Chapter 10

Fateha.com: challenging control over Malay/Muslim voices in Singapore

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Introduction

The silencing of dissenting voices in the public sphere has been a source of discontentment in Singapore's Malay/Muslim community. The ruling People's Action Party's (PAP) control of public discussion over the community's needs has time to time pushed the voices from the Malay ground to mosques and other Malay/Muslim centric platforms (Berita Harian, 2000).

As a result, discussion about Malay marginalisation has rarely been discussed openly. Apart from a short PAP led discussion in 2001, in response to Malaysian media review of the book The Singapore Dilemma: The Political and Educational Marginality of the Malay Community, discrimination and marginalisation of the Malays in Singapore, has rarely been given its due attention. This is largely due to the fact that avenues for public discussion and lobbying are open only to those discussing non-political matters or if it is connected to politics or policies, only views sanctioned by the ruling party are given airing.

Avenues for channeling Malay/Muslim voices are inaccessible to those who are not aligned with the ruling People's Action Party (PAP). Malay/Muslim organisations are equally ineffective as public funding of such organisations is at the discretion of the government. PAP politicians lead some of these organisations either in a direct or advisory role. Even sermons delivered in mosques need approval from the government-controlled Islamic Council of Singapore (MUIS). Hence, any analysis of the muted Malay/Muslim public voice needs
to examine the various institutions - Malay/Muslim Parliamentarians, Malay/Muslim organisations and the media, including the Internet -- that have been set up to extend the PAP's domination in the public discourse.

This chapter seeks to shed some light on how Malay/Muslim organisations have resorted to the Internet to reclaim their voice. The first part of the chapter explains why alternative voices from within the Malay/Muslim community are seldom heard. Three sub-sections discuss the role of the Malay MPs, Malay/Muslim organisations and the media. The second part provides an insider account of Fateha.com's birth and the government's retaliation against Fateha.com's operations and its members. The chapter ends with some reflections on Fateha.com's role in the public sphere and its future development.

Singapore Muslims - a history of marginalisation

A Malay person is defined as one who speaks the Malay language, follows Malay customs and is a Muslim (Malaysian Federal Constitution, 1994). By virtue of the close relationship between Islam and Malays in the region, both terms tend to be used interchangeably. Making up about 13.9 percent of the population, the Malays are the second largest racial group in Singapore. Their size is second only to the Chinese community, which makes up 76.8 percent of the population, with 51 percent of the Chinese being adherents of Buddhism/Taoism (Department of Statistics, 2000).

The first groups of Proto-Malays probably arrived in the area of the Malay Peninsula between 2,500-1,500 BCE. While the history of Malays in Singapore and its region has been clouded with myths and legends, it is noted that the Malays had a recognisable civilisation in Singapore prior to the 14th century. The Majapahit Empire destroyed any form of Malay authority in Singapore at around 1360CE.
To the casual observer, the Malays enjoy a privileged position in Singapore. Constitutionally recognised as the indigenous people of Singapore, the Malays are the only community in Singapore to have an additional law for their administration. The Administration of Muslim Law Act (AMLA) provides for the religious needs of the community, especially in terms of marriage, inheritance and Islamic trust (AMLA, 1999). Together with a Minister in charge of Muslim Affairs, and an article of the constitution that requires the government to protect, safeguard, support, foster and promote [Malay] political, educational, religious, economic, social and cultural interests and the Malay language (Constitution of the Republic of Singapore, 1999), it is usually perceived that the Malay community has been given greater advantage than other communities in Singapore.

However, while the provisions are set out in paper, in reality, the Malays are treated with suspicion by the PAP government - partly due to the fact that Singapore is located in a pre-dominant Malay region and partly due to personal views of some PAP leaders, the Malays in Singapore are considered as a threat to national security (Lee, 2 March 2001) and progress. While the AMLA and Ministership are provisions to protect the Malay community’s interest, they are in fact used to control the community. Together with other Malay-centric organisations and the Malay media, these provisions are part of the three pillars of control for the PAP government- - the media, Malay NGOs, and Malay Parliamentarians.

The tripartite structure is enhanced by the erosion of recognition of the Malays’ claims to be indigenous to Singapore. The common position now is that there are no indigenous communities in Singapore. It is regularly noted by the PAP that Singapore is a migrant nation and that Malays migrated from Malaysia or Indonesia. This position is also echoed by Singapore scholars and writers and some have even expanded upon the idea that Singapore Malays are immigrants. Even though Singapore has a rich Malay history and myths Simon Tay,
his article Human Rights, Culture, and the Singapore Example said that Singapore has no mythic, pre-colonial civilization on which to base a unique Asian identity (Tay, 1996: 762). Tay's claims is in defiance of the history of Singapore's founding by Sang Nila Utama, the various stories recorded in the Malay annals and even the fact that after the sacking of the fortress of Singapore in mid 14th century CE, Parameswara, the founder of Malacca, was involved in a royal intrigue in Singapore towards the end of the 14th century and early 15th century.

The claim of Malays as migrants has been successful to a certain extent. While Malays generally regard themselves to be the indigenous community in Singapore, Malay Ministers and political leaders were reportedly endorsing the argument that Singaporean society is primarily made up of immigrants (The Straits Times, 4 November 1991).

In response to the claim that Malays are migrants, playwright Alfian Sa'at said in his widely circulated e-mail to the arts community, In an interview a doyenne of Singapore theatre laments that all Singaporeans are “cultural orphans”, including the Malays, because they migrated from Malaysia and Indonesia, and that makes them immigrants too, no matter that one can take a sampan from Johor to Singapore. (Sa'at 2002) Academic Lily Zubaidah Rahim places the context of Malays as indigenous to Singapore by arguing:

[T]he significance underpinning the internal migration of Malays from one rumpun [group] of the 'Nusantara' [Malay Archipelago] to another, coupled with the fact that modern Malaysia and Singapore have historically evolved from a Malay polity, appears not to be understood by elements within the non-Malay communities. A manifestation of this lack of understanding is the perennial questioning of the indigenous status of Malays in Malaysia and Singapore. (Rahim, 1998:16)

Malay attitude towards being the indigenous community in Singapore
is reflected in debates on whether it is worth to die for Singapore. Dr Vivian Balakrishnan, PAP MP and Minister of Trade for National Development and Trade and Industry told Parliament in April 2002 that his son asked him if there is a war, why should we fight for Singapore? (Parliament, 4 April 2002). While the issue was debated nationally (Goh, 18 August 2002), it was conspicuously non-existent in the Malay community. That Singapore is their land, and its defence is necessary, is common belief within the community.

Malay loyalty to Singapore is reflected in their refusal of a Malaysian citizenship offer by Malaysia's former Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman. Tunku Abdul Rahman offered Malaysian citizenship to Malays residing in Singapore during Singapore's separation from Malaysia in 1965. Singapore Malays' refusal of the citizenship offer can be attributed to their loyalty to the island and belief in meritocracy, which the PAP claimed it was championing. Former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew's clarion call for a non racial and non discriminatory Malaysian Malaysia during Singapore's short-lived merger with Malaysia was the basis of assumptions that Singapore would be a model of racial equality. As a result of this belief, Singapore Malays today have not demanded special treatment even though constitutional provisions accorded them privileges.

Malay disillusionment in the meritocratic assumption as a result of discrimination and denial of indigenous claims exacerbates the feeling of oppression. There is a feeling of being oppressed in [their] own land. However, as a result of the pillars of control, the shutting of avenues to discuss discrimination and the Malay culture that sees itself as gentle and their aversion to confrontation, there is a general feeling of resignation that it is their lot to be discriminated. Discrimination is then accepted as a part of life, as they are told that they are not as smart as the migrant communities (Lee, 1998: 42), they lack the X factor in development (Barr, 2000: 185), that discrimination may just be common sense on the part of the government (Lee, 2 March 2001),
that they suffer from psychological dysfunction (Rahim, 1998:53) and to brush it off as discrimination exists in every society.

It should be noted that PAP's discriminatory policies and practices could be attributed to the views of former Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew. Generally regarded as the architect of Singapore policies and still holding substantial power, Lee Kuan Yew who now holds the position of Senior Minister has been referred to in religious and racial terms. Anthony Oei likened Lee Kuan Yew to Moses who was ordered by God to lead the Hebrews from bondage to the Promised Land... (Oei, 1992: 21) while some Malay MPs were reported to have said that Lee Kuan Yew shares similar characteristics with the Prophet Muhammad. Those disagreeing with him within the Muslim community sometimes refer to Lee Kuan Yew as a dajjal (Islam's anti Christ) and similar terms - usually in the confines of their homes and companions.

