RPCS
QUARTERLY

Developing New Horizons of Knowledge for Islam in the Contemporary World

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EVENT SUMMARY

On 11 October 2024, the Research Programme for Muslim Community of Success (RPCS) organised a round-table discussion featuring a research presentation by Professor Abdulkader Tayob, RPCS Visiting International Fellow. The event brought together scholars, religious leaders, and members of the community to examine the ethical journeys of the ulama within Singapore's unique socio-political and cultural landscape. Complementing the research presentation, Ustazah Dr. Alaniah, an adjunct research fellow at RPCS, provided a reflective commentary, further enriching the discourse.

The RTD underscored the intricate ethical life trajectories of Singapore's ulama, highlighting their efforts to harmonise Islamic traditions with the demands of a modern, pluralistic society. Themes such as mentorship, education, and public engagement emerged as critical areas for further exploration.

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RPCS
RESEARCH PROGRAMME IN THE STUDY OF MUSLIM COMMUNITIES OF SUCCESS

RPCS RTD RESEARCH PRESENTATION:
ETHICAL JOURNEYS IN SINGAPORE: THE ULAMA IN A
SUCCESSFUL SEMI-AUTHORITARIAN STATE

By Professor Dr. Abdulkader Tayob
Chair of Islam, African Publics, and Religious Values
University of Cape Town
RPCS Visiting International Fellow

11 October 2024

I.   NAVIGATING ETHICAL DILEMMAS IN A REGULATED STATE

Professor Tayob began by sharing the initial title of his research. Professor Tayob's research initially sought to explore the freedoms of ulama in minority contexts under the title, *"Ulama in Minority Countries: Between Freedom of Religion and Ethical Engagement."* However, as his research progressed, the focus shifted to ethical journey as the central theme, reflecting the complex challenges faced by Singapore's ulama. This shift resulted in the revised study, *"Ethical Journeys in Singapore: The Ulama in a Successful Semi-Authoritarian State."*

Rather than portraying the ulama as disconnected from modernity or confined by secular pressures in Singapore, the study highlighted their strategies to adapt to the environment and provided insights into their ethical negotiations. These negotiations underscore the ulama's evolving role as both custodians of Islamic tradition and active participants in Singapore's dynamic society.

Professor Tayob's study employed a fresh and innovative approach, integrating Islamic concepts like "becoming" and the idea of the self as a journey with contemporary philosophical ideas about narrative identity. This interdisciplinary perspective allowed for a deeper exploration of how the ethical worldview of an ulama evolves and takes shape over time.

The research explored the personal stories of seven ulama in Singapore, using in-depth interviews to trace their life trajectories and the key moments that influenced their ethical outlooks. By focusing on these personal narratives, the research provided a closer understanding of how these scholars navigate their roles within the structured framework of a regulated state.

The study highlighted the ulama's resilience and creativity in balancing their roles as religious authorities and public figures. Professor Tayob captured this complexity, noting that "the ulama are negotiating, not necessarily between the self as your own deeper self, but the self as an Islamic self and the self as a Singaporean modern self," reflecting their ability to harmonise Islamic principles with contemporary societal realities.

II. ETHICAL JOURNEYS: BALANCING TRADITION, MODERNITY, AND EDUCATION

Professor Tayob began his sharing with his reflections on the local Islamic education system, having noted that all the ulama interviewed received basic Islamic education. Education in Singapore, particularly madrasah education, has undergone significant transformation to meet the challenges and demands of a modern, secularised society. Early Islamic education in Singapore focused on Arabic texts and rote memorisation, but integration with national curriculum became essential after the Compulsory Education Act in 2000[1]. Professor Tayob highlighted that although initially madrasahs were not on par with the national curriculum in Singapore, the Compulsory Education Act marked a turning point, pushing madrasahs to elevate

[1] Compulsory Education Act 2000, Act No. 4 of 2000, § 3 (2000)

their standards and integrate religious teachings with broader societal expectations.

