

## Chapter 1

# INTRODUCTION

## Islamic Education and Religious Authority

The definition of religious authority varies across different faith groups. In Christianity and Catholicism, there is a concept of ordained priesthoods. In Catholicism, the Pope is the highest religious authority, and a symbol of unity among the faithful. His centre of authority is in the Vatican, Rome. While priests and bishops serve as intermediaries between God and man, the same claim cannot be made about the *ulama* (Islamic religious scholars), though they also fulfil the role as providers of religious guidance on theological matters to the masses. In Islam, religious authority is decentralized; even the religious scholars in Islam's holiest city Mecca (Saudi Arabia) cannot claim to be the central authority of the Islamic world. When Muslims were living under the caliphate system, the Sultan was regarded as a political authority rather than a religious one.<sup>1</sup>

*Ulama* refers to a learned group of men well versed in the Islamic religious sciences, and are moral guardians of faith and the gatekeepers of religion. The Quran, Islam's holiest scripture,

mentions the term *ulama* twice. A narration of the Prophet Muhammad referred to the group as *waratsatul anbiya* or the “heirs” of the Prophet. However, there are Muslims who prefer to treat the *ulama* as ideal social groups rather than referring to any specific individuals (Norshahril 2015).<sup>2</sup> The *ulama* as a social group is a product of human construction, and not one that is divinely appointed. *Ulama* for one community may not be considered as one in another community. This begs the question as to who has legitimacy in the religious community to speak on theological matters. This contestation also exists within the same community, depending on which criteria the group holds. Some communities emphasize on knowledge as the most important marker that differentiates a religious scholar and a layperson, and hence, authority is measured based on the number of books the *alim* (singular for *ulama*) has written or the originality of his ideas. Yet, in other communities, a scholar must possess the ability to cure the sick, or in other words, magical powers. The *alim* must reflect some form of divine inspiration, even though of lesser degree compared to the Prophet Muhammad, who died in AD 632. According to the Islamic belief, the Prophet received divine orders (*wahyu*) directly from God.

The way the religious authority is understood also differs within the Sunni and Shia sects. This is not to say that the two sects are homogeneous to begin with. For instance, among Sunni Muslims, the way certain Sufi (spiritual/mystical) groups understand authority could depend on their leader’s lineage. Some religious leaders, particularly the Sayyids (spelt as Syeds in Singapore), claim to be the descendants of the Prophet Muhammad, through his daughter Fatimah, who married his cousin Ali Abu Talib. Some Shia groups believe that their leaders are divinely guided and given the sole authority to interpret the religion.

The term *ulama* is also contested by Muslim intellectuals. They spoke about the need to broaden the concept of *ulama* to include experts in other fields of knowledge, such as economics, physics, philosophy, political science (Alatas 2015). Following this line of argument, those trained in the religious sciences may not necessarily qualify as *ulama* because they are not equipped with modern knowledge required to understand contemporary problems and find the necessary solutions for the same. Such is the complexity in defining the *ulama*.

### **RELIGIOUS TRAINING, TRADITION AND AUTHORITY**

Religious authority can take many forms (Weber 1963). A leader can obtain legitimacy based on enacted rules or system. He has the legal right to issue an order by his position because he is sanctioned by the state or the constitution. Related to our subject of Islamic authority in Singapore, an example of a person with his authority clearly defined is the Mufti, who has the powers to issue *fatwa* (legal rulings). This form of religious authority is common in the contemporary modern setting, given the establishment of religious bureaucracies and secular states. Governments bestow and define the powers of the religious bureaucracies, which then regulate how religious laws are enacted and the extent of their powers.

The religious community also defines religious authority based on their closeness to religious tradition. This is befitting to the traits accorded to *ulama* as gatekeepers of traditions. “Traditions” here refer to values and principles that bind the identity of a community. It also helps shape and mould the worldview of the people’s traditions (Shaharuddin 1992, pp. 242–43). Traditions are not static and can be modified to meet new challenges and needs.