Lee Kuan Yew is noted as either the person responsible for a peaceful multi ethnic Singapore (Vasil, 1994: 35) or as a closet Chinese Supremacist (Barr, 2000: 189). While it is debatable whether discriminatory policies were formulated consciously, it is clear that even unconsciously, Lee Kuan Yew's view of the Malays as being culturally and environmentally deficient, has an impact on public policy and that it is most evident in his treatment of the Malay community (Barr, 2000: 203).

Various issues reflect the discrimination and marginality of the Singapore Malay community. For example, Malay academic performance still lags behind other communities. Their overall economic weakness is also attributable to unclear and discriminatory PAP policies. Take the example of the Singapore Armed Forces. In 1971, the then Deputy Prime Minister and Defence Minister, Dr Goh Keng Swee claimed that the drafting of youths into the military National Service was to develop a multiracial, multilingual and multireligious community
committed to Singapore and to the well-being of its citizens. It follows the direction begun in schools, where an integrated community is educated together, where young people of all races study together, to forge a national identity (Bedlington, 1978: 240-241). However, while the claim was to bring the different races together to develop an integrated plural society, the reality was quite different. Malays were excluded from the military and police forces up till 1973 (Bedlington, 1978: 218).

It is ironical that Dr Goh Keng Swee claimed in 1971 that National Service was to aid the integration of the different races and religions, while excluding the Malays. The impact of this policy was not only severe in building a multiracial society, but also in the economic strength of the Malay community. Prior to the exclusion of Malays, up to 80 percent of the police and military were Malays. By disallowing Malay recruitment, the PAP closed a previously important avenue and social mobility of the Malays and increased the already large pool of Malay unemployed (Bedlington, 1978: 218). While the PAP claims the promotion of meritocracy, its stated policies are not always consistent with its actions.

While appointments to sensitive units, the air force and higher echelons of the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) dominate debates on the PAP government’s unmeritocratic hiring policies, it should be noted that discrimination is not viewed by the Malay community to exist solely within the Armed Forces. The lack of Malays in the higher levels of public service and Government Linked Companies is indicative of unmeritocratic government policies. However, due to difficulty in proving such assertions, the Malay community has steered away from discussions of Malays in non-SAF appointments, preferring to discuss the SAF as rank and intake is easier to ascertain.

Academic Lily Zubaidah Rahim highlighted the issue of Malay
marginality in her book *The Singapore Dilemma: The Political and Educational Marginality of the Malay Community*. She argued that the Singapore government's policies on education, racial quotas and Malay exclusion from critical positions in the Singapore Armed Forces have marginalised the Singapore Malay community.

Prime Minister Goh said that if Zubaidah Rahim's claim is true, then he and the PAP Government should be indicted for failing to discharge [their] responsibility to an important pillar of Singapore's multi-racial society (Goh, 21 January 2001). He then tried to refute Zubaidah Rahim's arguments by using a different set of criteria. In his speech at the Malay/Muslim organisations Tribute to Prime Minister's 10 years of Leadership, PM Goh gave a set of statistics to argue that Malays are not marginalised. However, instead of directly refuting Zubaidah Rahim's arguments, which centres on the Malays' progress as compared to the majority Chinese population in Singapore, PM Goh equated marginalisation with stagnation. He argued that it is marginalised only if it is stuck in a stagnant pool, and their lives have not improved while others have (Goh, 21 January 2001). PM Goh added further that lagging behind the other communities in some areas does not mean marginalisation. While you may not have caught up with them in all areas, you have narrowed the gap in many (Goh, 21 January 2001).

While claiming to have addressed the issue of Malay marginalisation, PM Goh did not attempt to contradict Zubaidah Rahim's argument, which actually centred on the relative deprivation of the Malays as evaluated by comparing their progress to other reference groups (Rahim, 2000: 24). PM Goh's argument that marginalisation means stagnation was in fact, a debate of semantics rather than the concept and existence of marginalisation. Also, contrary to PM Goh's claims of narrowing the gap, Zubaidah Rahim argued that the Malay community has fallen behind the other races in income, occupation and education, a situation that was not denied by PM Goh apart from the above claim.
However, while he did not address the issue, PM Goh’s choice of statistics reveals further weaknesses. PM Goh compared the situation of the Malays in education, occupation, income and quality of life in 1990 with their progress in 1999 and 2000. The flaws of PM Goh’s arguments and support are best reflected in his choice of items to reflect an improved quality of life. As part of his support, PM Goh used Malay ownership of handphones, laser discs and personal computers to illustrate his point. He said that in 1998, 40% owned handphones, up from 1%; 37% owned personal computers, up from 8%; and 61% owned laser-disc or video CD players, up from 12% (Goh, 21 January 2001). What seems lost is that in 1990, handphones, personal computers and laser disc or video CD players were still novelty items. While the personal computer was already in use, it was not as popular to allow it to be used in a measure of a community’s progress. Handphones, laser disc and video CD players are unsuitable for comparison. The fact that PM Goh used these measures may reflect a lack of items to use to support his argument.

However, while it is instructive to push the argument of discrimination, the issue of Malay marginalisation was not raised directly by Singapore Malays. Malay marginalisation in Singapore came to the fore as the result of Malaysian media discussion of Zubaidah Rahim’s book. If a Singapore Malay were to discuss the issue, he would have been labelled as having a crutch mentality and a chauvinist or a ‘communalist’ by the PAP and criticised by Malay organisational and political leaders in Singapore. Instead of discussing the issue to develop understanding and gather solutions, the PAP’s method is to suppress its discussion. It is argued that discussing communal issues will lead to chauvinism and therefore, discussions of ‘sensitive’ matters are best left with the PAP as they are the ones who are able to maintain racial harmony in Singapore. This perpetuates the total drowning of Malay voices.

In a country with 12 Malay Members of Parliament, hundreds of Malay-based organisations and a Malay-language newspaper, radio and
even a TV station, the drowning of the Malay voice defies logic. But in Singapore, logic is dispensable when it concerns the ruling party. The structures created by the PAP ensure that only PAP Malay/Muslim MPs, PAP-owned or linked organisations and approved persons represent the 'credible' voices for the community. These groups and individuals rarely involve themselves in adversarial politics, focusing instead on the problems within the Malay community. Some of these problems relates to the community's inability to cope and adapt to changes in their environment. Malay students generally perform less well in school as compared to students of other races. There is also a disproportionately large percentage of Malay youths in Drug Rehabilitation Centres (DRC). While the community has problems of its own, its ability to effect changes on a macro level is limited.

On the whole, the Malay community's grievances are not discussed publicly for fear of political persecution by the government. The following sections describe the mechanisms through which dissenting voices from the Malay community are contained and curtailed.

First pillar: Malay Members of Parliament - masters or servants?

The portfolio of Malay MPs and Ministers within the Cabinet at the time of independence were similar in significance to those of the other races. However, a Malay Minister in Singapore today typically holds the portfolio of Minister for Community Development and Sports (formerly Social Affairs). The appointment of a Malay Minister is commonly seen as an act to appease the Malay community. At any one time, there would be only one Malay Minister. Dr Ahmad Mattar (former PAP MP) was the lone Malay Minister during his time. He was in charge of the Ministry of Social Affairs and later transferred to
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the Environment Ministry. When Dr Mattar stepped down, Abdullah Tarmugi was made Minister for Community Development. In March 2002 Tarmugi was made Speaker of Parliament, a largely ceremonial position and Dr Yaacob Ibrahim was promoted to become Minister of Community Development and Sports.

The main role for the Malay MPs is to ensure continued support from the Malay community for the PAP. While this is expected of politicians, the problem arises when the party promotes them as leaders of the Muslim community. Their position belies the fact that they have always, without fail, taken the PAP's position in any conflict between the community and the PAP. Whether it is a controversy about the public funding of madrasah (Islamic schools), the wearing of tudung (headscarf) in schools, or discrimination of Malays in the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF), the MPs have continuously supported the PAP's policies, regardless of protests from the Malay community or whether it was against the community's interest.

When their role was questioned, PAP Malay MP Yatiman Yusoff claimed that the PAP MPs have worked for the community, for example in setting up the Syariah court and funding for MUIS. What was not mentioned is the fact that 'the Syariah Court was established in 1955 as a result of a study done by a Select Committee set up by the Singapore Government. This Select Committee was made up of lawyers, kadis and local religious leaders' (The Syariah Court Singapore, 1999). Not only were the MPs not involved in its set up, but the Court was established 10 years before there was a Parliament in Singapore.