Another key finding was the vital role of mentorship in shaping the ethical journeys of the ulama. All the scholars interviewed had a mentor as a part of their primary education. One of the interlocutors credited his primary teacher for her care and encouragement. Mentors provide a foundation for ethical life, serving as moral anchors and helping scholars navigate the complexities of their religious and societal obligations. These relationships are transformative, influencing both the intellectual and ethical dimensions for the ulama.

Compulsory education policies and curriculum enhancements have broadened the intellectual horizons of Singapore's ulama, equipping them to engage more effectively with a diverse society. These developments emphasise the importance of education in ethical and community leadership.

Professor Tayob also highlighted how the ulama's experiences studying Islamic education abroad also further shaped their ethical perspectives and practices, illustrating the influence of global exposure. For instance, one of the interlocutors completed his PhD on *maslahah* (public good) at Birmingham University. His PhD in a way contributed to how *fatwa* (judicial opinions) is issued in Singapore. His focus on prioritising public benefit over rigid textual interpretations led to innovative rulings, such as supporting joint tenancy laws to protect surviving spouses and reinterpreting pension funds as gifts rather than inheritances.

Ultimately, Professor Tayob pointed out that the ulama's education journeys overseas could thus be credited in shaping their ethical approaches, enabling them to address Singapore's unique societal challenges with openness, integrity, and with a commitment to the public good. By extension, tangible outcomes are produced from their experiences, including on the application of Islamic knowledge into actual processes in the religious life of the local Muslims.

III. ULAMA'S AUTONOMY AND ETHICAL ENGAGEMENT

Professor Tayob then discussed how public engagement was another key theme in the research findings. The ulama in Singapore navigate complex dynamics of public life, balancing their roles as religious leaders and citizens of a regulated state. A recurring issue is the question of the ulama's autonomy and operating within the frameworks of a statutory body such as MUIS. According to Professor Tayob, although some external observers, especially from outside Singapore, perceive the ulama in Singapore as compromised due to their affiliation with MUIS, the ulama themselves have emphasised their autonomy. The ulama shared and repeatedly affirmed their independence, not as opposition to the state but as a demonstration of their ability to balance collaboration with autonomy. This balance is crucial for safeguarding their ethical integrity while contributing to public and community life.

 A notable case study discussed during the session was the longstanding debate over the wearing of the *tudung* (Islamic headscarf) in public spaces, particularly the eventual allowance for Muslim nurses to wear the headscarf[2]. Although the covering of hair is obligatory for women in Islam, some scholars see the donning of the *tudung* as an expression of individual choice, reflecting the diversity of practices within the Muslim community. The ulama's role is to guide this evolving discourse while respecting both tradition and contemporary realities. This issue highlights the tension between religious duties and societal expectations, requiring the ulama to make thoughtful ethical choices.

Public engagement is also crucial in shaping the ethical perspectives of the ulama. Their interactions with state institutions and involvement in public discourse show their ability to handle complex situations wisely and flexibly. These interactions also highlight the interconnectedness of governance, faith, and community well-being.

[2] Singapore Government, "Tudung Issue," SG101, https://www.sg101.gov.sg/social-national-identity/case-studies/tudungissue/.

IV. BROADER IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Ustazah Dr. Alaniah's reflections complemented Professor Tayob's findings, offering a critical examination of the definition and roles of the ulama in a regulated state. She emphasised the importance of clarity in defining the ulama and understanding their contributions to both religious and societal spheres. Dr. Alaniah also highlighted the necessity of reflexivity- the capacity for self-examination and adaptability. She argued that reflexivity is essential for the ulama to remain effective leaders in a modern, regulated state. By cultivating this quality, the ulama are better equipped to navigate their dual roles as custodians of tradition and active contributors to societal development.

To summarise, the findings of Professor Tayob's research highlight the transformative potential of ethical leadership. The ulama in Singapore exemplify the delicate balance between tradition and modernity. Their journeys offer valuable lessons for navigating the complexities of leadership in an ever-evolving world, serving as a model for ethical engagement in diverse societies.

RPCS LUNCH TALK:
THEORISING GOVERNANCE BEYOND THE
WEST: THE ISLAMIC PUBLIC VALUE PROJECT

By Dr Salah Chafik
Senior Research Fellow at the UCL Institute for Innovation and
Public Purpose (IIPP).

