiyah was not a heterodox cult.

From the mid-1960s to the late 1980s the Muhammadiyah experienced a period of 'ideational expansion'. By this, I mean the translation of the six points highlighted above into discourses and activities that would publicise and broaden the appeal of the movement. This phase also saw a consolidation of the membership of the Muhammadiyah and the widening of its support base. The leaders of the movement surmised that there was no real need to differentiate the movement from its dissenters, cults and other heterodoxies. The stress then was on the reformation of selected groups in society as a means to uplift the Muslim community as a whole, both in terms of knowledge and morality, and for the Muhammadiyah to be given the liberty to expand its operations. Nowhere is this ideational expansion more apparent than in a speech delivered at the sixteenth anniversary of the founding of the movement in 1974. The President of the Muhammadiyah, Abdul Rahman Harun, mentioned that the movement should concentrate its energies on obtaining the acquiescence of several focus groups. Towards this end, he outlined five key sectors and what he felt each sector should give the Muhammadiyah:

- (1) The Government should give the Muhammadiyah the space to freely propagate Islam, and this would only happen if the leaders and followers of both the Muhammadiyah and the government upheld the peace and security of the country.
- (2) Other religious groups should recognise the Muhammadiyah's mission in imbuing the awareness of the Oneness of God and enter into the fold of Islam whilst not neglecting their roles as citizens of their country.
- (3) Muslim scholars would be urged by the Muhammadiyah to focus their time and efforts on alleviating ignorance and superstition among Muslims in Singapore, while maintaining an attitude of open-mindedness.
- (4) Educated Muslims would receive assistance from the Muhammadiyah to find solutions to social problems.

34 Ismail Hussein, 'Singapura Sa-bagai Pusat Kesusasteraan Melayu Sa-lepas Perang', *Dewan Bahasa*, 3, 2 (1959): 539–57.

35 Pasuni Maulan, 'Masyarakat Islam Singapura' (Academic Exercise, Kolej Islam Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, 1967), p. 33.

- (5) The Muslim masses would be enjoined by the Muhammadiyah to seek knowledge of Islam and to avoid insulting their co-religionists.³⁶

Another factor that permitted the expansion of the Muhammadiyah from the years 1959 to 1983 was the range of political opportunities available for achieving its goals and the movement's ability to adapt to changes in the political climate. Elsewhere, I have argued that the advent of the PAP government in 1959 ushered in an era that saw the implementation of wide-ranging policies to upgrade the down-trodden status of the Malays. Financial support was given to community organisations that promoted the well-being of the Malays in particular and Muslims in general as part of the short-term political strategy of the party to fortify the case for a merger between Singapore and Malaysia. Even the new Singapore state flag featured a crescent moon, which Muslims perceived as an important symbol of Islam.³⁷ And yet, with the separation of Singapore from Malaysia in 1965 came many changes in the management of Muslims on the island-state by the PAP government. The Administration of Muslim Law Act (AMLA) that was introduced in 1968 provided state-linked agencies such as the Syariah Court and Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura (MUIS or Islamic Religious Council of Singapore) with powers to regulate matters pertaining to Muslim personal laws. The function of the AMLA was later expanded through subsequent amendments that bestowed MUIS with the mandate to administer almost all aspects of Muslim life in Singapore.³⁸ Notwithstanding these structural and legislative changes, the Muhammadiyah was able to expand its influence among their co-religionists by exploiting two bodies closely associated with the political governance of Muslims, specifically: by gaining the patronage of influential Malay politicians in the PAP beginning as early as 1959, and by being a constitutive part of MUIS.

