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Hybrid Governance and Muslim Communities of Success: Lessons from Singapore's MUIS

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Synopsis

This article explores how Singapore's Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura (MUIS) exemplifies "hybrid governance", blending state oversight with community empowerment through the flexible legal framework of the Administration of Muslim Law Act (AMLA). Drawing on original research [1], it highlights how MUIS's statutory legitimacy, investment in social capital, operational flexibility and holistic approach to impact have enabled it to build a resilient and successful Muslim community. The article distils key lessons for public institutions and Muslim minorities seeking to thrive in secular, multicultural societies.

Introduction

What does it mean for a Muslim community to succeed in a secular, multicultural state? This question is increasingly urgent as Muslim minorities in diverse societies seek ways to maintain religious authenticity while engaging constructively with state institutions. In many cases, particularly in the West, public administration models treat religious communities as afterthoughts, leading to the application of "one-size-fits-all" frameworks that neglect the unique needs and contributions of faith-based bodies (Ongaro and Tantardini, 2023). Yet, as my research into Singapore's Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura (MUIS) demonstrates, Muslim communities can innovatively design processes within legal and institutional frameworks which can enable them not only to survive, but to thrive as "communities of success".

This article, based on fieldwork conducted in Singapore, examines how MUIS's hybrid model operates in practice and what lessons it offers for Muslim communities and policymakers globally. The perspectives presented in this article are primarily drawn from interviews with current and former MUIS office holders (data not publicly available), whose insights reflect their professional experiences within the organisation.

[1] The perspectives presented in this article are primarily drawn from interviews with current and former MUIS office holders, whose insights reflect their professional experiences within the organisation. The interviews were conducted between February and March 2025.

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The Puzzle of Hybrid Governance

Traditional decentralisation theories struggle to explain organisations like MUIS (Islamic Religious Council of Singapore). Elinor Ostrom's polycentric governance (1990) emphasises community autonomy, while Jean-Paul Faguet's contextual decentralisation (2014) focuses on transferring power from central to local authorities. Philippe Schmitter's corporatism (1974) distinguishes between state-controlled and societally autonomous interest groups.

Interestingly, MUIS defies these neat categorisations. Created through Singapore's Administration of Muslim Law Act (AMLA) in 1966, it operates as a statutory board under the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth (MCCY) while serving as the voice of Singapore's Muslim community. This dual positioning creates what one interviewee described as being "almost like an amphibian", in that it is capable of functioning effectively in both state and community environments. This approach aligns with Ostrom's model of polycentric governance (1990), which emphasises the value of overlapping, locally empowered institutions.

This hybridity presents a unique situation. It enables MUIS to navigate the dual expectations of regulatory compliance and religious authenticity, and to adapt its services to the evolving needs of Singapore's Muslim community, which are strengths in a plural, secular society. As my dissertation shows, existing frameworks struggle to conceptualise this dual role, often missing the creative tensions and innovations that arise from such a hybrid space.

Why does this matter for Muslim communities particularly? When public institutions fail to recognise the unique position of statutory religious bodies, they risk designing exclusionary or ineffective policies for minority faith communities. Conversely, hybrid models like MUIS offer a blueprint for inclusive, responsive and sustainable public service delivery which is a key ingredient for "communities of success" and the preservation of social cohesion.

AMLA: MUIS's Legal Roots

The Administration of Muslim Law Act (AMLA), enacted in 1966, serves as the legal foundation upon which MUIS was established (National Library Board, 2025). It places MUIS as a statutory board under the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth. Unlike many statutory boards, MUIS's mandate is explicitly tied to the religious, social and welfare needs of Singapore's Muslim community. Some of the main things AMLA grants MUIS broad authority over are:

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- *Zakat collection and distribution*
- *Mosque management and development*
- *Halal certification*
- *Religious education and community development*

A substantial body of scholarship has examined the administration of Muslim affairs and the operation of AMLA in Singapore. Notably, Rahman (2009, 2012, 2019), Neo (2022), Abbas (2012), Steiner (2015) and Osman (2018) have provided rich socio-historical accounts and critical analyses of how state control shapes the autonomy of Muslim institutions. Much of this literature argues that the Singapore government's strong regulatory approach, while ensuring order and cohesion, has limited the autonomy of local Muslim actors and generated ongoing debates about group rights and individual freedoms.