Anachronistic elements of the tradition can also be discarded. It comes in the form of culture, laws, and religion. In Islam, the source of traditions is fundamentally the Quran and the Hadith, but other sources such as writing by scholars also form the corpus of traditions. When discussing about the Malay society, customary laws in line with Islamic teachings are also part of their cultural heritage. The community respects the person who understands and lives up to its traditions. The person must also be someone knowledgeable.

Apart from knowledge and commitment to traditions, projection of piety is an essential trait for someone who wants to be considered an *alim*. The scholar must portray good character: one who never lies, gambles, steals or gossips. He must be a just, devout family man, and someone who shows strong desire to help the poor or less fortunate. A good *alim* must not miss his rituals, such as his five daily prayers, payment of tithe before they are due, fast during the month of Ramadhan (ninth month of the Islamic calendar), and performing of pilgrimage to Mecca (modern-day Saudi Arabia). As such, the society generally frowns if those trained in the religious sciences take up jobs deemed non-Islamic, particularly jobs in the entertainment industry, casinos or breweries.

Furthermore, he must be someone who has touched the lives of his followers. In other words, he must possess some form of charisma. When he speaks, his views will be heard and followed. Thus, an *alim* is someone who has significant impact on the lives of his congregation. A leader can also be selected by his followers based on irrational forms. The followers consider their leader as someone who possesses supernatural powers and magic. Irrational forms of authority could also derive from how the leader dresses, speaks and conducts himself in public, and less on evaluation of ideas and skills. He can be legitimized

through the prescriptions of traditions that induce obedience (Norshahril 2015, p. 11).

More importantly, an *alim* can be judged to be learned based on the college or university he attended. Here, an Islamic degree from one of the Middle Eastern universities is deemed more prestigious compared to one from the other parts of the world. For the Sunni world, the Al-Azhar University in Egypt remains the most respected centre of Islamic learning. Other universities that have credible standing in today's context are the Madinah University in Saudi Arabia and Yarmouk University in Jordan. These Middle Eastern universities remain ideal institutes for higher learning for many Southeast Asian religious studies students, even though there are equal, if not better, Islamic studies degree programmes offered by Western universities such as those in the United States, United Kingdom and Australia.

Yet, educational affiliation alone may not be enough to improve one's social standing in the eyes of the community. While most of the religious elites in Southeast Asia are trained in the religious sciences, there are individuals who remain active in the religious establishment without formally receiving training in the *madrasahs*. They studied religion as part-time students.<sup>3</sup> This again proves the fluidity of what constitutes formal authority and legitimacy. Religious authority is best explained through an accumulation of three variables: training in the religious sciences, charisma and society's perception of piety. This book covers only one and the most fundamental variable that defines authority, which is religious training.

Given the fluidity in measuring religious authority, this book applies the term *ulama* the way it is used by many Muslims in the Malay world, referring to the religious elite trained in the religious sciences. The *ulama* here includes those trained in Islamic disciplines such as law, exegesis, theology and traditions

of the Prophet. Upon graduation, they normally take up key positions in Islamic institutions, functioning as jurists, muftis (state-appointed religious scholars who issue religious rulings), grammarians, teachers in mosques, and writers of Quranic commentary. The religious community expects them to be able to converse in Arabic. The Malays, for instance, are generally not Arabic speaking, while Arabic is the original language in which the Quran was revealed. In fact, classical religious texts are all written in Arabic. Hence, they refer to the *ulama* to interpret the Quran and classical Islamic sources on their behalf.

### **MIDDLE EAST INFLUENCE ON SOUTHEAST ASIA**

A study of the genesis of religious authority in the Malay world has to trace its connections with the Middle East. For centuries, Malays who seek to deepen their understanding in Islam would travel to the Middle East. Besides, Muslims would travel to Mecca at least once in their lifetime to complete their obligatory pilgrimage. Thus, the Middle East connection with the Malay world cannot be discarded.