Muhammadiyah members paid occasional visits to the homes and offices of Malay politicians with the aim of maintaining friendly ties with these office bearers. Indeed, since coming to power, both Muslim and non-Muslim politicians in the PAP reciprocated such proactive moves by the Muhammadiyah by endorsing the existence of the movement and its right to expand its operations in spite of protests from the general public. This was due partly to the secularist outlook of the PAP government, which meant that all religious faiths were given the right to exist as long as they did not seek to threaten the legitimacy of the state. Among the prominent figures who expressed overt support for the movement during these years of expansion were: the late Haji Ya'acob Mohammed (a former minister of state for the prime minister's office), Yatiman Yusof (a former senior parliamentary secretary), Zulkifli Mohammed (a member of parliament) and Sidek Saniff (a former senior minister of state).³⁹

36 'Sambutan Ulang Tahun Ke 16 Muhammadiyah Singapura, 2-3 February 1974', Abdul Rahman Harun's private papers.

37 Syed Muhd Khairudin Aljunied, 'The role of Hadramis in post-Second World War Singapore - A reinterpretation', *Immigrants and Minorities*, 25, 2 (2007): 167.

38 Thio Li-ann, 'Courting religion: The judge between Caesar and God in Asian courts', *Singapore Journal of Legal Studies*, 1, 32 (2009): 52-79.

39 *Suara Muhammadiyah*, 4 (1977): 3.

The inauguration of MUIS in 1968 also provided the Muhammadiyah with an immense opportunity to enhance its standing within the Muslim community in Singapore.⁴⁰ This statutory board, which consists of elites from the Muslim community, legitimised the Muhammadiyah through its constitution by declaring the movement as one that was dedicated to social and religious reform. Beyond mere recognition, Muhammadiyah members were nominated to serve as members of the MUIS Council, which was a governing arm of the religious bureaucracy. Responsible for the formulation of policies and major operational plans pertaining to the administration of *zakat* ('alms'), *wakaf* ('endowment'), pilgrimage affairs, halal certification, administration of mosques and madrasah and Islamic education as well as the issuance of *fatwas* ('judgements on matters of religious law') and financial aid, the MUIS Council comprises the president of MUIS, the mufti of Singapore, the secretary of MUIS and other respected figures from major Muslim organisations. Members of the council were nominated by the minister of Muslim affairs before being appointed by the president of Singapore to a three-year-term. Among Muhammadiyah members who served on the MUIS Council were Abdul Rahman Harun (1968–74), Osman Ahmad (1974–83), Salleh Abdullah (1983–85) and, later on, Abdul Manaf Rahmat (1989–2001) and Hamzah Abdul Rahman (2001–04).⁴¹

The popularisation phase (1983–2008)

The period from 1983 to 2008 saw the widespread popularisation of the Muhammadiyah in Singapore. Indeed, the number of its followers grew from 2,000 members in 1983 to more than 25,000 members and sympathisers in 1995. The latest membership figures have yet to be disclosed although it is claimed that the present cost of maintaining the movement amounts to more than five million Singapore dollars a year.⁴² This shift in public reception could be largely attributed to developments in the Muslim world in general which had a great impact upon Muslims locally and regionally. The Middle East oil boom in the 1970s and 1980s led to an unprecedented revival of economic interactions between the Middle East and Southeast Asian Muslims whilst inaugurating an epoch of Islamic resurgence in both regions. King Fahd of Saudi Arabia played a leading role in this process of fostering Islamic revivalism, by sponsoring the building of mosques and the work of missionary organisations, as well as other activities dedicated to the promotion of Islam and the countering of Shiite influence. Several million US dollars were donated by the Saudi, Kuwaiti and Libyan governments to a multitude of Muslim movements, mosques and religious schools in Southeast Asia.⁴³

The two Muslim movements in Singapore that capitalised on this global Islamic resurgence were Jamiyah and the Muhammadiyah. The donation of a few million

40 For details of the establishment of MUIS through the provisions of the Administration of Muslim Law Act (AMLA), see *The administration of Muslim Law Act, 1966* (Singapore: Government Printers, 1966).

41 The profiles of MUIS Council Members can be found in MUIS publications, for example, *Fajar Islam, Warita Kita* and *annual report* (Singapore: Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura, 1976–2007).