For instance, Rahman (2009, 2012, 2019) and Neo (2022) highlight the tensions between group autonomy and individual rights, and the anxieties that arise from the state's ambivalent approach to accommodating Islam. Abbas (2012) and Steiner (2015) further critique the extent to which AMLA centralises religious authority, often at the expense of community-led governance. Osman (2018) explores the dual secular and religious management of Islam, underscoring the complex balancing act required by both state and religious authorities.

While these works have been invaluable in tracing the evolution and challenges of Muslim administration in Singapore, they often focus on the constraints imposed by the state. This paper seeks to complement and nuance these perspectives by highlighting the agency and adaptive strategies of MUIS within the AMLA framework. Through concrete examples and interview-based insights, I show how MUIS not only negotiates its dual accountability to state and community but also innovates in service delivery, offering a more neutral and balanced account of its operations.

By situating Singapore's experience within broader debates on religious governance, this analysis also offers valuable learning points for Muslim minority communities in Western and other plural societies. While the context is unique, the Singapore case demonstrates how hybrid models can be adapted to local conditions, providing both external audiences and local practitioners with practical insights for improving governance and community outcomes.

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While AMLA can be considered a set of regulations, its reach is far more impactful. Unlike more rigid bureaucratic structures, AMLA was designed for adaptability, allowing it to be amended as society and circumstances evolve. For example, in 2008, AMLA was amended to expand the Mosque Building and Mendaki Fund (MBMF), which consolidated mosque building and community development initiatives under a single, community-driven funding mechanism. This amendment enabled MUIS to respond to the growing needs of Singapore's Muslim population by streamlining the process for mosque construction and expanding the scope of community support services (Jamil and Teng, 2019). Such legislative flexibility ensures that MUIS remains responsive and relevant as the social and religious landscape changes. One interviewee shared how, "with AMLA, it allows that room for us to actually manoeuvre ourselves in accordance with Shariah, without... jeopardising or setting aside certain considerations for other parts of the law".

AMLA explicitly empowers MUIS to function as both a state and community actor. This dual capacity enables MUIS to delegate responsibilities and adapt its programmes as new challenges and opportunities arise. A clear example of this legal hybridity embedded in AMLA was how MUIS responded rapidly during the COVID-19 pandemic. The organisation swiftly transitioned to online religious programming and digital zakat collection, demonstrating a level of religious authenticity and agility that was rooted in its flexible mandate. Perhaps most importantly, the act empowers MUIS to decentralise many functions to local mosque committees while maintaining overall coordination and standards. This approach fosters a culture of "co-creation", where solutions are developed collaboratively with those closest to the issues at hand.

How MUIS Embodies Hybrid Governance

MUIS's "dual accountability", both to the state and the Muslim community, creates a dynamic tension that drives innovation. Rather than being paralysed by competing demands, MUIS leverages its hybrid position to advocate for Muslim interests at the highest levels of government and uphold rigorous standards of transparency and regulatory compliance, all while remaining responsive to community expectations for religious authenticity and empowerment.

State Legitimacy with Community Roots

MUIS leverages its statutory status to advocate for Muslim interests at the highest levels of government while remaining grounded in community needs. This positioning provides several advantages:

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- **Institutional Credibility:** As a government entity, MUIS can participate in policy discussions and secure stable funding. As one employee noted: “For MUIS and for that matter, I think it cuts across even government agencies, in terms of going forward, in terms of aspiring to build Singapore for today and for tomorrow.”
- **Legal Authority:** Unlike in some countries where halal certification for food and beverage products may be issued by small companies or even individuals, Singapore's halal certification process under MUIS is governed by a clear legal mandate and is subject to strict, multi-level regulatory oversight involving both religious authorities and government agencies. This rigorous and transparent process has contributed to the global recognition of MUIS's halal certification.
- **Resource Access:** Statutory status provides MUIS with access to government resources, enabling it to deliver a broad range of services that extends well beyond the collection and distribution of zakat and waqaf (religious endowments). For example, MUIS's mandate covers critical areas such as halal certification, which is internationally recognised and supports both the Muslim community and Singapore's food and beverage industry. Additionally, MUIS oversees the Mosque Building and Mendaki Fund (MBMF), which facilitates the construction and maintenance of mosques across Singapore. These services are made possible through a combination of government support and community-driven funding streams. By leveraging its statutory position, MUIS is able to coordinate these diverse functions effectively, drawing on both public resources and the active participation of the Muslim community, while maintaining sensitivity around budgetary matters. This blended approach ensures that MUIS can sustainably meet the evolving religious and social needs of Singapore's Muslims without relying solely on one source of funding.