Apart from the PAP's hegemony within the community, two other factors inhibit any active challenge to the Malay political leadership. First, the Malays consider their culture as being soft and gentle. Their cultural attribute of deferring to those in authority, which makes them acutely averse to direct confrontation, preferring to use subtle hints in making a point in order to 'save face' of those who are questioned.
The Singaporean ‘save face’ concept has been noted as:

Stems in part from the desire to create an appearance of consensus and to avoid open conflict...Saving face is based upon a pecking order in that the position of a superior is more important. At the national level, the tradition is obviously well suited to the maintenance of hierarchical or even authoritarian rule since it closes down opportunities for individuals to object openly to unreasonable rules or conditions. (Lingle 1996: 72-73)

Second, the inhibition is compounded by the Malay’s feudal history. Malay tradition is rife with characters who portrayed blind loyalty to their masters, even at the expense of other values. One example is the Malay hero Hang Tuah. Believed to have served during the reign of Sultan Mansur Shah of Malacca during its golden era, Hang Tuah’s legend does not merely stress his physical and tactical prowess, but also the extent of his loyalty to his ruler.¹ His total and unwavering loyalty to his ruler is seen as ideal in Malay society.

As the quintessential Malay, the Hang Tuah mentality is seen in the Malay’s reverence for their rulers. The Hang Tuah mentality was transferred from Sultans to the British Colonialists even while there were pockets of resistance during British rule. Malay loyalty towards their British masters was strengthened by the colonialists’ show of acceptance of the Sultan’s immediate lordship over his peasantry, especially in issues pertaining to Malay customs and religion. In turn, the British show of power and influence over the Sultans in non-Malay specific matters led to the transfer of loyalty from the Sultan to the Colonialists. The symbiotic relationship kept the Malay peasantry under close control of the British colonialists.

This relationship did not end with the British departure and the removal of Malay aristocracy in Singapore. Malaysia, which is more politically dynamic than Singapore, saw the transfer of deference to
the current political leadership. In fact, even within UMNO, the total
primacy of the party's President reveals the mentality of unchallenged
loyalty. For several elections, UMNO has declared that the office of
the President cannot be challenged. And when several MPs submitted
a petition to the Prime Minister and gave public notice, they were
instantly rebuked by their colleagues and other Malaysians for
imprudence. In Singapore, deference to the Sultan was further transferred
to two new groups of rulers. The transfer of absolute loyalty to the
Malay Minister and PAP leadership was instantaneous.

The Malay Minister and MPs are perceived by the Malay community
as the rulers. In fact, the sole Malay Minister also holds the portfolio
of Minister in charge of Muslim Affairs. Seen as the 'apex' of the
Malay community, the Malay Minister assumes a similar position as
Sultans, albeit to a less reverential degree. While the Malay Minister
assumes control of the community a la the Sultans, the PAP and its
leadership has demonstrated similar overtures as did the British
colonialists. Malay issues are left to the purview of the Malay Minister.
The Prime Minister makes regular statements to support the Minister
from possible criticism and challenges. And yet, ironically, by virtue
of the Prime Minister's consistent show of support for the Malay
Minister and Malay MPs and the Malay Minister's lack of influence
over national policies and his invisibility in national politics, it is
accepted that real power and control does not reside with the Minister.

However, while Malays show their deference to the Malay MPs
and Minister, it does not mean that they receive electoral support
(Rahim, 2000: 92; Tan, 2003: 245). Due to the Malay MPs' inability
to give voice to the community's concerns and feelings of discrimination,
they have been viewed as little more than explainers of PAP policies
and more interested in protecting their positions within the PAP
hierarchy. But due to the Malay psyche and culture, while support
may not be granted in the elections, they continue to show deference
to the Malay MPs and accept the MPs' leadership and the overriding
power of the PAP leadership.

Thus, the acceptance of overlordship, not only in national politics but also in totality is granted to the PAP leadership. While the Malay Minister is constantly complimented, the Senior Minister and Prime Minister make regular criticism of the Malay community. A lack of response from the Malay Minister and his colleagues, further strengthens the PAP leaders’ position within the community as the de facto rulers.

However, this does not mean that the Malay MPs are always silent every time the community is criticised. There were instances when they spoke up against charges made by other PAP Members of Parliament. A highly debated issue was of Malay economic performance and the need to reformulate meritocracy to aid the Malay community. Malay MPs defended the current PAP policy and argued against any form of affirmative action in aid of the Malays.

Similarly when it was brought to light that Malays were initially excluded from the military and police forces, PAP Malay leaders claimed that Malays should have used the exclusion as an opportunity to expand their employment scope. However, it was a near impossible task for Malay youths then ‘because they could not produce the requisite certificate of completion of national service which the government could not give them because it was reluctant to publicize openly its disinclination to accept Malays into the military and the police’ (Bedlington 1978: 218).

The imposition of the PAP Malay MPs as the leadership of the community is politically astute. By defining the role of the Malay MPs as leaders of the community, the Malay community will have a vested interest in the MP’s election. Discussions on Malay-specific issues are usually met with the demand that the community help strengthen the Malay MPs’ political position. The argument is that only when Malays rally behind the PAP Malay MPs and vote
overwhelmingly for them, can the position of Malays in Singapore be strengthened.

**Second pillar: the Islamic Council, Mendaki and other Malay organisations**

Another arm of control is through Malay/Muslim organisations. This is achieved through a variety of mechanisms such as the provision of government funds, appointments of heads of organisation and co-option of independently set-up interest groups and institutions. Hence on important issues that pertain to the Malay/Muslim community oftentimes decisions and positions are taken in favour of the PAP government policy standpoint.

One example is of the Islamic Council of Singapore (MUIS) which was set up to ensure protection of the Malay religion, which is Islam. In compliance with the Administration of Muslim Law Act, MUIS was set up to advise the President of Singapore on Islamic issues. MUIS also administers Islamic entities from mosque management to curriculum for madrasahs. However, the past few years have seen the role and function of MUIS being called into question. The organisation supported the proposed closure of primary madrasahs even though the Muslim community was against the proposal. Its role was further questioned when the President of MUIS stated that in his consultation with the Mufti, the MUIS determined that since the girls in the tudung case were not allowed to wear the tudung, they should remove it to attend school. The position was problematic as MUIS said in the statement that the tudung is a religious obligation. However, instead of acting as required in its charter, which is to advice the President and government of Singapore on Islam, MUIS took the position of recognising the discrimination, and yet refused to effect its change.

MUIS' position is understandable. While the government's grant
makes up less than 2% of its $100 million annual budget (MUIS Accounts 2000), MUIS is an organisation in constant conflict with itself. It is an organisation that is supposed to manage the interests of the Muslim community, and yet is not appointed by the Muslim community. The President of MUIS is directly appointed by the President of Singapore, while the Executive Council of MUIS is appointed by the President of Singapore on recommendation of the Minister or the President of MUIS. The Minister appoints the Secretary of MUIS. The President of Singapore upon recommendation by the President of MUIS appoints the Mufti. However, since the whole political organisation of Singapore is dominated by one party, actual appointments are made by the PAP.

Similarly, the head of Mendaki, a self-help group in Singapore, is a Deputy Superintendent of Police (DSP), seconded to the organisation. The Chairman of Mendaki is the sole Malay Minister, Dr Yaacob Ibrahim while two more PAP MPs make up the Board of Directors. MUIS' President, Mr Maarof Salleh is also a Board member of Mendaki (Mendaki Foundation).

As a result of the MPs and Malay/Muslim organisations' inability to represent the interest of the Malay community, over the years Muslim groups have boldly voiced their dissatisfaction. One outcome was the setting up of the Association of Muslim Professionals (AMP), which aimed to voice the Malay professionals' concerns. The government quickly responded with the provision of matching funds. This was to have a long-term impact on its ability to act independently on political issues. For instance, an AMP convention held in November 2000 to propose the setting up of 'an independent, non-partisan collective leadership for the Malay/Muslim...to have a say in issues and developments that affect the community or the nation as a whole' (AMP Press Release, 16 December 2000) was met with PAP resistance.

The 550 participants at the convention, 80 percent of whom were
not AMP members (AMP Press Release, 16 December 2000), overwhelmingly supported the setup of the Collective Leadership system. In response, during his address at the convention, Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong disapproved of the proposal and suggested that AMP ‘concentrate on strengthening the Malay MP leadership rather than on undermining it’ (Goh, 5 November 2000). He proposed that instead of working on setting up an independent apolitical leadership system for the Malay community, AMP should strengthen the current system made up where ‘(at) the apex is the Minister-in-charge of Muslim Affairs. He is assisted by the Malay MPs’ and with the Islamic Council (MUIS) and MENDAKI, as its two supports (Goh, 5 November 2000).

Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew gave a more telling response in his address at a dialogue session with AMP and Majlis Pusat four months later. SM Lee said, ‘Do you think the PAP or any party will sit back and watch this happen? They cannot do that. We are fighting for votes, for the right to govern Singapore. We are not going to allow our Malay MPs to be undercut so that they can't pull the Malay votes’ (Lee, 2 March 2001). While PM Goh claimed the reason for his disapproval was for the benefit of the Malay community, SM Lee candidly stated a different reason. SM Lee clarified that the position of the Malay MPs is to gather Malay votes and the collective leadership proposal threatened PAP Malay MPs' ability to represent their party.