16 October 2024

I.   ISLAMIC PUBLIC VALUES: BROADENING GOVERNANCE PARADIGMS THROUGH TRADITION AND INNOVATION

The RPCS (Research Programme for Muslim Communities of Success) hosted an insightful lunch talk featuring Dr. Salah Chafik, senior research fellow at the UCL Institute for Innovation and Public Purpose (IIPP), on the October 16th, 2024. Dr Chafik presented on the Islamic Public Value Project, an initiative funded by the John Templeton Foundation, that seeks to explore indigenous Islamic governance models

and challenge the Western-centric paradigms of governance and public value. Dr. Chafik's insights centred on historical and contemporary Islamic institutions, offering fresh perspectives on governance, innovation, and ethics.

Dr. Chafik opened his presentation by explaining how the Islamic Public Value Project fits into the larger goals of the IIPP, which focuses on mission-oriented innovation. He highlighted the potential of Islamic ethical principles to help shape modern governance. The main goal of the Islamic Public Value Project is to offer alternative perspectives to discussions on governance, sustainability and innovation that are usually dominated by the West. Dr Chafik emphasised how an Islamic governance model could offer alternatives or solutions that are innovative and ethically grounded as a solution to the current governance challenges. The project aims to explore governance and administration models rooted in Islamic traditions.

II.   NON-WESTERN GOVERNANCE AND PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

Dr Chafik challenged the conventional notion that Western governance is inherently progressive, proposing that the Western model often overlooks indigenous governance systems. The Islamic Public Value Project specifically focuses on indigenous cooperative institutions that are rooted in local Islamic traditions and emphasize community-centred approaches to public service and governance.

One striking example discussed was the Moroccan *Zawāyā* institutions, which combine community service (*khidma*) with spiritual accountability. Dr. Chafik described these as powerful grassroots institutions that offer essential services while fostering personal and communal ethical growth. These institutions play a crucial role in societal cohesion, despite often working under the radar of formal policy frameworks.

Another notable example shared by Dr Chafik was the traditional apiaries of the Anti-Atlas Mountains. The beekeepers prioritize the well-being of their colonies over profit, reflecting a more ethical approach to production that prioritizes ecological balance and communal good. These informal institutions, though often overlooked, provide a valuable lens for understanding community-driven, non-market-based governance.

III. SACRED CRAFT, INNOVATION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Dr Chafik then shared his vision for the future of the project, which includes exploring the concept of "sacred craft". According to Dr Chafik, craftsmanship rooted in religious and cultural traditions plays a vital role on innovation and community-building. The concept of "sacred craft" is central to the project's call for a shift in innovation policy, one that integrates ethical values and social concerns instead of focusing only on market-driven goals. This approach aligns closely with *Maqasid* principles, which seek to preserve public good (*maslaha*) and prevent harm (*mafsada*). By drawing on these principles, the project aims to redefine innovation as a process of responsible stewardship, rooted in cultural and moral contexts.

The talk also covered the broader policy implications of Dr. Chafik's work. He pointed out that integrating Islamic ethical values into governance can create positive feedback loops, where policies are not just effective but also aligned with societal and moral good. He acknowledged that public policy often involves trade-offs, particularly in areas like funding Islamic education, but argued that these investments are crucial for fostering ethical governance.

Dr. Chafik emphasised the importance of "creative bilingualism" in navigating these challenges, advocating for fluency in both Islamic and Western ethical traditions. This dual approach allows policymakers and practitioners to leverage on the strengths of both frameworks, fostering innovation that is both contextually relevant and globally informed.

Dr. Chafik also outlined future research directions, including sustainable social entrepreneurship, technical mastery, and community identity. These areas, he noted, are essential for understanding how local governance practices can influence broader policy and innovation discussions.