42 For the financial statements, see <http://www.muhammadiyah.org.sg/index.php/about-us/financial-statements> (last accessed on 13 Jan. 2011).

43 Fred R. von der Mehden, *Two worlds of Islam: Interaction between Southeast Asia and the Middle East* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1993), pp. 17–20.

Singapore dollars from the Saudis to the Muhammadiyah facilitated the building of the new Muhammadiyah headquarters at number 14, Jalan Selamat towards the end of the 1980s. This large amount helped to sustain the activities of the movement for the next few years. Selected Muhammadiyah members who were educated in Saudi Arabia and working as full-time activists received monthly salaries from the *Al Rabita Al-alam Al-Islami* ('the World Islamic League'). The movement benefited from these donations and Islamic resurgence in other ways as well. New networks were created with other Islamic movements in Southeast Asia, such as the *Persatuan Islam Indonesia* (PERSIS, or the Muslim Organisation of Indonesia). Religious teachers and clerics from Malaysia, southern Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines were periodically invited to deliver talks at the movement headquarters and to conduct training courses for the members and the general public. Muhammadiyah members also attended conferences, seminars and workshops in countries within the Southeast Asian region, as well as various parts of East Asia, North Africa and the Middle East to gain exposure to a multitude of Islamic movements and ideas from overseas.⁴⁴ During my interview with Djamel Tukimin, who has been a member of the Muhammadiyah Organisation since the early 1970s, it was mentioned that the 1980s and 1990s were a 'renaissance' period of Islam in Singapore in general and the Muhammadiyah in particular. Lectures, conferences, camps, workshops and publications pertaining to Islam of all sorts mushroomed on the island-state.⁴⁵

Muhammadiyah grew in terms of membership and reputation during that time. We had our first formal building at Jalan Selamat and conducted classes and Friday prayers. The support from members of the public swelled because of this. Even the membership in our branches throughout Singapore grew with the rising awareness that Muhammadiyah and the Salafi movement are not deviations from Islam.⁴⁶

The advent of new leaders into the movement and changes in leadership style further aided the process of popularisation. With the exception of a brief interval of a few months (from March 2001 to December 2001) which saw Abdul Salam Sultan holding the office of president, the Muhammadiyah was led by Shaik Hussain Yaacob who has been the president since 1983. Following in the footsteps of his predecessors, the present leaders of the Muhammadiyah gained respect from members and critics by displaying a strong sense of obligation to missionary work and knowledge in Islamic and secular matters. Shaik Hussain, for example, was known to have told high-ranking politicians that the Muhammadiyah had yet to fulfil its mandatory duty to invite the non-Muslim cabinet ministers into the fold of Islam. Admittedly more restrained and certainly less authoritarian than Shaik Husain, Abdul Salam is well respected by both Muhammadiyah and non-Muhammadiyah alike because of his familiarity with classical Islamic texts and fine manners. He obtained his degree

44 *Suara Muhammadiyah*, 4 (1997): 23.

45 On the impact of Islamic resurgence on Muslims in 1980s Singapore, see Syed Muhd Khairudin Aljunied, 'Ethnic resurgence, minority communities, and state policies in a network society: The dynamics of Malay identity formation in postcolonial Singapore', *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power*, 17, 2 (2010): 304–26.

46 Interview with Djamel Tukimin, 8 July 2009.

in Islamic Studies in Saudi Arabia and had taught for some years in South Korea before his return to Singapore. Both leaders capitalised on the media to shore up support from the public. Aside from appearing in television interviews, they were also featured in local newspapers, advertisements for courses, and donation drives. As the Muhammadiyah grew in size and importance, a unanimous decision was made to employ a permanent president to manage the daily operations of the movement. Both Shaik Hussain and Abdul Salam have been employed as paid staff since 2000 for their roles in leading the movement on a full-time basis.⁴⁷