To protect the PAP's interest, national institutions and the funding process were used. PM Goh started the speech by stating the aid granted to AMP was by the government (Goh, 5 November 2000). In the dialogue session following his speech, he made a veiled threat to stop funding AMP. It is widely believed that even though the AMP withdrew the proposal, it still had to pay a heavy price. It was commonly noted that the AMP was promised a new 6-storey building as its new headquarters. Ultimately, AMP was granted the use of only one storey. Its annual funding was also reduced by SG$500,000.
AMP was forced to back down from its proposal. It submitted a statement one month after the convention to state its position upholding the PAP's demand that the Malay community's interest was vested with the PAP Malay MPs. According to AMP:

We have deliberated on Prime Minister's suggestion and subsequent comments on the matter. As we see it, the key elements are:

- strengthening the system of political leadership within the community
- not undermining the role of the Malay/Muslim MPs;
- and greater participation of the community on matters affecting it.

To achieve the above, our preferred option is for a greater and regular process of consultation between the Malay/Muslim civil society and the Malay/Muslim MPs.

(AMP Press Release, 16 December 2000)

According to the AMP statement, AMP would hold an annual Malay conference with the participation of the Malay MPs because 'the Prime Minister has stated that he had no objection to the idea' (AMP Press Release, 16 December 2000). AMP noted that: 'There were strong reactions from the Government leaders. We accept their concerns and shall take them as a reminder of what our limits are' (AMP Press Release, 16 December 2000).

Like other civic organisations in Singapore, Malay groups are concerned about being branded political and constantly strive to remain within the out-of-bounds (OB) markers. These markers, which are intentionally kept vague, usually crop up in discussions pertaining to citizen political participation. AMP stated:

Stating that a challenge to the leadership of the Malay/Muslim MPs would not be tolerated, the Prime Minister then drew "OB markers" which must be observed...AMP, being a civil society group, has never had any desire to step into the political arena. We view the discussion
on leadership as part of our role as a civil society group. If this was seen as a challenge to the Malay/Muslim MPs, it was not intended. (AMP Press Release, 16 December 2000)

While AMP's attempt was unique, its backing down in the face of PAP threat is common. The PAP has set out, from its earlier years, to ensure that it is the centre of power and that no other organisations can exercise any real power. The PAP leaders were clear in their minds that they could not afford to allow any alternative centres of power in Singapore. The civil service, trade unions, organisations of ethnic segments and trade and industry, all had to be totally subordinated to the government. Unlike advanced western democracies, domains of power and influence between the government and the civil service and voluntary associations could not be separated (Vasil, 1984: 117).

Third pillar: the media

Whether it is about a communist threat resulting in the arrest of opposition politicians in the 1960s, the claim of Catholic churches infiltrated by a Marxist conspiracy, or the use of the judiciary to protect the reputation of PAP leaders, the government has successfully used the compliant media to perpetuate its views.

The PAP has enacted laws to ensure total compliance. The law requires the Chief Executive Officer of local media companies to be approved by the government. Newspaper licences have to be renewed yearly. There cannot be substantial shareholding without the Minister's approval (Newspaper and Printing Presses Act, 2002). In PAP-governed Singapore, 'legislation has been used to effectively control all aspects of information flow' (Gomez, 2000: 28). In such a restrictive environment, media organisations have learned to accept the PAP's position without question.
While there are three main media groups that are of interest to the community (Malay media, non-Malay media and foreign media organisations), the Malay media organizations - Berita Harian (newspaper), Suria (television channel) and Warna and Ria (radio stations) - have been instrumental in supporting the PAP's agenda.

Malay media organisations primarily rely on reports from The Straits Times. Mr Said Zahari, former editor of Utusan Melayu and ISA detainee under the PAP for 16 years, commented on Berita Harian's first few years: 'The newspaper then was almost entirely translated from The Straits Times, item by item, including features and editorials' (Zahari, 2001: 90-91). Berita Harian now is usually 20 odd pages, compared to over 100 pages for The Straits Times. Its editorials are also its own. Everything else is the same. Not much has changed since 1958.

It is notable that a number of PAP Malay MPs are former journalists and editors with Berita Harian and Straits Times. Berita Harian journalists regularly state the position that they are pro good government and therefore, they are pro PAP. In the current Parliament, Mr Maidin Packer was formerly a journalist with Berita Harian. Abdullah Tarmugi was with The Straits Times. Zainul Abidin Rasheed was with Berita Harian, MUIS and Mendaki.

It has been informally stated by journalists that on issues that do not conflict with the PAP's interests or policies, the media often works independently. Journalists would confirm that editors would not tamper with their reports. But when there is a conflict with the PAP's position, the PAP's arguments would be used or would dominate the news. Journalists have complained that their stories are often changed by editors to align with the PAP's agenda.

While these pillars have been the main platforms used by the PAP to control the Malay discourse, the development of the Internet has
facilitated the setting up of alternative civil society groups to address the silencing of the Malay/Muslim voice. In turn, the PAP and its supporters have set up their own websites to promote the PAP’s position to the Malay community. These websites are then promoted by the local media as the credible voices and the de facto platforms for Malay leadership. Websites such as Ridzwan and KampungNet were featured on the PAP- owned media channels and promoted for use by ‘moderate Muslims’ to discredit voices ‘from the fringe’.

Internet and the Singapore Malay/Muslim community

A survey of Internet usage by households conducted by the Infocomm Authority of Singapore (IDA) in 2000 found that 57.9% of Malay homes have computers and 40.4% are subscribed to the Internet compared to 1999 when home computer ownership was 47% and Internet subscription was 22.5% (Infocomm Survey, 2001). However, the Malay community lags behind the other communities in Singapore. In the Infocomm survey, the community came out last. The National average for computer ownership and Internet use are 61% and 50% respectively.

The Internet in Singapore was preceded by a Singapore Telecoms service known as Teleview, which offered information, services and chat functions to its subscribers. Members of the Malay community frequented J7, a channel within the Teleview setup.

The Internet allowed individuals to start their own forums such as the Bulletin Board Services (BBS). Between 1994-1996, there were three Malay BBS groups -- East Muddy (after the webmaster’s name, Ismadi), Rudy’s place and the Mendaki bulletin board. East Muddy, arguably the most popular board, had about 40 regular members.

From 1996, Alamak! Chat and Internet Relay Chat (IRC) were
popular among Malay Singaporean teenagers and young adults. One of the most popular chat channels on IRC from 1995 to 1999 was kampung. Sited on the Undernet network, kampung was a mainly Malaysian channel with between 100-400 chatters at any one time. While some Singapore users frequented the channel (and still do), most members are Malaysian residents or Malaysian students studying overseas.

In 1996, the Galaxynet IRC network became the most popular network for Singaporean chatters and a Chinese Singaporean chatter started the channel #melayu. #Melayu now usually has between 100-400 chatters and has spawned various other channels, such as #melayu2, #melayu20+ with their own unique groups of chatters.

Muslim organisations also started coming in strongly in 1996. The most significant is probably the mailing list started by PERGAS or Islamic Scholars Association of Singapore known as ‘Cyber Ummah’. Cyber Ummah was hosted on a government server administered by the Islamic Council of Singapore (MUIS). While it is inactive now, during its peak, Cyber Ummah had around 2,000 members discussing issues like matchmaking and restaurant services to theology and politics.

The MUIS website is positioned as a one-stop site for Muslim community use and information. It provides information on ‘Halal (‘Islamically’ allowed) certified Foodcourt Establishment,’ a query section for Islamic opinion on various issues and mosque websites. MUIS hosts thirty-two mosque websites providing information on booking of mosque resources, calendar of events and schedule of religious classes.

The Mendaki website carries the theme of ‘Community of Excellence.’ Its sections include research papers on the Malay community, a mini bulletin board service, Ministerial and PAP MP speeches and selected statistics. As Mendaki was founded by the PAP
and its Chairman and board of directors are made up of PAP politicians, its publications either discuss the need for Malays to improve themselves or that the Malays have done well under the PAP government. Mendaki, and thus the site too, was set up to promote the PAP’s interest within the Malay community. While it provides data for research on Malays in Singapore, the Mendaki website does not provide information on the discrimination faced by the Malay community in Singapore.

The Association of Adults Religious Class Students of Singapore (PERDAUS), on the other hand, attempts to provide information on a social and practical level. Its website theme is ‘Across Barriers’. Unlike Mendaki, its publications are mainly for individual use. For example, two publications that are available on the website are ‘General Islamic views on health and medicine’ and ‘Boy meets Tekong: NS (National Service) guidebook for Muslims.’ Also included in the PERDAUS website are information on its religious classes, newsletter, press releases, and its projects with MERCY Relief.