IV. RECLAIMING ISLAMIC ETHICAL HERITAGE

In concluding his sharing, Dr. Chafik stressed the importance of balancing modernity with the core ethical values of historical institutions. By grounding innovation and governance in the values of *khidma* and *Ihsan* (excellence), societies can strive to improve both character and governance, fostering a more ethical, community-centred approach to public value. Dr. Chafik concluded by encouraging attendees to rethink how Islamic governance principles could shape contemporary discussions on ethics, innovation, and public policy.

The Islamic Public Value Project represents a bold step toward a more inclusive and ethically grounded approach to governance. By drawing on the rich traditions of Islamic institutions and integrating them with contemporary innovation policy, the project offers a vision of governance that is both pluralistic and deeply rooted in ethical values. Through its interdisciplinary approach, the initiative seeks to create a dynamic field of research and practice that bridges the gap between tradition and modernity[3].

[3] For more details on the project, refer to the Islamic Public Value website: https://islamicpublicvalue.org/

RPCS-SRP RTD
MUSLIMS AND INCLUSIVE NARRATIVES:
SURVEY FINDINGS IN SINGAPORE

by Dr Paul Hedges and Ustazah Siti Raudhah
Guest Speaker: Dr. Abdullah Saeed

15 November 2024

I.   BACKGROUND

On Friday, November 15, 2024, the Research Programme in the Study of Muslim Communities (RPCS) and the Studies in Inter Religious Relations in Plural Societies (SRP) co-hosted a roundtable discussion to present the findings of a multi-year research project funded by the Australian Research Council. This research, exploring how Muslim religious leaders in Australia, Indonesia, Pakistan, and Singapore are reshaping their stances on interfaith relations, provided valuable insights into the evolving nature of inclusivity within Muslim communities worldwide.

The session featured a distinguished panel of speakers, including Professor Abdullah Saeed, a renowned scholar in Quranic hermeneutics and the Peter Lim Visiting Professor of Peace Studies at RSIS, Professor Paul Hedges, Professor of Inter Religious Studies in the Studies in Inter Religious Relations in Plural societies Programme, and Ustazah Siti Raudhah Ramlan, RPCS Junior Research Fellow. The session explored key insights into the tensions between inclusivity and exclusivity within Muslim thought, and how these tensions manifest in the real world. Moderated by Luca Farrow, Senior Analyst at SRP, the roundtable discussion engaged deeply with both the challenges and opportunities that arise from Muslim communities' interactions with broader pluralistic societies.

II. RETHINKING INCLUSIVITY: A CROSS-COUNTRY PERSPECTIVE

Professor Saeed began by providing a brief introduction on the research. He explained the four objectives of the research project. First, it examined the extent to which traditional exclusivist Islamic legal and theological positions are still propagated by influential religious leaders in Indonesia, Pakistan, Singapore, and Australia. Second, it explored the prevalence of inclusivist perspectives within various sectors of Muslim communities in these countries. Third, it analysed the challenges faced by religious leaders in promoting inclusivist views, particularly resistance within their communities. Finally, the study documented the strategies, methods, and arguments used by these leaders to effectively communicate and advocate for inclusivity.

The research project, which spans four diverse countries, two Muslim majority countries and two Muslim minority countries, offers a nuanced exploration of Muslim religious leaders' evolving attitudes toward interfaith relations. While theological exclusivism, the belief that only one's own faith holds ultimate truth, remains a dominant framework, the study found that social inclusivism has emerged as a key theme. This signifies an increased willingness among religious leaders in the four countries to engage with other communities for the collective well-being, although they often stop short of theological inclusivity, which would acknowledge other faiths as equally valid paths to salvation.

Professor Saeed elaborated how this issue reflects deeper theological beliefs while adapting to the realities of living in pluralistic societies. He explained that religious leaders are trying to foster peaceful coexistence without compromising their core beliefs. Using interpretations of the Quran, many highlight the flexibility of Islamic teachings in addressing modern challenges, including interfaith dialogue.

III. NAVIGATING TRADITION, INCLUSIVITY, AND CHALLENGES IN CONTEMPORARY ISLAMIC DISCOURSE

Ustazah Raudhah began by discussing the concept of mutability, highlighting that which is contextual and changeable within Islamic teachings and what remains immutable. She explained that the discussion aimed to examine how the interviewees, comprising of religious leaders and scholars, communicate their ideas of inclusivism to their respective audiences.

