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EKATERINA ASTAFYEVA. MUSLIM / MALAY COMMUNITY IN SINGAPORE* // *The article was written for the bulletin “Russia and the Moslem World.”*

Keywords: Singapore, Muslim / Malay community, socio-political development, Islamic Religious Council of Singapore.

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Abstract. The article is dedicated to the Muslim / Malay community in Singapore. The author dwells to analyse of historical and socio-political aspects, which affected on its modern development, considered the activities of its main institutions and organizations, and

* Translation of the title is presented in author's version.

concluded the prospects for the full integration of the Malay community into the construct of united Singapore nation.

The Republic of Singapore, located in the very heart of the Malay world, is a country with a multi-ethnic and multi-religious population, which is divided into four ethnic groups: Chinese, Malay, Indian and others. The Chinese ethnic group accounted for 74.3%, Malay – 13.4%, Indian – 9%, others – 3.2%¹, according to 2018 data. And this percentage of ethnic groups has been maintained (with minimal fluctuations) since the beginning of the 20th century. The population compartmentalization into four main categories is used for simplification, and “nationality” is used for homogenization, to hide the linguistic, religious, and cultural differences within each category. In particular, the Malay ethnic group is divided into two main groups by origin: those born in Singapore and Malaysia and immigrants from Indonesia. At the same time, all Malays consider themselves a single group, although they are aware of the differences in their origin. As for religious affiliation, 43.2% of the population professed Buddhism and Taoism, 18.8% – Christianity, 14% – Islam, 5% – Hinduism, do not profess any religion – 18.5% of the population as of 2015².

Singapore is a unique country in the region of Southeast Asia, as its population is formed solely by migration, which began with the arrival of the British East India Company in 1819 in this part of the world and the further development of Singapore under the rule of the English crown. Although the Chinese were the ethnic majority in the island's population by the end of the 19th century, ethnic Malays are recognized as native residents of Singapore under the Constitution, which obliges the Government to support the political, educational, religious and other interests of the Malay minority. The special rights of Malays and Muslims are enshrined in Articles 152 and 153 of the Constitution of the Republic of Singapore. Islam is practiced mainly by Malays and Muslim Indians, thus it is possible to

equate the concepts of the Muslim community of Singapore and Malay in most cases.

It is necessary to look back to the recent past to understand the problems of the modern Malay community in Singapore among other things the Malays did not have a tradition of community organizations until the separation of Singapore from Malaysia in 1965. Their activities were associated with religious and political organizations due to their religious and national identity, in contrast to the Chinese and Indians with strong communal traditions. It was the community, both Chinese and Indian, which helped to socialize, get a job, etc., to newly arrived immigrants to the island. The policy of the British colonial authorities, aimed at assigning each ethnic group its own niche in economic activity, played a significant role in this. In fact, the various ethnic groups in Singapore did not overlap with each other, living separately in ethnic areas and doing their own thing. This unfortunate legacy has been overcome by the government of Singapore ever since it strives to create a unified Singaporean nation of various ethnic groups. An attempt to solve this problem within the Federation of Malaysia, which Singapore was a member of in 1963–1965, was unsuccessful. The appeal of Lee Kuan Yew (Prime Minister of Singapore, 1959–1990, chairman of the People's Action Party) to the population regarding the formation of a single “Malaysian nation” within the Federation was met with hostility by the Malays, who were afraid of the consolidation of the already obvious superiority of the Chinese ethnic group.

In 1965, with the formation of the independent Republic of Singapore, the Malays on the island were “torn away” from the Malays on the mainland, completely losing their political influence. The state, led by the People's Action Party (PAP), assumed the functions of initiating and developing the organizations of the Malay community in these conditions. One of the first such initiatives of the PAP government was the establishment of the umbrella organization of non-political Malay

institutions of the Central Council of Malay cultural organizations of Singapore (Majlis Pusat)⁴ in 1969, which aimed to improve the education and welfare of the Malay community. This was the very first attempt by the government to rethink the role of Malays within independent Singapore after its separation from Malaysia.⁵

Another important government initiative was an attempt to promote the development of small, informal groups of Malays, so to speak, modern Malay intellectuals, who were to play a crucial role in adapting the Malay community to the rapid economic changes in the country. The challenging mission of calling for the progress of the Malay community, shackled by traditional values and obligations, was entrusted to this group of "middle class mediators." Identifying such intermediaries was a difficult task in the 1970s, as there were few suitable candidates, and not everyone was willing to participate, and Muslim Arabs or Indians by origin could hardly claim to be representatives of the Malay community.⁶ The few, who served as intermediaries, felt hostility and suspicion from the Malay community. The effort to reorient the values and identity of the Malay community, initiated in 1969–1970, resulted in increased awareness of the need for change. However, these government initiatives created bewilderment among the Malays as to what was required of them and how they were supposed to act. In particular, the lack of appropriate structures to bring about the desired changes was discontent.⁷