Overall it should be noted that Malay/Muslim groups and organisations have taken advantage of the Internet.

The madrasah debate and the shift to cyberspace

Fateha was born out of the frustration encountered following the madrasah debate. The PAP claimed that madrasah students were not adequately prepared for the new knowledge based economy. It proposed that primary level madrasahs be shut down and for students to attend public schools (The Strait Times, 31 October 1999). The PAP argument rested on the claim that the madrasahs produced only religious scholars and thus, the supply should be equivalent to the number that the community can support. It is further argued that because these religious scholars do not directly contribute to the economy, the community needs to determine a number that it can
sustain as the wages and support for these scholars will come solely from the Muslim community.

However, the PAP's claims are unjustifiable upon closer examination. Most madrasah students do not work as religious scholars. Madrasah graduates are in business, accountancy in Muslim firms, working in Information technology fields in Muslim companies and other various fields. The problem that has not been elucidated is that many of these graduates can only find employment in Muslim companies and organisations. The reason can be traced to the PAP's refusal to recognise universities in the Middle East. For example, graduates in Commerce at the University of Al Azhar, a premier university in Egypt, are not given graduate recognition. The fact that the PAP government refuses to recognise them as graduates of a university makes it almost impossible for them to work outside of the Muslim community.

During the debate, which took place from 1999 to July 2000, the PAP utilised the three pillars of control highlighted in this paper to strengthen its position. The Malay MPs feigned ignorance of the possibility that the PAP was trying to close the madrasahs. Then Minister, Abdullah Tarmugi (Channel News Asia, 9 April 2000) and then Senior Minister of State for the Environment, Sidek Saniff (Berita Harian, 10 April 2000) came out in support of the PAP's proposal to start with the closure of primary level madrasah.

On the Malay/Muslim organisations front, apart from PERGAS, PERDAUS and AMP, Muslim organisations were silent. MUIS, whose role was to administer the madrasah, gave indirect support to its closure (Channel News Asia, 18 April 2002). PERGAS, in a show of community support, submitted a petition with more than 30,000 signatures to the PAP government. Mr Yatiman Yusoff responded in parliament, by stating that the Muslim community was wrong in its attempt to defend the madrasahs.
Throughout the madrasah debate, there was no channel for the Muslim community to air their thoughts and grievances. PERGAS, the defenders of the madrasah, was invited to attend a discussion on Suria but turned it down due to concerns over biased editing. PAP MPs' positions were given prime coverage while the voices of the community, coming in strong in Cyber Ummah, and submitted to the media, were scantly published.

During the madrasah debate, members of PERGAS-run mailing list, Cyber Ummah, were confronted with another problem. Some girls were expelled from the national school system for wearing the tudung (headscarf). The tudung is a cloth used to cover the head and neck, without a face veil. It is widely considered as an Islamic mandated attire. The PAP's argument was that the wearing of the headscarf, even if it was colour co-ordinated to fit the school uniform, will break the 'uniformity' of the school uniform code. The PAP Malay MPs, as expected, endorsed the PAP view.

The expulsion created another concern about these girls' inability to receive proper education. With the limit imposed on madrasah intake, these girls had no other recourse. While some were able to join night classes for adult education, younger children who put on the tudung had to stay home. Their only access to education was either from family and friends or part time tutors. The requirement for the girls to either remove their tudung or be suspended indefinitely was deemed unfair. The girls and their families should not be forced to choose either their beliefs or education.

In order to work on the issue, four members of Cyber Ummah came out of the cyber realm and decided to lobby for the tudung to be allowed in national schools. The group decided to explore the possibility of taking the case to court for a judicial review. A mailing list was started, known as the 'Muslim Fund', to raise monies from friends and families to facilitate a possible legal action. The group was...
then expanded, by invitation, to 33 members. It was largely a collection of some of the most vocal members of Cyber Ummah. Apart from raising funds, MuslimFund@egroups.com discussed ways to successfully lobby for the non-expulsion of girls wearing tudung in national schools.

However, in January and February 2001 the group observed disconcerting developments. PERGAS ran Cyber Ummah from a server owned by MUIS. Since MUIS was upstaged by PERGAS during the madrasah debate, MUIS demanded that Cyber Ummah be removed. The MuslimFund then took immediate steps to ensure safeguards. Although the MuslimFund started as a working group, it recognised that closure of a platform such as Cyber Ummah will close the space for new voices.

The MuslimFund therefore decided to be the support structure for Cyber Ummah. If Cyber Ummah was closed, MuslimFund was prepared to take over the role. To reflect this change, the group’s name was changed to Fateha.com. Al Fateha in Arabic means ‘The start’ or ‘the opening’. The name was chosen to reflect the start of Muslim voices being heard.

Fateha@yahoogroups.com, the mail list, was then open for general membership. While members were known and scrutinised before acceptance into MuslimFund, Fateha@yahoogroups.com approved any interested member. And while Cyber Ummah was accused of being heavily moderated, Fateha@yahoogroups.com moderators made a conscious decision to leave the group unmoderated. As such, debates are less structured and more open. Views from anti and pro-establishment are given similar treatment.

While the mailing list served its purpose in allowing Malays to speak up, it lacked the ability to put up an organised coherent argument. There was no structure to the group. Further, only members were able to view and read the arguments, thus limiting its impact. Given
that the local media do not always publish non-PAP aligned arguments, it was proposed that Fateha@yahoogroups.com set up its own website to provide independent analysis of Muslim issues. On 7th June 2001, Fateha.com went online.

Fateha.com: the voice of the Singapore Muslim community

Fateha.com owes its birth and development to two organisations: The Islamic Scholars Association of Singapore (PERGAS) which run Cyber Ummah, and the Think Centre. PERGAS and Cyber Ummah were the catalysts to the growing voices of the Muslim community. Think Centre (Gomez, 2002) aided in providing the technical structure for the maturing of Fateha.com and aiding the group in breaking out of a purely communal base.

Fateha started as a group of cyber activists. However its members were unaccustomed to dealing with issues through the media. However, a chance meeting with members of the Think Centre in September 2001 at the Speakers Corner gave Fateha the opportunity to develop the group further towards an online presence. Some Fateha members became active in Think Centre and attend some regional meetings on media development and wrote articles for the Think Centre website.

Think Centre also helped Fateha.com go beyond communal issues to be part of a national political landscape. Fateha.com members took part in discussions beyond issues concerning the Malay community. And more importantly, it helped Fateha.com in bringing issues affecting the Malays to the knowledge of other communities. It was noticed then that participation from the Malay community in national NGOs was sorely lacking. Very few Malays took part in non-Malay organisations. That Malay concerns were unknown became apparent.
Starting out as a collection of individuals concerned about the moves to close madrasahs, Fateha took on the role of reviving the Malay community’s involvement in issues that affect their daily lives. Fateha has two main areas of operations.

From the start, Fateha.com decided on two main missions. First, it would publish what is not stated in the PAP controlled media, especially with regard to issues concerning Palestine, Moro and Afghanistan and societies that come into focus for the period. It was decided that as long as the PAP media takes a partial position, Fateha would discuss issues of interest to the Muslim community by providing the other viewpoint and would not be cowed by political expediency. If an issue needs to be discussed, it would be discussed without self-censorship.

Fateha’s position with regard to Malay issues is to nationalise, and if necessary, internationalise them. This is a departure from the historical reaction of the community. Partly due to the controls imposed on the community and partly due to its traditions, Malay issues have long been left solely within the community’s domains. The different ethnic groups in Singapore typically stay away from supporting each others’ causes and issues. As the PAP’s method of dealing with racial issues in Singapore is to divide and rule, Fateha saw it as necessary that Malay issues do not remain within the discussion of the Malay community. It is an issue for Singaporeans to discuss.

Second, it would actively lobby the government on issues that are deemed important for the community’s progress. With the limited resources available, and the culture of fear prevalent in Singapore, even with tacit support from the community, the group needed to take on all the roles itself. For instance, Fateha focused its resources on trying to solve the tudung issue. Between June 2000 to November 2001, several dialogue sessions were organised with Malay MPs and MUIS. 2,000 booklets that were adapted from the Council on American
Islamic Relations’ ‘An Educator’s guide to Islamic Religious Practices’ were published and 3,300 signed petitions were submitted to Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong.

A press conference was held immediately after submission of the petition to the Prime Minister. The next day, Fateha received calls from several journalists stating that even though the reports had been written, they were not allowed to publish it. Every newspaper had to ‘kill the story’. The reason given was that it was too close to the 2001 General Elections and would have made the PAP look discriminatory.