The study sought to understand how these figures perceive traditional Islamic legal positions, particularly regarding interfaith relations, whether these positions are considered binding by the scholars or whether adaptation is possible in certain areas.

Ustazah Raudhah shared that a central concept discussed by the interviewees was *dharuriyyatul khams*, the five fundamental necessities (religion, life, intellect, wealth and offspring), which are central pillars to the Sharia law. According to Ustazah Raudhah, the interviewees noted that any harm to these necessities limits flexibility in Islamic legal positions. They also distinguished between *thawabit* (immutable) and *mutaghayyiraat* (mutable), with *qat'iy* (definite) and *zhonniy* (probable) evidences guiding this distinction.

All the interviewees agreed on the importance of context when considering the mutability of positions. Factors such as time, space and social structure influence the interpretation of Islamic positions. When discussing interreligious relations, core values such as justice and coexistence were viewed as immutable, while issues like interfaith marriage were considered open to reinterpretation. Theological positions on God and salvation were seen as fixed, though interpretations on salvation varied, highlighting the importance of context and sincerity in Islamic thought.

Ustazah Raudhah also emphasised the importance of mutability in Islamic law, acknowledging the need for a more flexible interpretation of traditional Islamic texts to better align with contemporary needs. However, she cautioned that any reinterpretation must be done carefully, grounded in a deep understanding of context, time, and place to avoid misapplying religious principles in a manner that may lead to divisiveness rather than unity.

The concept of "tradition" was also discussed by the interviewees. Ustazah Raudhah shared how the concept is subject to different interpretations.Some interviewees equated conservatism with exclusivism, suggesting that historical Islam was exclusivist due to truth claims but has progressively become more inclusive. Others argued the opposite, claiming that Islam's tradition was essentially inclusive but became exclusivist due to historical influences, such as colonialism. Both views emphasised the importance of contextual factors, such as time and geography, in shaping traditional interpretations.

While the push for social inclusivity seems promising, the panel also addressed the obstacles hindering wider acceptance of interfaith dialogue. Professor Hedges highlighted the challenges posed by conservative groups, the rise of populist rhetoric, and the spread of misinformation online as key barriers to progressive thinking. Terms like "liberal" or "progressive" are often used negatively within Muslim communities, making it harder to promote a more inclusive approach to interfaith relations.

The study also revealed a hesitance among grassroots leaders to fully engage in interfaith dialogue. This hesitance often stems from a lack of confidence in one's own faith, making it difficult for these leaders to engage meaningfully with adherents of other religions. The discussion turned to the role of education in overcoming these barriers, with several panellists calling for a more robust and context-sensitive Islamic education that empowers leaders to confidently participate in interfaith discourse.

IV.   INTERFAITH ENGAGEMENT AND THE ROLE OF LEADERSHIP

A key question raised during the round-table discussion was the role of religious leadership in shaping attitudes toward interfaith relations. Professor Saeed spoke of the influential role religious leaders plays in countries like Pakistan and Indonesia, where strong religious figures often lead the charge in fostering interfaith dialogue. In contrast, the diverse Muslim community in Australia struggles with a lack of central leadership, which makes it challenging in promoting interfaith understanding.

Singapore, however, offers a promising example. Here, the leadership of Malay/Muslim religious figures has significantly shaped the community's engagement with other faiths, fostering an environment where interfaith dialogue is both encouraged and supported.

As the session drew to a close, the discussion turned to the future directions of the study and the broader implications for Muslim communities worldwide. While the research offers a hopeful outlook for interfaith dialogue, there remains much work to be done. The challenge of aligning theological exclusivism with social inclusivism will require continued scholarly attention, as will the exploration of how interfaith relations can evolve within Muslim communities without compromising essential beliefs.