The terms of office of Shaik Hussain Yaacob and Abdul Salam Sultan also represented the phase of ideational change. From the late 1980s to 2001, the ideology of the Muhammadiyah has been both societal-centred and religiously committed. Less stress was given to the removal of innovations in religion and the primacy of deriving knowledge from the authentic sources of Islam for the reason that such ideas had by then become popular even among organisations that were once resistant to those notions. Furthermore, the splinters and fissures that were developing within the Muhammadiyah itself provided the pretext for the rapid dissemination of the ideology of the movement in many places through new organisations and the initiatives of individuals. Some splinter collectives and organisations include the *Ansarus Sunnah* ('the Helpers of the Sunnah') formed in the early 1980s, the Fellowship of Muslim Students Association founded in 1994, the *Persatuan Islam (Singapura)* (PERSIS) established in 1997 and the formalisation of the *Persatuan Al-Qudwah* in 2004. There were also former members who became independent preachers after having been expelled for failing to comply with the constitution of the movement. While the basic fabric of the movement remained intact and was not severely threatened by such divisions, it became clear to the leadership that the ideological framework of the organisation had to be changed. *Dari Masyarakat ke Masyarakat* ('From Society to Society') became the rallying cry of the Muhammadiyah during this phase of its development to attract more members and sympathisers. To manifest this ideological framework, the movement ventured into welfare services, which will be discussed below.⁴⁸

The core members of the movement made full use of several types of infrastructures to sustain their activism to further popularise the Muhammadiyah. Glenn Robinson has classified these types of infrastructure as formal (such as political parties), informal (such as informal urban networks) and illegal (such as underground terrorist cells). It is through these infrastructures, according to Robinson, that Islamic movements 'recruit like-minded individuals, socialise new participants, overcome the free rider problem, and mobilise contention'.⁴⁹ While eschewing the clandestine methods used by militant groups such as the *Jemaah Islamiyah*, Muhammadiyah members have made use of formal and informal channels to increase the membership of the movement, to solicit support from sympathisers, and, in the process, to raise funds for its activities.

47 'Special Branch Intelligence Summary for May 1960 (No. 5/60)', TNA, FO 1091/107 and Interview with Mohd Ghazali Alistar, 9 Sept. 2008.

48 See <http://www.muhammadiyah.org.sg/index.php/about-us/our-core-values> (last accessed on 13 Jan. 2011).

49 Glenn E. Robinson, ' Hamas as social movement', in *Islamic activism*, ed. Wiktorowicz, p. 116.

Informally, Muhammadiyah members engaged in recruitment activities 'off the street', at coffee shops, bus stations, beaches and parks. This was most prevalent in the 1980s when it was felt that there was a dire need to keep youths away from the lure of drug abuse.⁵⁰ The membership size has also grown through the years as members of the Muhammadiyah engaged in inviting friends, families and neighbours to the classes conducted at the homes of the movement's ideologues. Since a number of Muhammadiyah members were working as full-time teachers in national schools, recruitment was also done under the pretext of exposing students to outdoor activities and leadership camps, as well as in-house forums and talks organised by the Pemuda Muhammadiyah and other branches. More than 72 classes were conducted throughout Singapore in 1979.⁵¹ Muhammadiyah members were also active as volunteers within mosques and the mainstream Malay-Muslim organisations with the aim of establishing close rapport with persons who could potentially be recruited into the movement. Such an approach was, of course, not without consequences. While some Muhammadiyah members were received with open arms in the mosques and Muslim organisations where they sought to expand their membership and ideological base, many others were told to cease their activism. An example of governmental and public acceptance of the activism of Muhammadiyah members is the appointment of a former vice-president of the movement, Abdul Manaf Rahmat, as the mosque executive chairman of Masjid Muhajirin and as a member of the Religious Rehabilitation Group, a voluntary group formed to rehabilitate Muslims who were alleged to have been involved in terrorist activities.⁵²