**September 11 and the Jemaah Islamiah arrests**

Fateha shot into national prominence when it criticised the arrests and detentions without trial of alleged members of the Jemaah Islamiah in Singapore in December 2001. It took the position that the PAP’s policies in discriminating against the Muslims in Singapore and its military alliances with the United States and Israel might have actually acted as impetus for the alleged plans of the Jemaah Islamiah.

In a press release, Fateha stated:

*If what the government claims is true, then it signals a deeper problem. The motivation for the act seems to be the US army in Singapore. It is incorrect to merely label them as terrorists and leave it as that. We need to identify further reasons for their actions.*

(Fateha Press Release, 14 January 2002)

With the Muslim community being suspicious of the attack on Afghanistan, Fateha stated the need for the Singapore government to ‘take appropriate actions to remove itself from the American and Israeli attacks on Muslims.’ (Fateha Press Release, 14 January 2002)
The PAP immediately gave a twist to the comments. Dr Yaacob Ibrahim gave a different account when he spoke at the Kampung Siglap Mosque. According to Dr Yaacob, '(Zulfikar) suggests that Singapore needs to cease any dealings with the US and American companies because such dealings offend the sensibilities of one local community-Muslim Singaporeans' (Yaacob, 26 January 2002). Dr Yaacob's aim became clearer in the following sentence. In an attempt to cause fear for Fateha.com’s statement, he said ‘Statements such as these can have serious ramifications for Malay/Muslims working for American MNCs here in Singapore’ (Yaacob, 26 January 2002).

While the statements were widely reported, Fateha.com never suggested that Singapore should stop dealing with US companies. Fateha.com’s position was that for the maintenance of harmony, the military support for the war should be reconsidered. The PAP government’s common style in stopping dissent is to cast doubt on the messenger and ignore the message. Dr Yaacob’s statement was meant to cause fear and to show that Fateha.com causes harm to the Muslim community's economy.

The PAP Malay MPs' criticism was only one aspect of the attack. As indicated earlier, Malay/Muslim organisations are regularly forced to take positions in support of the PAP. When Fateha was in a national debate with the PAP in January/February 2002, the PAP used its political muscle to demand support. Motivasi Youth Association and several other Malay organisations were pressured by the Minister to condemn and distance itself from Fateha. Some of these organisations later sent its committee members to meet with Fateha in secret to state their support. The committee members stated that while they support Fateha’s issues in private, they were forced to criticise Fateha in public.

Most of these organisations receive funding from the Singapore government. However, not all who criticised are closet supporters. Mr Ameerali Abdeali, one of the most visible PAP aligned Muslim
leaders in the media advocated taking action against Fateha.com. Mr Abdeali who heads the Islamic Fellowship Association and General Manager at the Ministry of Manpower said of Fateha.com: ‘It must cease to exist because it has damaging and untrue statements saying Malay/Muslims here have been marginalised’ (The Strait Times, 26 January 2002).

The PAP's action and treatment of Fateha.com incited reactions from outside Singapore about how alternative Malay/Muslim voices are treated. For instance, the Australian Financial Review reported:

The PAP compounds the problem, however, by treating young Malay activists, like the Fateha group, which seeks to articulate its grievances through the highly regulated forums for political debate, as indistinguishable from those prepared to advance their cause by violent means.
(Jones and Smith, 2002)

Due to the actions taken against PAP's political opponents, politics is taboo in Singapore. Thus, when Fateha.com was embroiled over the comments of the war on Afghanistan and the arrests of alleged Jemah Islamiah ‘terrorists’, the Singapore Broadcasting Authority (SBA) demanded that Fateha.com be registered as a political website. This could have meant the end of public support as Fateha’s supporters would be afraid of being associated with a political organisation.

There were two required actions when a website is registered. The website had to declare its members and declare its funds. Registration itself was not a problem. Fateha has always been open and transparent about the people managing the group. Running on volunteer energy, funds were not required. Fateha had only SG $1,400.

While the registration was not desired, it was not unexpected. When ThinkCentre and Sintercom were told to register in March
2001, Fateha knew that it was only matter of time before similar demands were made on the website. When the SBA contacted Fateha via e-mail, plans were put in motion and the issue of political registration was discussed.

When Ms Yvonne Paglar of the SBA e-mailed Fateha demanding registration, Fateha asked for the grounds requiring registration. According to Ms Paglar, ‘Fateha.com is required to register as a political website because it is clearly engaged in the discussion and propagation of political issues relating to Singapore’ (Fateha.com, 28 March 2002).

Fateha responded by asking her to explain why The Straits Times Interactive was not similarly required as it also is ‘engaged in the discussion and propagation of political issues relating to Singapore.’ (Fateha.com, 28 March 2002). In the discussion, SBA was not able to provide a reason and Fateha declared that it would not register itself.

Culture of fear: fracturing Fateha

Fateha.com was soon to fall victim to the self-censorship syndrome which Singaporean writer James Gomez noted in his book, Self-Censorship: Singapore’s Shame. The author had noted when a group is promoting non-PAP endorsed views, the group will feel the weight of self-censorship. Gomez noted that ‘even if there is a small body of people fairly united behind a cause, the group often breaks down through the pressure of censorship as most do not want to stand out as the non conformist minority’ (Gomez, 2000: 62). As the PAP continued its attack on Fateha.com in January and February 2002, the group began to fracture. As a result of the daily attacks by the PAP and exacerbated by the Singaporean politics of fear, Fateha.com almost disintegrated.

Cracks within the group started within the first two weeks of the
attacks. Members started denying their involvement and took different positions to insulate themselves. One of them, Mr Nawab Osman, organised a press conference to deny any involvement with statements made and the issues raised. In an attack on Fateha.com and the author, Osman and six other members, some of whom left Fateha.com the year before, claimed no knowledge and disagreement with the statements made.

However, three of them, including Osman were part of the group that gave interviews to TODAY, Asian Wall Street Journal and BBC that started the debate. Osman attended or participated in all three interviews. While it would have been more appropriate to recant the statement, the three denied involvement in toto.

Their reactions were, however, understandable. The PAP had never reacted kindly to its opponents. Osman was then a student at the National University of Singapore and President of the university's Muslim Society. Academics have been taken to task and even sacked for publishing papers or positioning themselves as opponents of the PAP. Students were afraid of being marked down and failed for speaking against the PAP.

Some Fateha members were informed by relatives that their names were published by PAP organisations such as the People's Association (PA) as being 'black marked.' Others described being followed by suspicious individuals and having their homes and communications monitored. Members who were identified as being part of Fateha talked about losing customers and their jobs.

While it is commonly accepted that the PAP uses state agencies to monitor its opponents, it is arguable whether organisations such as PA would publish names of black marked individuals. While the PA is chaired by Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong and Mr Wong Kan Seng, who is Minister for Home Affairs and Minister in charge of the
PA and Deputy Chairman of the organisation, a similar situation exists in other organisations too. Major ethnic organisations are also headed by PAP MPs or party loyalists. If the claim of PA's involvement is true, it may signal the possibility that other organisations, especially ethnic based groups as working along similar lines. But regardless of the truth of the claim, Singaporeans are afraid of being perceived to be opposing the PAP.

Fear and the Hang Tuah mentality amongst Malays were also manifested in some reactions to Fateha.com. Fateha.com was criticised for taking a confrontational approach. According to Malay standards, discussions with the leadership, as with discussions on any difficult topic, must be covered in euphemisms. To state openly to the government that changes needed to be made is considered impertinent.

Thus the Malays argued that while the problems were real, the methods employed in bringing them to light were wrong. While Fateha maintained that the language used was not disrespectful, that the group brought the issues out in the open without the requisite filters was criticised. Fateha was seen to be not only in opposition with the PAP's policies, but in speaking against the government, according to the Hang Tuah mentality, this should be considered treacherous and contrary to the state and culture.

PAP's counter measures and its impact on the media

During the attack on Fateha, the media started promoting another site. Ridzwan.com is a discussion forum run by a PAP member. The forum was portrayed as one for 'moderate Muslims'. Ridzwan.com, as a forum is one of hundreds of Muslim groups and individuals in Singapore with a similar platform. While its effectiveness is limited given the lack of news and analysis, the media positioned the website as the de facto cyber voice of moderate Singapore Muslims.
The lack of organisational comments in Ridzwan.com is supplemented by another website. Promoted as a website for the silent majority of the Muslim community, its owner has similar associational problems with Ridzwan. Owned by Mr Abdul Rahman Said, Dr Yaacob Ibrahim's close associate, KampungNet was given active promotion by the media.

KampungNet is superior to Ridzwan.com in display and structure. Apart from providing snippets of news from sources such as CNN and the BBC, the website includes a forum similar to Ridzwan.com.

