

A Tribute to Lee Kuan Yew

by Hugh Fitzgerald



Singapore has been in the news for other reasons recently, but its appearance on the world stage, however brief, may provide us with an excuse to consider the views on Islam of the founding father of Singapore, and its longest-serving Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew, who died in 2015. Lee Kuan Yew lived in a multicultural city, with a Chinese majority and Indian and Muslim Malay minorities. All his political life, Lee Kuan Yew was aware of the need to keep the Muslim population in check. The laws he had passed, the regulations he enforced, were directed in large part to that end. He knew about Muslim efforts to convert others, and he made sure that any convert had to immediately register with the government, so such efforts could be monitored, and then countered, by the government. A study of all the ways that Lee Kuan Yew dealt with Muslims, and took careful note of, and combated, their natural aggressiveness and political machinations in tiny Singapore, an island of mostly Unbelievers – 3/4 of whom are Chinese – in a Muslim sea, should be instructive for Western

leaders, who have the same problem and as yet only timid and confused ideas as to how to solve it.

Wikileaks revealed that Lee Kuan Yew had called Islam “a venomous religion.” He made sure to limit the numbers of Muslims in Singapore’s armed forces, suggesting their religion made them a possible danger to their non-Muslim fellow soldiers. In his “The Malays in Singapore,” he wrote that “if, for instance, you put in a Malay officer who’s very religious and who has family ties in Malaysia in charge of a machine gun unit, that’s a very tricky business.” It was under his leadership that the government instituted a ban on hijabs and other Muslim headscarves in both the police forces and nursing jobs. Lee Kuan Yew also substantially reduced government funding for madrasas, while increasing support for secular education. His government carefully monitored the mosques, both for the content of the imam’s sermons, and for any foreign (especially Saudi) sources of financial support that might lead to a mosque being “radicalized.” Clearly he understood the danger of Islam.

Lee Kuan Yew had, after all, originally declared Singapore’s independence from Malaysia because the Muslim Malays rejected meritocracy, and insisted on giving economic advantage to themselves. All Malays were required to be counted as Muslims (even if some were not), and all Muslims benefited from a disguised jizyah tax on non-Muslims which is called the “Bumiputra.” Although the word means “sons of the soil,” it is not the indigenous Malaysian tribes that benefit from the “Bumiputra” policy, but Malay Muslims alone.

According to this “Bumiputra” idea, all economic undertakings, all examples of entrepreneurial flair, must have Muslim Malays as their full partners. Two Chinese who wish to open, for example, a computer consulting company, or an architectural firm, are required to take on a Muslim Malay (but not a Hindu, nor another Chinese) as a full partner, with an equal financial stake – even though he need not contribute a thing.

This is simply a way to ensure that the Muslims can continue to live on the backs of non-Muslims, who fulfill part of the traditional status of dhimmi by what is in effect a jizyah payment. In his book *Hard Truths to Keep Singapore Going*, Lee Kuan Yew urged Muslims to be “less strict” in their interpretation of Islam. And he also wrote in the same book that “I think we were progressing very nicely [in limiting the power of political Islam] until the surge of Islam came, and if you asked me for my observations, the other communities have easier integration – friends, inter-marriages and so on – than Muslims... I would say, today, we can integrate all religions and races, except Islam.”

As we look around the world, hasn't the same problem of the failure of Muslims to integrate into non-Muslim societies arisen everywhere? Why should it be any different from what Lee Kuan Yew observed in Singapore? For Muslims around the world read the same Qur'an and Hadith, that offers the same description of non-Muslims as “the most vile of creatures,” the same commands – more than 100 – to wage violent Jihad against them, the same instruction “not to take Christians and Jews [or any other non-Muslims] as friends, for they are friends only with each other.”

Spare a thought for modern Singapore's creator, Lee Kuan Yew, and take the opportunity to look into his unvarnished understanding, throughout his long political career, of the menace of Islam, and the various means he deployed – diminished funding for madrasas, limits on the Muslim presence in the armed forces, strict monitoring, through reporting requirements, of Muslim conversion efforts, bans on the hijab and other head covers for police and nurses – to comprehensively hold Islam in check. And it worked. [Muslim Malays today make up 14%](#) of the population of Singapore, just about the same percentage as in 1990. The Bumiputra system, which has unsurprisingly done damage economically to Malaysia, was successfully kept out of meritocratic Singapore. The

results are there for all to see:

Malaysia has exports of \$227.70 billion, while Singapore, with one-sixth its population, has exports of \$435.80 billion. The GDP of Malaysia is \$304 billion, and of Singapore – with that much tinier population, has a GDP of \$275 billion. The GDP per capita is \$16,800 for Malaysia, and \$60,800.00 for Singapore, an astonishing difference given that they began from roughly the same starting point, forming a single political unit at independence.

If Singapore is an economic powerhouse today, it is because Lee Kuan Yew guided it to a successful separation from overwhelmingly Muslim Malaysia, kept the Muslim Malays in Singapore from increasing their numbers by monitoring campaigns of conversion, and limited the freedom of those conducting such conversions whenever they appeared to be too successful. Further, the madrasas were kept largely free from foreign funding, while government support for them was deliberately diminished. Local Muslims knew they were being watched by a government unafraid to take them on – the government of the authoritarian, far-seeing, no-nonsense Lee Kuan Yew. Few governments in the democratic and far too tolerant West could follow his hard-headed example. But for authoritarian regimes run by secular Muslims – such as the five Islamic republics in Central Asia, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan – the example of Lee Kuan Yew, who for decades was unafraid to constrain the forces of Islam in Singapore, remains relevant, useful, and even inspiring.

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