Decentralised Operations Within Centralised Framework

- **Mosque Empowerment:** Local Mosque Management Boards (MMBs) possess considerable autonomy to assess community needs and design contextually appropriate programmes. As one employee explained: “To be with the community, you cannot have the control model. You need to have a balance of control and empowerment.”

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- **Alternative Funding:** MUIS generates most of its revenue through community contributions of zakat and waqaf rather than government allocations. A former employee noted: “A large portion of our budget actually comes from services that we provide to the Muslim community.” This model encourages creativity while also fostering a sense of ownership and responsibility within the community.
- **Local Monitoring:** Community feedback mechanisms such as regular needs assessments, focus group discussions and post-programme surveys ensure that MUIS's programmes remain relevant and effective. For example, mosque committees routinely organise town hall meetings where congregants can voice concerns or suggest improvements for religious classes, welfare assistance or youth engagement initiatives. Additionally, MUIS conducts periodic surveys and collects feedback forms after events to gauge satisfaction and identify emerging needs. This “ground-sensing” approach enables rapid adaptation to changing circumstances. For instance, feedback gathered from mosque volunteers during the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the need for digital religious services and targeted welfare support for vulnerable families. In response, MUIS quickly launched online religious classes and expanded its zakat distribution to address these specific needs. Such mechanisms ensure that programmes including religious education, social welfare, youth outreach and community health initiatives are continuously refined based on direct input from the community, making MUIS's service delivery both responsive and inclusive.

Managing Dual Accountability

MUIS's hybrid nature creates inherent tensions between state and community expectations. Employees regularly navigate questions about their primary loyalty, as one interviewee noted: “There's always this scepticism, you know, within the community that hey, you know, are you representing us or are you representing the government?”

MUIS manages these tensions through several strategies:

- **Trust Building:** Social capital becomes a strategic asset. One employee emphasised that trust operates “at all levels. The trust with the community, the trust with the government, and also the trust with the non-Muslim communities as well.”
- **Value Integration:** Staff integrate Islamic values with professional duties, viewing their work as religious obligation. This creates internal motivation beyond bureaucratic requirements.

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- **Innovative Structures:** When constraints arise, MUIS can create subsidiary companies that can operate commercially while adhering to both religious and administrative requirements. One example of this is their Warees Halal subsidiary, which is able to function as a commercial entity within MUIS's halal scope that generates money for MUIS's halal department.

This operational flexibility in the organisation is critical for addressing the diverse and evolving needs of Singapore's Muslim population, ranging from palliative care to youth engagement and other forms of social welfare. It enables the community to take genuine ownership of the services delivered by MUIS, ensuring that governance is not conducted from an ivory tower but is grounded in the lived realities of Muslims' everyday life.

Building Muslim Communities of Success: Lessons from MUIS

MUIS's design offers a set of nuanced lessons for those seeking to nurture Muslim communities of success in secular and plural societies. These lessons, rooted in both institutional design and lived experience, reveal how legal legitimacy, social capital and flexibility can work together to create resilient and thriving communities.

1 - Embrace Institutional Legitimacy, But Stay Community-Focused

MUIS's statutory status, embedded in AMLA, gives it the authority and resources to advocate for Muslim interests at the highest levels of government. This formal recognition has enabled MUIS to participate in policy discussions, secure stable funding and ensure that the needs of Singapore's Muslim community are not sidelined in national agendas. Yet, legitimacy on paper is only half the equation. MUIS's credibility also depends on its ability to remain rooted in the community, attentive to the latter's evolving needs and aspirations.

This balance is not always easy to achieve. The risk for any statutory body is that it becomes distant and more attached to bureaucratic processes than to the people it serves. MUIS has sought to counteract this by actively building in mechanisms of decentralisation that allow for community consultation and oversight, such as engaging mosque committees and soliciting feedback from grassroots leaders. This lesson shows how hybrid governance structures that combine state legitimacy with genuine community participation are best positioned to deliver sustainable success for programmes and other forms of faith-based service delivery.

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2 - Make Social Capital a Strategic Asset

MUIS's strength lies not just in its legal mandate but also in the trust and relationships it has cultivated both within the Muslim community and with the wider Singaporean society. Putnam et al. (1994) discuss how social capital in the form of strong social networks, high trust levels and civic engagement has positive impacts on governance and social wellbeing in society. Social capital, manifested in networks of volunteers, respected community leaders, and inter- and intra-faith partnerships, has been a cornerstone of MUIS's resilience. These relationships have enabled MUIS to mobilise quickly in times of crisis, mediate tensions and foster a sense of belonging and shared purpose among Singapore's Muslim community. As one employee in the mosque sector noted: "Fundamentally it's about trust that MUIS is able to garner from the community. That's where you get the resources, the funding, the zakat. And that's how we start. We really focus on that first, the trust."