There are structural differences between KampungNet and Fateha. Fateha rarely uses CNN and similar sources. Preference is given to analytical views and commentaries from other alternative websites. News are sourced from press statements and other primary sources. Fateha also regularly publishes original commentary on Singapore politics. Fateha's forum is based on yahoogroups' e-mail and archive, while KampungNet and Ridzwan each use Bulletin Board services.

While the existence of diverse views is positive in the movement for democracy, the promotion of PAP aligned websites dearly reflects the party's recognition that Malays in Singapore has moved to take advantage of the cyberspace. Its response was to attempt to dominate Malay discussions in cyberspace by promoting websites from PAP members and associates and to discredit the voices of its opponents and critics.

Uncritical scholars and the perpetuation of a myth

The problem extends not just to domestic media organisations or websites. Foreign news agencies as well as academic literature are also affected. For instance an outcome of the PAP media offensive against Fateha is that the Agence France Presse (AFP) still includes, in every
report about Fateha or the author that, ‘Zulfikar came to prominence earlier this year when he expressed sympathy for suspected terrorist mastermind Osama bin Laden and opposed Singapore’s support for the US-led war on terrorism’ or words to similar effect (Dawn, 21 January 2001). But no one in Fateha has ever expressed sympathy for Osama. It was a myth that the PAP used to discredit Fateha. That position was given several twists by media companies such as The Straits Times, Suria and Streets.

More importantly in 2003, National University of Singapore’s Associate Professor Thio Li-Ann, Chief Editor for Singapore Journal of International Comparative Law (SJICL) wrote in an essay for Singapore Journal of Legal Studies, in a footnote that ‘13 members of Fateha.com had been detained in conjunction with the terrorist plot under the ISA’ (Singapore Journal of Legal Studies, July 2002). The mistake however, is understandable given her sources. Associate Professor Thio cited only newspaper articles from The Straits Times and Sunday Times.3

It was only after I contacted the author via e-mail and demanded a correction that the Singapore Journal of Legal Studies inserted an Erratum Notice in its December 2002 edition. The notice reads ‘In the article ‘Recent Constitutional Developments: Of Shadows & Whips, Race, Rifts & Rights, Terror & Tudungs, Women & Wrongs’ by Thio Li-Ann, on page 355 of [2002] SingJLS, at footnote number 121, the two occurrences of the word ‘Fateha’ are erroneous and should be replaced with the words ‘Jemaah Islamiah.’ There was no intention on the part of the author to suggest or assert that Fateha was involved in any way with the alleged terrorist plot of the Jemaah Islamiyah. We apologise for any misunderstanding or misconception this error has caused.’

Another National University of Singapore academic, Dr Kenneth Paul Tan, Assistant Professor at the University Scholar Programme,
made further interpolations of Fateha.com and the author. Among his mistaken assumptions, Dr Tan claimed that the author said ‘in a BBC interview that Singapore's actions were motivated by its firm support for the United States and therefore indirectly for Israel.’ (Tan, 2003: 244). Tan's claim was not supported and inaccurate. The interview with the BBC was in fact, a discussion on Malay leaders in Singapore and the difficulties faced by sections of the community.

In supporting the PAP government's suspension of the tudung wearing schoolgirls, Tan stated that the tudung ‘is not a part of the official school uniform and because it discourages students of all ethnic backgrounds from interacting with one another...’ (ibid). Without discussing the legal merits of the official school uniform policy versus constitutional guarantees, Tan’s acceptance of a mistaken assumption shows the lack of criticism of the PAP’s position. For example, if Tan had researched the issue, he would have found out that the tudung wearing girls interacted well with students from other ethnic backgrounds and those who did not wear the tudung. In fact, the family of one of the tudung wearing girls informed the author that on the day that the girl was barred from attending school, some of her classmates wrote on the board, pleading to the teacher to allow her to return to school. In all the cases that Fateha.com aided, the girls did not have problems interacting with children from other ethnic backgrounds. Their integration was only disrupted when they were expelled from school.

Tan dichotomised between those who agreed with the government and ‘the core values of ‘multiracialism’ and those who viewed ‘the episode as a form of unconstitutional religious persecution’ (ibid). Tan's argument seems to reject the possibility of someone believing in the values of multiracialism but also viewing the episode as an unconstitutional religious persecution, which is the position that Fateha.com takes.
AFP, Thio and Tan’s comments and reports are reflective of the success of the PAP’s media campaign and the lack of research rigour exercised by some academics when they discuss Malay/Muslim issues.

Leaving Singapore and receiving the PAP’s leash

I finally left Singapore on 9 July 2002, but the PAP and its machinery began their intimidation from May 2000. It started with trailing and monitoring and telephone and e-mail taps. While several Fateha members found the surveillance amusing, some were terrified that their private conversations and movements were being monitored. Those who carried out the surveillance did not attempt to be discreet, and several times, seemed to intentionally expose themselves.

It should be noted that technology has allowed telephone surveillance to be done without those monitored ever knowing. However, in July 2000, while I was in a telephone conversation, another voice came on the line and said, ‘Start recording.’ Fateha members also observed individuals sitting outside their offices and homes who followed them when they left. Sometimes, these individuals would be in small groups and carried radio sets.

Suspicions of e-mail and Internet monitoring were confirmed when four Fateha members went to Jakarta in June 2001 for training on radio journalism.

The four members who attended the training, Nawab, Riaz, Aishah and I informed other members and the Fateha mailing list that they were going to Jakarta for radio journalism training but did not indicate the station they would be attached with. In fact, only I knew the station where we were going. All communications with the Managing Editor of the radio station was done via encrypted e-mail. No other form of communication was conducted. The only other person that was contacted was the editor’s secretary. The e-mails to her were not encrypted.
When we arrived in Jakarta, the Managing Editor informed us that the Singapore embassy in Jakarta had contacted the radio station, asking for the secretary to the Managing Editor and requested that they be allowed to join the training with the group from Singapore. Their request was denied but it was a confirmation of Internet and e-mail surveillance by the government in Singapore.

In January 2002, a few days before Fateha.com highlighted the tudung issues, further attempts were made to intimidate me to leave Singapore. A man called me on my mobile phone and said I had one week to leave Singapore or they would do me harm. The man attempted to further intimidate me by playing a recording of my telephone conversation. When I stated that I did not mind any harm to myself, the man told me to do so for the sake of my family. I refused the demand and the next day, my wife Shireen, received the call. She was told that for the sake of the family, she should convince me to leave Singapore.

Shireen was also familiar with the intimidation tactics. She was the first to notice, on 5 May 2000 that several individuals, some with radio sets, were trailing us. At that time, instead of being concerned, we found the harassment amusing. And to record the event, I made a police report at Bedok Police Station. The officer who conducted the preliminary interview told a colleague that 'He is being trailed by India Sierra Delta' which stands for the Internal Security Department (ISD).

However, the situation ceased to be amusing 2 years after. On 1 May 2002, I was informed that Dr Chee Soon Juan, Secretary General of the Singapore Democratic Party, and advocate of civil liberties and freedom of expression was arrested for trying to speak without a permit in front of the Istana's grounds, the Presidential residence. Dr Chee had intended to speak regarding the situation of workers in Singapore. He was arrested before he started his speech.
When I was informed of the arrest, I went to Tanglin Police Station, where Dr Chee was being held to wait and provide support. A police officer demanded that all who were in attendance leave the police station and claimed that it was ‘private property.’ When I asked for the reasons, I was arrested. I was subsequently charged with ‘wilful trespass at a police station’.

The verdict was read on 1 July 2002. The judge chose to believe the testimony of the lone prosecution witness, who was the arresting officer and denied the testimonies of 5 defence witnesses. I was pronounced guilty of trespassing in a police station.

The day after the verdict, several officers from the Central Investigation Department (CID) Special Investigation Section came to my house. They had a search warrant and received instructions that afternoon, to investigate articles posted on Fateha.com. The main article that was being investigated was ‘The Ho Ching Miracle’. The article discussed the appointment of Ho Ching- wife of Deputy Prime Minister, Lee Hsien Loong and Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew’s daughter in law- as Executive Director of Temasek Holdings, which is the Singapore government business arm. It was claimed that the article implied there was nepotism in the appointment and a report of ‘Criminal Defamation’, which carries a two-year jail term was filed.

The officers stated that they needed to confiscate the computer that was used to write these articles. When informed that there was no computer in the house and that the articles were written using a computer at the office, the officers handed me another search warrant, bearing my office address.

My reaction then was to fight the case. While it was recognised that the jail term would be given, I did not want to give in to the intimidation. However, several Fateha members and families of the tudung case persuaded me to leave Singapore. It was argued that if I
was imprisoned, Singaporeans would be more afraid to speak up, the issues I was fighting for would be buried and while in detention, the PAP could come up with other charges to lengthen my term in prison.