Recently, the Middle East impact in Southeast Asia has received negative publicity. There is increasing thought that Muslims in Southeast Asia are becoming puritan or exclusivists in their orientation, in what many scholars define as Wahhabi-Salafi in their orientation. The threat of radical groups (such as Al Qaeda and Islamic State in Iraq and Syria or ISIS) originating from the Middle East did not help improve these negative perceptions. The change in attitudes of the Southeast Asian Muslims towards conservatism or the extreme forms of radicalism is often regarded by scholars as the “conservative” turn or the departure of Southeast Asian Islam. Another common perception is that terrorism originates from the Middle East. These works

argue that the writings of Muslim ideologues inspire terrorists such as Syed Qutb, who was a prominent and celebrated figure in the Muslim Brotherhood movement, and inspire radical groups. Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) followers read these works and thus strived to create *daulah Islamiyyah* (Islamic State) in Southeast Asia. There were other commentaries in the newspapers that spoke about the changing fashion of the Muslim women. More Malay women are putting on the *niqab*, a veil covering all of the face except the eyes, which in the past is unheard of in the Malay world.

Since Islam originates from Arabia, it is understandable that Southeast Asian Muslims consider the Middle East as the centre of Islam. Their emotional attachment to the Middle East resulted in many wanting to study in the Middle Eastern universities to deepen their knowledge on Islam. They wanted to immerse themselves with the Arabs' way of life and become an expert in their language. They felt that these are necessary steps before they could unlock the verses from Islam's sacred texts.

Fundamentally, Islam does not value one culture over another, but upholds universal values cutting across geographical and cultural boundaries. Islam was brought to the Malay world by traders from the Middle East (particularly Hadramaut, Yemen), explorers from China and preachers from India. The religion came centuries before the Europeans colonized the Malay Archipelago, though it is difficult to establish the exact date Islam came to the region because of the lack of information, historical evidence or documents (Al-Attas 2011, p. xiii). Relying only on hard evidence, such as colonial writings or artefacts (such as coins, paintings, and containers), would be insufficient to reconstruct the history of Islamization.

Scholars pay interest in the connections between the Islamic institutions of higher learning in Middle East and those

in Southeast Asia. Azyumardi's (2004) *The Origins of Islamic Reformism in Southeast Asia* traces the networks of scholars from the Grand Mosque in Mecca with those in Southeast Asia. It shows the ties between the two regions were close, resulting from pilgrimage and interactions at institutions of higher learning. Lately, there have been greater interests by scholars to examine the impact of Middle Eastern universities in spreading Islamic ideas across the globe. One work relevant to this current study is by Abaza (1994), who looks at Indonesian students in Cairo. Her work traces the Al-Azhar University's influence on Indonesian Islam in terms of ideas and institutions. Showcasing strong anthropological study, Abaza discusses among others student life, exchange of ideas (such as feminism and modernism), and housing issues (Abaza 1994).

Other works that examine the Middle Eastern universities and institutions of learning, and how they impact Southeast Asia are by Bano (2015) and Kushimono (2015). These works are part of an edited volume entitled *Shaping Global Islamic Discourses: The Role of Al-Azhar, Al-Medina and Al-Mustafa*. The two articles discuss the impact of the Al-Azhar University education on Islamic thought. Kushimono's article, for example, focuses specifically on the impact of Al-Azhar graduates on Malaysian institutions, tracing the reasons why the Malaysian government supports students studying in Al-Azhar and how Malaysia's religious curriculum is heavily designed to facilitate Malaysians studying there.

Nevertheless, Muslims in Southeast Asia have developed their own brand of Islam different from the Middle East. They uphold an important Islamic principle that respects local traditions and culture. This means that Southeast Asian Muslims continue to practise their local customs, traditions, arts, fashion and rituals, as long as they do not contradict Islam's monotheism. On legal matters not covered in the Quran and Sunnah, customs in the



Malay-Muslim world continue to be practised. Colonial scholars saw this mix of Islam and Malay customs as a point of tension, leading them to conclude that Islam has minimal influence on Malay social and political life. Some colonial scholars went so far as to suggest that Islam degraded Malay traditions and customs, even though Islam is neutral towards many of the community's cultural values and practices. Today, some Muslim groups in Indonesia promoted the notion of "Islam Nusantara", a version of religious identity that appreciates local cultures and needs.