The Muhammadiyah used several types of formal channels, the first being public events that were organised on a regular basis to gain visibility. The mass prayers to commemorate the end of the fasting month (*Eidul Fitri*) and the Feast of Sacrifice (*Eidul Adha*) were especially significant. The prayers were conducted at stadiums, sports clubs and other open areas near residential areas to ensure maximum participation from all Muslims, including men, women and children of all ages. Texts of the sermons were distributed for free. Aside from elucidating the ideology and thrust of the movement, the sermons included diagnoses of and solutions to the challenges faced by Muslims locally and globally, as well as open invitations to everyone who attended to play an active part in the creation of a God-conscious society. It was a long way from a prayer congregation consisting of no more than 20 core members in 1958 to the *Eidul Fitri* prayers organised by the Muhammadiyah at a football stadium in 2006 that were attended by more than 5,000 Muslims. To complement these mass prayers, the Muhammadiyah organised carnivals, public lectures and symposiums on an annual basis to raise funds, as well as drawing attention to the leading personalities of the movement and their achievements.⁵³

Educational institutions, health services and rehabilitation homes represent other formal infrastructures that were utilised by the Muhammadiyah. In so doing, the

50 Tania Li, *Malays in Singapore: Culture, economy, and ideology* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 54.

51 *Suara Muhammadiyah*, 4 (1979): 10–11.

52 See http://www.rrg.sg/subindex.asp?id=A229_07 (last accessed on 13 Jan. 2011).

53 Ust Shaik Hussain Shaik Yaacob, 'Bersatu & Bertoleransi Kunci Perpaduan' (Persatuan Muhammadiyah, Singapore, 2007).

Muhammadiyah movement in Singapore had trodden a similar path to its giant namesake in Indonesia as the movement entered into the popularisation phase. A welfare home for juvenile delinquents was set up in December 1989 with the support of the Ministry of Community Development and Sports. The Muhammadiyah Health and Day Care Centre for Senior Citizens was formally inaugurated on 14 April 1997 to assist elderly people who were suffering from stroke, rheumatism, Parkinson's disease and other medical problems.⁵⁴ Seeing that the Islamic beliefs, values and ideology of the movement were best imbibed at an early age, the Muhammadiyah established a kindergarten called *Tadika Muhammadiyah* in 1981. Three years later, a weekend religious class called *Kelas Asas Bimbingan Agama* ('basic religious guidance classes') was started to provide Islamic instruction to students studying in national schools. The Muhammadiyah took over the administration of a full-time school called *Madrasah Al-Arabiah Al-Islamiah* in 1989, providing Islamic and secular education for male and female students at the primary and secondary levels. To date, there are 342 students taught by 31 full-time and part-time teachers.⁵⁵ In 2000, the Muhammadiyah founded the *Kolej Islam Muhammadiyah* (KIM) to widen the provision of formal education to the Muslim public in Singapore. KIM, also known as the Muhammadiyah Islamic College, is a tertiary institute offering diplomas and degrees conferred by *Institut Agama Islam Negeri* ('National Institute of Islam') in Indonesia. With the graduation of its first batch of students in 2002, KIM broke new ground by being the first local institute to produce university graduates trained in Islamic Studies.⁵⁶ It is pertinent to mention here that although the Muhammadiyah has not succeeded in recruiting a large number of committed members through these infrastructures, it has succeeded in other areas, such as in raising funds to sustain its activities and in gaining recognition from the state and other civic organisations, as well as in the promotion of its ideology in a more subtle manner.

In the realm of local politics, the Muhammadiyah maintained the support and endorsement of the ruling PAP government through the help of the present minister of Muslim affairs, Dr Yaacob Ibrahim, and other Malay members of parliament. In a media release dated 30 August 2000, for example, Yatiman Yusof, the parliamentary secretary for information and culture, commended the Muhammadiyah for having channelled its resources towards the welfare of the community, particularly in the rehabilitation of youths. Such media releases and speeches by leading politicians have doubtlessly shaped public opinion towards the Muhammadiyah.⁵⁷ However, it would be too far-fetched to assert that the ties between state agencies and the Muhammadiyah have always been free of conflict and that the Muhammadiyah has been co-opted by the government. There were public disagreements over issues connected to the determination of the date of the Eid celebrations, the permissibility of

54 *Suara Muhammadiyah*, 3-4 (1998): 16-18.