I then chose to leave. However, while the PAP and its supporters may have initially wanted me to leave, they may have decided that the prison term would be a better recourse. In July 2000, I was informed by the former head of the Islamic Scholars Association of Singapore (PERGAS) and another activist that in their meeting with Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, they were informed that the PAP was waiting for me to 'say or do something wrong.'

In October 2001, I received an e-mail from a foreign-based NGO that they received documents stating the PAP government's intention to begin arrests under the Internal Security Act, which allows for a renewable 2 year detention without trial, and that my name was on the list. It was stated that the arrests would take place a few weeks after the Singapore general Elections in November 2001. The PAP had submitted the documents to the US government for approval but the US was non-committal. Realising that my e-mail was monitored, I declined to leave Singapore and stated that I had nothing to worry as I was not a subversive and was working within the constitutional framework of Singapore. A few weeks after the General Elections, the PAP government arrested 18 individuals under the Internal Security Act, allegedly for being members of a militant group known as Jemaah Islamiah.

It seemed then, that the 'Ho Ching Miracle' criminal defamation report was a reflection of a plan for my arrest. I realised that if it was known that I was trying to leave Singapore, the ISD may arrest me before it happened. To mask the intention, I acted as though I intended to remain in Singapore. Only close family and Fateha members, including the families involved in the tudung case were informed. It was decided then, that I would leave for Australia. My application
for an Australian visa was submitted only after I left Singapore.

I submitted an appeal against the guilty verdict for wilful trespass. To highlight that the criminal defamation charge was frivolous and politically motivated, I filed a police report against Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong and Senior Parliamentary Secretary Yatiman Yusoff. In my report, I provided the dates and articles of newspaper reports where the individuals had made defamatory statements about me. The report also aimed to indicate that I would remain in Singapore.

I made an appointment to meet with Mr Karpal Singh, the lawyer who had agreed to represent the families in the tudung case, in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. I then left Singapore with one of my children. My son, who is Malaysian, did not have a passport and needed to have it made in Malaysia. Leaving with my son for the meeting with Mr Karpal Singh provided the cover for my departure.

After my departure, the police attempted to build other cases against me. One of the parents in the tudung case was summoned to the police station for investigation. Mr Faroukh Dawood was informed that he was required to attend an interrogation for investigation on ‘illegal solicitation of funds’.

In order to gather funds for the court case, I had sent several e-mails to appeal for help to my friends and NGOs with details of the legal fund bank account. These e-mails were then forwarded to others who may want to contribute to the fund. However, a problem was raised during a Fateha meeting. It was feared that unscrupulous individuals would change the account details. As a counter measure for this possible problem, the details were published on Fateha.com for verification.
Mr Dawood was summoned to assist investigations in that matter. However, the interrogating officer did not ask him any questions on the funds. Instead, Mr Dawood was given an article written by me where I discussed the discrimination of the Malays in Singapore. Mr Dawood was then asked, whether he hated the government after reading the article and if he felt like rebelling. I was informed that the PAP government was trying to build a case against me as being a ‘threat to racial and religious harmony’. While the investigations and pending charges were done from July 2002, to date, there has not been any declaration of the outcome. No charges have been filed or dropped.

To add to the indeterminate state of the criminal defamation charges against me, I was placed in further limbo. My passport was supposed to expire in November 2003. When I called the Singapore Immigration and Registration department, I was informed that I had to apply or collect the passport in person. If I applied online, I would be required to collect the passport in person, and I could do so at the Singapore High Commission in Canberra.

I applied for a passport online in March 2003. In April, I received a telephone call from the mission in Canberra informing me that my passport was ready and that I should mail my old passport to the High Commission. They would then mail a new one to me. Feeling uneasy about the arrangement, I informed the officer that I would be travelling to Canberra and would stop by to collect my passport.

The passport extension was meant for a further 10 years. Accompanied by a senior Amnesty International officer and a Singapore activist, I collected my passport in April. However, instead of 10 years, I was granted a one-year extension. My new passport expires in April 2004, which in reality means an extension of only 5 months. The First Secretary of the Singapore High Commission admitted to the unusual circumstance.
I was informed that I needed to reapply for an extension when my current passport expires, effectively putting me on a short leash and placing me in constant need of the Singapore High Commission for valid travel documents.

Conclusion

As a result of my departure from Singapore, it had become difficult for me to continue commenting on Malay community and political issues and put out information through the Fateha website. While it is still possible to access reports from the Internet and other media sources, not being in Singapore had made it virtually impossible for me to feel the pulse on the ground and get behind the issues discussed. Also, as part of my self-development, I have come to realise that community-based issues need to be integrated into national issues and politics. Thus as an organising principle I find that working through democracy advocacy organizations can be helpful.

Nevertheless, Fateha.com at the time of writing remains in operation. Several individuals have taken over my functions as editor. While Fateha.com will retain its format, it is still too early to see if it will remain as active. The new editors have indicated that several changes will be made. The most important of which is its transparency. While Fateha.com's previous editorial team was known, it has been indicated by the new editors that due to possible repercussions from the PAP government, the new team will remain anonymous.

Anonymity, the new team feels, is necessary to ensure that space can be sustained to discuss Malay/Muslim community issues. Fateha members are aware that the PAP government is able to track down any member in Singapore and persecute them. This theoretical anonymity requires another caveat. The new team will not be based in Singapore. The new chief editor of Fateha.com will be based overseas. The PAP's difficulty in tracking overseas Internet users and
the greater freedom of speech in other countries will provide Fateha.com the scope to continue its work without fear.

On one level, the removal of transparency should be seen as regression in civil movement in Singapore. However, the new team at Fateha.com needed to choose between two evils. Either it becomes anonymous and unaccountable or stop writing, or remain public and risk persecution. The new team decided to opt for the former.

The activities of Fateha.com came about because of Internet developments in Singapore. The success of Fateha.com lies in its ability to provide alternative community news in a cost effective manner and staffed only with volunteers. Since finance was not Fateha.com’s lifeline, the PAP government used legal criminal charges and intimidation techniques to weaken the effectiveness of the website. In doing, it has pushed Fateha members to operate anonymously and to base themselves overseas. It remains to be seen how far the PAP government will go to ensure its monopolistic control over voicing Malay/Muslim community concerns in Singapore.

End Notes

1. When charged with adultery with members of the King’s harem and sentenced to death, Hang Tuah did not dispute his King and urged his executioner to carry out his punishment. The Bendahara however, kept Hang Tuah in safety. Hang Tuah’s closest friend, Hang Jebat tried to avenge his friend’s ‘death’. Hang Jebat’s action allowed for Hang Tuah’s release. In a classic battle, Hang Tuah deceived his best friend and killed Hang Jebat as part of his service to his King.

2. The Council comprises the President of MUIS, the Mufti of Singapore, persons recommended by the Minister-in-Charge of Muslim Affairs and other persons nominated by Muslim organisations. All members of the Council are appointed by the President of Singapore.
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Muslims and Headscarves in Singapore. Devout Malay Muslim females were the tudung, a headscarf that is pinned under the chin and hangs down over the torso. It is the same kind of headscarf worn by Muslim females in Malaysia and Indonesia. In the early 2000s, a big deal was made about girls wearing headscarves to school in Singapore. In early 2002, in a rare act of civil disobedience in tightly-controlled Singapore, the parents of four small Malay girls attending state primary schools challenged the longtime ban on Muslim headscarves by bringing them to classes dressed in tudungs (the Malay word for the traditional Muslim headscarves). Malay Singaporeans (Malay: Melayu Singapura, Jawi: ملايو Ø³ÙŠÚ Ø§Ú¤ÙˆØ±Ø§â€Ž) are a local ethnic group in Singapore. Recognised as the indigenous people of the country, the group is defined as Singaporean who is of Malay ethnicity or whose ancestry originates from the Malay world. Local Malay Singaporeans constitute 15% of the country's citizens, making them the second largest ethnic group in Singapore. Keywords: Singapore, Muslim / Malay community, socio-political development, Islamic Religious Council of Singapore. Ekaterina Astafyeva, PhD(History), Senior Research Associate. Center for Southeast Asia, Australia and Oceania, IOS RAS. 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%, according to 2018 data. 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.” The Malay population makes up Singapore's three largest ethnic groups. This book presents holistic and extensive analysis of the “Malay Muslim story” in Singapore. Comprehensively and convincingly argued, the author examines their challenging circumstances in the fields of politics, education, social mobility, economy, leadership, and freedom of religious expression. The book makes a significant contribution to the understanding of Muslims in Singapore, and the politics of a Malay-Muslim minority in a global city-state. It is of interest to researchers and students in the field of Singaporean