## **THE AL-AZHAR UNIVERSITY AND RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY**

This monograph's discussion of religious authority in Southeast Asia, and its Middle East connections, would not be complete without a discussion of the Al-Azhar University. It is in the scope of this monograph to discuss the influence of the 1,000-year-old Islamic university on Southeast Asia, particularly Singapore. Al-Azhar remains the most popular destination for Southeast Asian students pursuing religious studies. Parents choose to send their children to Al-Azhar because it teaches the Sunni school of Islam, which majority of Malays adhere to. Al-Azhar also exposes its students to other schools of thought, despite being largely Sunni. More importantly, Al-Azhar, according to some graduates, teaches the students about moderation.

The Al-Azhar has produced many outstanding graduates in Southeast Asia. Some have occupied important positions in the religious bureaucracy and functioned as muftis or jurists in their respective states. Al-Azhar's mode of transmission is Arabic, the language in which the Quran is revealed. Thus, Southeast Asian students who wish to improve their command of the Arabic language would choose the Al-Azhar University. Some parents

equip their children with basic Arabic and religious education in anticipation of sending their children to study in Al-Azhar one day to become an *alim*. Although an important area of study, the religious experience of students studying in Al-Azhar has been under-researched. So far, more attention has been given to students studying in the local Singapore *madrasahs* from primary to pre-university levels, compared to those studying at the university level. This monograph hopes to fill this lacuna.

## **MADRASAH EDUCATION SYSTEM IN SINGAPORE**

Muslims in Singapore make up about 13 per cent of Singapore's population of about 5.6 million people, and majority of Muslims there are Malays. The Muslims consider the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura, or Muis) as the highest Islamic authority in the country. The council came into being resulting from the Administration of Muslim Law Act (AMLA) which came into effect in 1968. The Council mainly undertakes the following functions: administration of *zakat* (tithes), *wakaf* (endowments), *haj* (pilgrims), halal certification, *madrasahs* (Islamic schools) and *fatwas* (religious rulings) (Funston 2006, p. 73). Muis is partly funded by the government, but most of its resources come from the community and endowments.

Although AMLA underlines Muis' role in Islamic education, it was only in 1989 that Muis set up its Religious Education Unit.<sup>4</sup> By 1990, Muis began to play a bigger role in determining the registration of *madrasah* students and approving its curriculum. In 1994, a Madrasah Fund was also set up to assist the *madrasahs* financially and the funds were mainly contributions from the Muslim community, Muis and Mendaki (Chee 2006, p. 19). The

funds were mainly used to raise teachers' salaries and upgrade school facilities such as the library and audio-visual facilities. For the longest time, students studying in the *madrasahs* were denied financial schemes that were extended to students studying in government schools. It was only in 2014 that *madrasah* students were given Edusave accounts (an annual government contribution), the entitlement of which other Singapore students between the ages of 7 and 16 receive from the government.

Almost all Singapore students studying at the Al-Azhar University come from one of the six *madrasahs* in Singapore. These *madrasahs* were founded by philanthropists and built on *waqf* land or endowments. There were many more *madrasahs* in the past, but they were closed due to financial difficulties, low student enrolments and lack of support by the colonial government (Chee 2006). Some of these *madrasahs* have existed for almost a century (for example, Aljunied was founded in 1927, and Al-Maarif in 1936). In fact, Alsagoff was founded in 1912. There are six *madrasahs* that remain today and they are Alsagoff Al-Arabiah, Al-Maarif Al-Islamiah, Wak Tanjong, Al-Irsyad, Aljunied and Al-Arabiah. In the past, all *madrasahs* offer primary, secondary and pre-university education, with Aljunied sending the highest number of students to the Al-Azhar.