55 See <http://www.mai-edu.net/joomla/> (last accessed on 13 Jan. 2011).

56 See <http://www.muhammadiyah.org.sg/kim> (last accessed on 30 Jan. 2011).

57 'Ucapan Yatiman Yusof, Setiausaha Parlimen Kanan (Penerangan Dan Kesenian), di Majlis Perasmian "Ekspo Keluarga Dan Barang Pengguna Indonesia", Anjuran Rumah Kebajikan Muhammadiyah Welfare di Dewan Ekspo Singapura, pada 31 Ogos 2000, 3.00 Ptg', at <http://stars.nhb.gov.sg/stars/public/viewPDF.jsp?pdfno=yy20000831n.pdf> (last accessed on 13 Jan. 2011).

organ transplants, and the implementation of the Central Provident Fund, as well as the passing of the Women's Charter Bill and the Compulsory Education Act.⁵⁸ In 1998, the Muhammadiyah was also entangled in debates over the future of *madrasahs* ('Islamic schools') in Singapore. The debate began when the PAP government raised its concerns about the progressive estrangement of six full-time *madrasahs* (*Al-Junied, Al-Sagoff, Al-Maarif, Al-Arabiah, Al-Irsyad* and *Wak Tanjung*) from the national educational objectives. Goh Chok Tong, who was then the prime minister of Singapore, stated that the issue was not:

... about *madrasah's* future, but the future of Muslim children ... Do you want them to grow up all being religious teachers and religious preachers, or do you want them to be trained in IT, to be engineers, doctors, architects, professionals? If the *madrasah* were training 100 or 200 students a year, I think we can live with that. But if you are training 400, 500, 1000, 2000 in full-time *madrasah* or in full-time religious education supplemented by some secular subjects, what will be the future of the Malay community? ... I cannot say, however, that some *madrasah* may not close because we want to have standards.⁵⁹

Predictably, Muslims in Singapore were enraged by the comments of the government on the ineffectiveness of the *madrasah* and state plans to implement the Compulsory Education Act. Upon effective resistance from civil society groups within the Muslim community in Singapore – of which the Muhammadiyah was an integral part – a somewhat unprecedented compromise was reached in that the government exempted *madrasah* from the Compulsory Education Act provided that the minimum standards for Primary School Leaving Examinations were met within eight years.⁶⁰ Still, such isolated episodes of resistance and non-compliance did not mean that there was any severance of the relationship between the state and its governing agencies with that of the Muhammadiyah. It is clear that these conflicts stemmed largely from differences in the implementation of certain policies than from a sharp rift between the state and the movement. One could further argue that the state and the Muhammadiyah realised the far-reaching benefits to be gained from mutual co-operation and interdependence. The state tolerated Muhammadiyah intransigence from time to time, insofar as these expressions were directed towards the common good and did not jeopardise the security of the country.

Conclusion

'The Muhammadiyah we see today is not the same as the Muhammadiyah in the 1950s. It is less interested in ideological struggles. Muhammadiyah has become a

58 Muhammadiyah's stand regarding the implementation of laws and policies affecting Muslims in Singapore can be found in the following articles: Fadhlullah Jamil and Atiku Garba Yahaya, 'Muslims in non-Muslim societies and their response to major issues affecting them: The case of Singapore', *Islamic Quarterly*, 44, 4 (2000): 576–600; *Suara Muhammadiyah*, 1 (1987): 4–5 and *Suara Muhammadiyah*, 1–2 (1997): 11–16.

59 *Straits Times*, 2 May 2000.