Despite the secular nature of the state recorded in the report of the 1966 Constitutional Commission, the Administration of Muslim Law Act (AMLA) entered into force in 1968. Singapore Muslim affairs are handled by Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura (MUIS), also known as the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore. The functions of the Council members include advising the President of Singapore on Islamic issues, as well as promoting religious, social, educational, economic and cultural activities in accordance with the principles and traditions

of Islam, as enshrined in the Koran and Sunnah. The Council is headed by the President of MUIS and consists of the mufti of Singapore, persons recommended by the Minister of Muslim Affairs, and other members nominated by Muslim organizations. All Council members are appointed by the President of Singapore.¹¹ MUIS was created as the supreme governing body of Muslim religious affairs, partly to meet the demands of Muslim organizations and partly to amalgamate some fifteen religious organizations into one structure.¹² There was considerable controversy over the issue of its autonomy. When the parliamentary bill to create this organization was passed in 1966, it provided that the president, mufti (religious head of the Muslim community in Singapore) and the secretary of the organization are appointed by the government. The Council carries out an intermediary function between the state and the Muslim community. More importantly, MUIS is an effective tool to contain Malay extremism and religious fanaticism.¹³

MUIS collects religious tax (zakat) from Muslims, monitors the state of mosques, Muslim cemeteries and waqfs.¹⁴ There are currently 101 waqfs in Singapore. The first waqf was created in 1820 - it is the Omar Kampong Malacca Mosque, built with funds from Syed Omar bin Ali Aljunied, (Yemen). It is noteworthy that in the 19th century it was merchants from Yemen who actively created waqfs in Singapore.

It is necessary to mention about 14 waqfs, founded by representatives of the Indian Muslim community. A significant contribution was made by the Bugis from the Indonesian archipelago. Almost a third - 30 waqfs - were created by women. However, not a single new waqf has been created in Singapore since the 1970s. Probably one of the reasons is the rise in property prices, making it impossible for many Singapore Muslims to bequeath property as a waqf. People talk about "donor fatigue."

All waqfs are owned by MUIS, with 68 managed by the Council and 33 managed by Trustees. A total of \$ 3.082 million was allocated in 2019. The largest beneficiaries are mosques -

62%, madrassas – 9%. In accordance with the will of the creators of waqfs, contributions are paid to other countries (usually the country of origin of the waqf or Holy places, i.e. Mecca and Medina), these payments are 13% today. It should be clarified that the beneficiaries of the waqf are usually indicated in the will of the donor, and the distribution of funds is carried out in accordance with his will.¹⁵

Returning to the activities of MUIS-competitions of Koran reciters are held under its leadership, members of the Council give advice on Sharia issues, as well as monitor how the believers fulfill their religious duties.¹⁶ This control has a legal basis in the form of a law of 1966, which requires Muslims to strictly fulfill their religious duties, as well as a decree of 1968 regarding the punishment for violators of piety. The legal capacity of both legislative acts has been and is being reinforced today by the relevant decisions of the Sharia courts. The Council has monitored the performance of the Hajj since 1975. A compulsory official registration rule was introduced in 1982 for pilgrims who had to fly to Mecca on either Singaporean or Saudi Arabian airlines only.

The construction of mosques in Singapore is carried out through a special program funded by donations. Every working Muslim contributes a monthly amount (zakat) to a special fund (Mosque Building and Mendaki Fund, MBMF) run by MUIS. In the early 1970s, during a period of rapid urbanization and development of the country, the government moved the residents of the Muslim community of Singapore from kampong to apartments provided by the Housing and Development Board (HDB). There was an urgent need to raise funds for the construction of mosques in new areas in this regard. Although the Muslim community was willing to contribute, traditional fundraising methods were too slow, so an efficient way to raise funds was developed through the Central Social Security Fund system. Every Muslim working in Singapore, including

foreigners, must contribute to a community fund – the Mosque Building Fund, which was established in 1975.

In 1984, the Mendaki Foundation was created to promote the development of religious education for the Muslim community, thus MBF was merged with it in the Mosque Building and Mendaki Fund (MBMF). The key beneficiaries of the Fund are mosques, madrassas and families in need. The Fund finances the construction of new mosques and renovation of old ones, a complex of programs in the field of religious education and social programs aimed at improving the situation of Malay / Muslim families is being implemented.

Due to the growing Muslim population, as well as increased spending on education and construction, contributions to the Fund increased several times in 1977, 1984, 1991, 1995, 2005 and 2009. The latest changes took effect on June 1, 2016. For example, for Muslims earning less than \$ 1,000 a month, zakat was 50 cents in 1975, \$ 1 in 1977, \$ 1.5 in 1984; \$ 2 from 1991 to 2015, and \$ 3 from 2016 to the present. It is noteworthy that the gradation of zakat depending on the level of income did not exist until 1995, when a progressive scale of calculation was introduced.¹⁷

In October 2006, the Center for Harmony was opened at the initiative of MUIS, whose activities are aimed at deepening the understanding of Islam and Muslims by the multinational population of the country, as well as stimulating interfaith dialogue and interaction at all society levels. Prime Minister Li Hsien Loong said at the opening ceremony that the establishment of the Center was a significant step forward in the tireless efforts to bring Singaporeans of different faiths closer together.¹⁸

In addition to these major Muslim institutions, there are various ethnic Muslim organizations – self-help groups, voluntary charities, civic and religious-cultural groups, for example, Malay Muslim organizations: Association of Muslim Professionals, Muslim Missionary Society (Jamiyah), Singapore Islamic Scholars and Islamic Teachers Association (PERGAS),

Muhammadiyah and Islamic Theological Association of Singapore (Pertapis) and others. Indian-Muslim organizations: Federation of Indian Muslims, Singapore Kadayanallur Muslim League, Singapore Tenkasi Muslim Welfare Society, etc.