V. INTERFAITH ENGAGEMENT AND THE ROLE OF LEADERSHIP

A key takeaway from the session was the need for a more nuanced approach to Islamic education. As Professor Saeed noted, the belief that Islamic knowledge must only come from the Middle East is a colonial legacy. Southeast Asia, with its rich Islamic scholarship, offers a promising alternative. As the study moves forward, an important goal will be to explore how local Islamic education can better equip leaders and communities to engage in meaningful and informed interfaith dialogue.

The round-table discussion concluded with a call for a more contextualised approach to Islamic education, one that reflects the dynamic and diverse nature of modern societies. As Muslim communities work to balance exclusivism and inclusivity, it is crucial to cultivate leaders who can navigate these challenges with wisdom and openness. The insights from this session contribute to an ongoing conversation about how Muslims can engage in plural societies, fostering peace and understanding while staying true to their faith.

RPCS ENGAGEMENTS

RPCS HOSTS RIMA AT BENCOOLEN CAMPUS

11 December 2024

The Research Programme in the Study of Muslim Communities of Success (RPCS) had the pleasure of welcoming a visit from The Centre for Research on Islamic and Malay Affairs (RIMA). The visit facilitated an exchange of ideas and insights, highlighting the importance of collaboration in addressing the evolving challenges and opportunities within the Muslim community today.

We look forward to future cooperation and collaboration to pave the way for more impactful contributions to the Muslim community in the 21st century.

RPCS VISITS PERGAS

21 October 2024

RPCS ENGAGEMENTS

RPCS AT ICCOS 2024

As ICCOS 2024 comes to a close, RPCS is proud to have played an integral role in curating the event's content and programme. Our team collaborated closely with invited speakers to ensure each session resonated with the audience, keeping discussions both relevant and engaging.

As we look back on the event, we invite our readers to stay tuned for our upcoming ***ICCOS 2024 Quarterly Special Edition***, where we will showcase more in-depth insights and highlights from the conference.

THE RESEARCH PROGRAMME IN THE STUDY OF MUSLIM COMMUNITIES OF SUCCESS (RPCS)

The Research Programme in the Study of Muslim Communities of Success (RPCS) is developed as part of Muis' efforts in advancing religious thought leadership for the future. The programme seeks to develop contextualised bodies of knowledge on socio-religious issues that are typical for Muslim communities living in secular states and advanced economies. The RPCS focuses on developing new understanding, interpretations and application of Islamic principles, values and traditions to contemporary issues and challenges through its research and publications.

The RPCS aims to bring together local scholars and senior practitioners to study current and future issues in the socio-religious life of the Singapore Muslim community. Through RPCS seminars, workshops and roundtable discussions, it serve as platforms to nurture the right intellectual ecology and environment to facilitate the growth and development of its own group of religious leaders, scholars and thinkers who are seen as authentic and credible to guide the local Muslim community.

Aside from conducting research, the RPCS also aims to develop future thought leaders through its fellowship programmes and research training workshops to familiarise with the evolving religious discourse and analysis of issues relevant to the theme of Muslim Communities of Success. Its research agenda encompasses three broad areas:

GOVERNANCE
Islam, Secularism & Diversity

Study and develop new understanding on the relationship between religion and secularism, identify models of successful citizenship and contribution, and formulate a robust and credible framework of successful living drawn from Islamic traditions, history and experiences.

SOCIETY
Family & Social Cohesion

Identify ways of supporting and strengthening the family institution and review laws as society evolves so that they remain resilient amidst these challenges, and how religions can be an efective resource in enriching further the common space and common good in any pluralistic society.

SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY
Biomedical ethics, new food technologies, digital technologies and ethics, crypto-currencies

Develop Islamic thought and ethics to provide new guidance on issues such as new food technologies, digital and financial technologies, environmental challenges and others.

If you are interested in the topics and discussions covered in our RPCS Roundtable Discussions, do keep a look out on our website and related platforms for upcoming sessions. We look forward to providing a safe space for collaborative learning and the building of new bodies of knowledge on the range of topics covered. Please visit **www.muis.gov.sg/education/RPCS**.

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RESEARCH PROGRAMME IN THE STUDY
OF MUSLIM COMMUNITIES OF SUCCESS