Investing in social capital is not a passive process. MUIS has actively nurtured leadership at the mosque level, supported elderly, youth and women's initiatives, and participated in national dialogues on multiculturalism and religious harmony. By doing so, it has positioned itself as both a guardian of tradition and a bridge to the broader society.

For other Muslim communities, the lesson is that social capital is not an option or a side goal, but rather it is central to both resilience and innovation. Trust, once established, becomes the foundation upon which new initiatives can be built and sustained.

3 - Foster Operational Flexibility

One of the most distinctive features of MUIS's approach is its operational flexibility, enabled by AMLA's design. While MUIS operates as a statutory board, it has deliberately decentralised many of its functions. Local mosque committees, known as Mosque Management Boards (MMBs), are empowered to assess needs and design programmes in ways that are sensitive to their unique contexts. This decentralisation has allowed MUIS to respond swiftly to emerging challenges like shifting demographics and unexpected crises like the COVID-19 pandemic.

Operational flexibility also extends to funding. By supporting alternative funding streams, such as zakat and waqaf, MUIS has preserved a measure of independence from state budgets. This has allowed for experimentation and innovation at the grassroots level, fostering a culture where new ideas can be piloted and then scaled. The broader lesson is that rigid, top-down models often fail to capture the diversity and dynamism of real communities.

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Empowering local actors and decentralising decision-making enable organisations to remain relevant and effective in a rapidly changing world.

4 - Balance Quantitative and Intangible Outcomes

Finally, MUIS's experience underscores the importance of measuring success in both quantitative and qualitative terms. While it is essential to track metrics such as the number of beneficiaries served or funds distributed, these figures do not capture the full impact of religious governance. MUIS has recognised that intangible outcomes such as generosity, dignity, empowerment and social cohesion are equally vital indicators of success.

To this end, MUIS has had to navigate approaches that combine performance data with stories, testimonials and community feedback. This approach is beneficial to the government as it is able to effectively show results, but it also provides a richer understanding of what works in practice rather than on paper. Doing so also ensures that policies remain aligned with the lived realities of Singapore's Muslim community. For Muslim communities elsewhere, the lesson is to resist the temptation to equate success solely with numbers. True community development is as much about fostering a sense of belonging and purpose as it is about delivering services.

Conclusion

Singapore's MUIS challenges us to move beyond simplistic binaries of centralisation versus decentralisation, or state versus community. Instead, it shows that hybrid governance, rooted in flexible legal frameworks like AMLA, can produce resilient, innovative and successful Muslim communities. Rather than viewing state laws as a detriment to fostering healthy spiritual communities, Muslims can actively work within the frames of the spaces they live in to find innovative ways to establish themselves as communities of success.

As our societies grow ever more diverse, these lessons are essential for building inclusive public institutions that serve all. Muslim communities of success are those that can adapt, innovate and remain anchored in both faith, justice and civic responsibility. By learning from models like MUIS, we can chart a path that is both authentic and impactful, contributing to the broader public good while safeguarding unique values and needs.

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About Author

Ms Ambar Khawaja is a Master of Public Administration Graduate, The London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE). Her areas of expertise/research interests include hybrid and digital governance, decentralisation, institutions, international development, humanitarian policy and the political economy of state-building in non-Western contexts.

This article is based on the author's dissertation, "Decentralized Authority in a Centralized State: The Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura and Public Service Delivery in Singapore", and is part of the RPCS Insights & Perspectives series.

Editor's note:

Ms Ambar Khawaja was a guest of the RPCS in February 2025. She shared on her Master's research which covers how Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura (MUIS) operates within Singapore's centralised governance framework and the mechanisms that allow it to effectively deliver public services to Muslims in the country. Her contribution in this RPCS Insights & Perspectives series provides an insightful take on Singapore's administration of Muslim affairs, from an outsider/observer's perspective. Her discussion of hybrid governance models provides useful frameworks to consider when examining governance of religious matters in secular, non-Muslim majority states, especially within plural contexts.

About 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 focus will be on developing new understanding, interpretations and application of Islamic principles, values and traditions to contemporary issues and challenges.

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