In 1981, a special outreach service was established in Singapore, under government control, with the responsibility of organizing religious discussions and publishing and distributing theological literature among Muslims. The activities of foreign Islamic preachers in Singapore are prohibited in order to curb the spread of Wahhabism.¹⁹

The problem of religious education is very urgent for the Muslim community in Singapore, since all madrassas are private institutions funded by the community. Madrasahs raise funds through school fees and fundraising, the Muslim community contributes through zakat and waqf, targeted donations to the madrasah and the MBMF Foundation. However, it is incorrect to believe that the government is on the sidelines of addressing these issues – it provides assistance to students through the Edusave system. To date, more than 90% of madrasa teachers have a basic certification, and 59 teachers and school principals have been trained in middle management and leadership programs thanks to effective government support; 98.5% of madrasah students achieved the PSLE (Primary School Leaving Examination) level, i.e. the unified state examination at the end of the elementary six-year school, which assesses the level of preparation for further education in the corresponding secondary school course)²⁰, and were able to get a high score.²¹ A government – funded special grant scheme for Malay students (Tertiary Tuition Fee Subsidy-TTFS) was established in 1991 and currently covers approximately two thirds of Malay families. In 2011, the criteria for providing assistance under this scheme were revised. While the grants were initially provided to Malay students from families with incomes of up to \$ 3,000 per month, from the beginning of 2012, the cost of education is fully covered with an average monthly income for each family member of less

than \$ 1,000, i.e. 100%, with an income between 1001 and 1200 – 75%, 1201–1500 – 50%. At the same time, students from a typical family of four with a total income of less than \$ 6,000 began to receive full subsidies.²²

However, despite the support of both the Muslim / Malay community and the government, the problem of fully integrating the Muslim (majority Malay) community into the structure of a multi-ethnic and multi-faith Singapore has not been resolved. The level of well-being of most members of the Muslim community is much lower than that of other groups. The government of Singapore, under the leadership of the People's Action Party, sought to establish the compatibility of Malay identity within a common national system, aiming to create a unified cultural space with clearly defined basic concepts such as survival, meritocracy, and multiculturalism. However, one of the ways to solve this problem was the government's justification of the economic backwardness of the Malay community in terms of the specificity of their cultural values. This position of the ruling circles of Singapore contributed to the recognition of the “cultural weakness of Malay traditionalism” by the Malays themselves. In other words, the Malays were convinced that they, and not the Chinese or the government, were responsible for their own socio-economic problems. The reason for their “predicament” is the lack of motivation for success and focus on agricultural production.²³ The phenomenon roots go back to the distant past of Singapore, as mentioned above. The idea that justified the situation of poor Malays was taken up by reform-minded Muslims, then by the Malay literary elite, and later even by some sociologists.²⁴

Although the position of the Singapore government on this issue is understandable, it is still trying to radically change the values of the Malay community. This activity is associated not only with the aforementioned involvement of the so-called middle-class intermediaries, but also with the creation of special organizations whose activities are aimed at raising the

educational level of the Malays. The Mendaki Foundation, already mentioned above, was created at the initiative of Malay MPs from the People's Action Party, who were alarmed by the low rates of Malays in the 1980 census in education and employment.²⁵

Much attention is paid to the problem of preventing radicalization of Muslims, and awareness-raising activities are conducted to combat terrorist propaganda and recruitment under the auspices of the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS). The government of Singapore also seeks to prevent the development of Islamophobic attitudes in society. Minister for Home Affairs and Law K. Shanmugam, speaking at the opening of the international conference on the role of Muslim non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in strengthening peace, which took place in Singapore in October 2017, stressed that one should not associate any religion with extremism, citing the existing deep conflicts in the region, in particular, in the Philippines – between Catholics and Muslims, in Myanmar – between Buddhists and Muslims. He noted that the slogans of terrorists who allegedly acted in the name of Islam created a wrong mood in society when Islam began to be associated with terrorism. In his speech, K. Shanmugam also indicated that the Singapore government would make every effort to maintain harmony between people of different religions, adhering to a firm position in preventing interfaith conflicts, the emergence and expansion of racial enclaves.²⁶

The problems of remoteness of the Muslim community in Singapore from the rest of the population are solved with great difficulty. Unfortunately, we can say that this remoteness is only getting worse. The activities of the government of Singapore in the field of nation-building seem more like propaganda than the implementation of something real. There is a constitutional provision declaring the need to take care of the interests of national and religious minorities, and recognizing the special position of the Malays as the indigenous people of Singapore. But

does this give them a chance to occupy a position in society equal to the Chinese? Obviously not.

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