60 For details on the Compulsory Education issue and its implications for Muslims and *madrasah* in Singapore, see Dayang Istiasyah Hussein, 'School effectiveness & nation-building in Singapore: Analysis of discourses on Madrasah & why Madrasah stand out from national schools?' (M.A. thesis, Department of Sociology, National University of Singapore, 2003).

populist and socially oriented organization.⁶¹ This observation by one of the surviving founders of the movement summarises the major transformations that the movement has undergone during the first five decades of its existence. The preceding discussion has explained how four key processes ensured the formalisation, expansion and popularisation of the Muhammadiyah and the ways in which social, political and ideational developments shaped the evolution of the movement and its impact upon the Singaporean Muslim community. While the symbiotic relationship between the leaders and the rank and file ensured that links with other religious bodies could be forged, the maintenance of a close rapport among the members of the Muhammadiyah enabled the movement to withstand the threat of ideological fissures. Through a continuous reformulation of the movement's ideology, the Muhammadiyah adapted to the changing conditions on the ground. The movement also secured its place as a legitimate body in the eyes of political brokers, while obtaining much-needed backing from international donors through the exploitation of the relevant political opportunities that were open to them. The effective utilisation of different types of infrastructure provided avenues for recruitment and funding for activities, while the ideology of the Muhammadiyah was propagated through less obvious means.

The progressive dismantling of public mistrust towards the movement and a shift towards co-operation and mutual interdependence between the Muhammadiyah and the state were among the major outcomes that emerged from these processes. Through the efforts of the Muhammadiyah and other movements that shared its visions, a critical approach to the study of Islam that stresses independent thinking has now become commonplace among Muslims in Singapore. The conduct of Eid prayers in open spaces that is now prevalent throughout Singapore could be attributed to the relentless activism of Muhammadiyah members. Whether the Muhammadiyah can further heighten its present impact and influence on the lives of Muslims and non-Muslims in Singapore remains to be seen. There is, however, no denying that the myriad of challenges posed by cataclysmic shifts in the global environment, coupled with the ever-increasing demands of the secular state, all point to the urgent need for the leaders of the Muhammadiyah to regularly take stock of the organisational structure, ideology, and training of the members, as well as other Muhammadiyah activities, in order to guarantee the continued existence and further growth of the movement.

Indeed, one major challenge facing the Muhammadiyah as it enters into the popularisation phase is the loss of devoted members who were contributing their time and energies to the movement for many decades. While many chose to become involved in splinter groups that are currently drawing other existing Muhammadiyah members from their parent organisation, others have ceased their participation in Islamic-related activities altogether. Their reasons for breaking away from the movement are varied, ranging from personality conflicts to the pressures of family life and work. What this has amounted to is the dearth of experienced persons who would be able to guide the new generation of activists to take over the mantle of Muhammadiyah leadership. The other inevitable consequence of this talent drain is

61 Interview with Osman Ahmad, 7 Sept. 2008.

the want of a larger pool of prominent persons in society that are, at the same time, active in the Muhammadiyah.

Finally, this study has two larger implications that should be developed by future research. The first concerns the interface between socio-political developments and the role of ideas in the analysis of grassroots movements in post-war Singapore. All too often, studies of movements in this island city-state have been marked by the lack of an in-depth analysis of the ideas of the participants in these movements, and how these ideas influenced and shaped social life and politics in the country. There is a need to avoid the fallacies of past approaches, and this can be achieved by breaking down the boundaries between social, political and ideational histories. By developing such integrative methodologies, we can deepen and broaden our understanding not only of Islamic movements but also of other movements in Singapore and in Southeast Asia in general.

The second and final implication pertains to the study of Islamic activism in Southeast Asian countries where Muslims are minorities. There has been little research on this topic and it has been overwhelmed by studies concerning extremism and terrorism, many of which were written to inform state policy or to validate jaundiced views about Muslims globally. To the extent that political violence and social unrest are indeed some of the key problems of our time, this fact should not distract us from the urgent task of pioneering new methods and perspectives to further the study of the everyday struggles of minority Muslims in secular settings and their collective efforts to create an environment conducive to Islam.