The *madrasah* system underwent a major rearrangement in 2008 with the introduction of the Joint Madrasah System (JMS). These changes were made in response to the issues raised by the government in the late 1990s and early 2000s, mainly *madrasahs'* underperformance and inability to equip its students with necessary knowledge for the economy. Three *madrasahs* joined the JMS scheme: Al-Arabiah, Aljunied and Al-Irsyad. Since its introduction, Al-Irsyad takes in students at the primary level in which students will graduate after the sixth grade through the Primary School Leaving Examinations (PSLE). These students can

choose to either join Aljunied, which focuses more on religious subjects, or Al-Arabiah, which gives more weightage on secular subjects. Non-JMS *madrasahs* continue to conduct classes from primary to secondary levels. However, the non-JMS *madrasahs* may not be allowed to enrol students at the primary one level for a few years if they do not meet the minimum scores for the national PSLE examinations set by the Ministry of Education (MOE).

## SUMMARY

This monograph throws light on the concerns many scholars have towards the Middle East impact in Southeast Asia, particularly the religious discourse and authority in Singapore. It focuses on the graduates of Islamic studies from the prestigious Al-Azhar University in Cairo, and their learning experiences studying in the university. This monograph looks at whether the religious training acquired from the university meets the society's expectations on what is required of a religious scholar, particularly when they return home.

This monograph combines both historical and contemporary analysis of Al-Azhar undergraduates of Southeast Asian origin, particularly on Singapore students. I have conducted a survey of thirty-seven students currently studying in Al-Azhar, and the questions asked are mainly regarding their perceptions towards the classes conducted in the university and the student life there. I have also followed up with in-depth interviews with twenty current students studying there in Egypt. The purpose of the interviews is to understand the factors, which motivated them to study in the university, as well as the challenges they face. I also interviewed the graduates of the university who are currently teaching in *madrasahs* or serving in Islamic institutions in Singapore. They include the principals of local *madrasahs* and

also former Mufti of Singapore, Shaikh Syed Isa Semait. Three Al-Azhar alumni from Malaysia were also interviewed in order to obtain some form of comparison.

In Chapter 2, I recap the history of the Al-Azhar University from its founding in the tenth century to the present day. This chapter is not meant to provide an all-encompassing history of the university except to highlight important episodes. Of interest to this region is more recent developments such as the modernist movement at the turn of the twentieth century, which sparked the *Kaum Muda/Kaum Tua* contestations (between modernist reformers and conservative traditionalists), and the rise of Muslim Brotherhood ideologues in Egypt's religious-political sphere, such as Syed Qutb and Yusuf Al-Qaradawi, who continue to have a significant following in Southeast Asia today.

Chapter 3 mainly focuses on several key Al-Azhar graduates from Southeast Asia who would later shape religious and political institutions in Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore. The chapter highlights two to three personalities who had received their degrees from Al-Azhar, yet their religious orientation differs from one another. Also different were the roles they played upon their return to the region: most ended up as religious scholars (*ulama*), while others became politicians and activists. This shows that one cannot speak of a monolithic Al-Azhar "school of thought".

In Chapter 4, I analyse the learning experience of past and contemporary Singapore students of the university. I conducted in-depth interviews with a sample of graduates from the 1960s to the 2000s and interviewed students currently studying in the university. I have also conducted an online survey with thirty-seven students to understand their struggles in Al-Azhar.

Chapter 5 concludes with a summary of my preliminary findings on the religious experience of Al-Azhar students. The

data presented in this book may be useful for policymakers in relation to religious education in Singapore.

## Notes

1. Under the Caliphate system, such as the Ottoman Empire (1299–1923), Muslims around the world paid tribute to the Caliph.
2. They do not use the label on any groups or individuals (e.g., Organization XYZ is an *ulama* organization, or person ABC is an *alim* (singular for *ulama*)).
3. Interview with Shamsiah, 2016.
4. Previously, this function was under the Mendaki Religious Advisory Committee. Mendaki is a Malay self-help group whose mainly responsibility is to raise the community's educational standards.