

RIMA Brief

February 2022

CONTEMPORARY SALAFISM IN SINGAPORE

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Key Takeaways

1. Salafism is not a monolith. Salafis are a diverse community with different references for religious resources and different networks of preachers and followers.
2. The degree to which an individual Salafi is exclusivist or inclusivist is dependent on individual agency and structural constraints.
3. State and society play an important role in moderating Salafi discourse as well as the broader Islamic discourse in Singapore.
4. Salafism has existed in Singapore since the 1900s. Its roots are modernist and progressive. However, it was later affected by the Middle East geopolitical turmoil, particularly the Iranian revolution that resulted in anti-Shiite sentiments and anti-Western ideas. Since the turn of the millennium, Salafism in Singapore started to have a theological emphasis in their discourse.
5. Contemporary Salafism in Singapore may evolve into something different from the reactionary and exclusivist aspects of Saudi 'Purist' Salafism.



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Summary

Singapore values religious harmony and social cohesion due to its multi-religious composition. Considering that Salafism is commonly assumed to be linked with exclusivism and even Jihadism, Salafis in Singapore have been the subject of public attention and concern. However, it is essential to recognise that Salafis are not a monolith. There exists a myriad of differences and similarities among those who identify as Salafi or have been labelled as Salafi in Singapore. In this context, the discussion explored the current landscape of Salafism in Singapore. It also outlined the differences among the various Salafi groups as well as explained how Salafi ideas have developed in Singapore and the extent to which contemporary Salafis find their ideas acceptable in Singapore's secular and democratic context.

Who are the Salafis?

Haziq started the discussion by defining Salafism as a branch of Sunni Islam whose adherents claim to emulate the pious predecessors (al-salaf al-salih) as closely and in as many spheres of life as possible. However, this pietistic zeal is not unique to the Salafis as mainstream Sunni Muslims also attach great importance to the actions of the pious predecessors but do not imitate them literally. According to Haziq, what distinguishes the Salafis and the non-Salafis is that the latter view the praxis of the Salaf through the prism of the Islamic scholarly tradition as embodied by the different madhahib (Islamic jurisprudential schools of thought). However, Salafis exclusively and meticulously emulate the Salaf by rejecting all other sources of influence and strictly abiding by the rules and guidance in the Quran and Sunna. Their ideational frame creates the impression that the consensus and rationalism of the traditionalist scholars were a form of impurity that has polluted the religion. In short, Salafis can be distinguished from non-Salafis because of the theological dimension etched in their desire to emulate the Salaf. Apart from their theological leanings, Haziq highlighted that Salafis could

also be categorised into three factions based on their attitudes towards politics and violence.

The first is the Quietists, who largely shun political activism and concentrate on cleansing and teaching Islam in all its 'purity'. Interestingly, despite being labelled as quietists, they may have a loud political voice by contributing to the larger political discourse on Islam. The second group is the Politicos, who apply the Salafi methodology to the political arena. They regard political commitment as an integral part of Islam through the creation of political parties and parliamentary participation. The last group is the Jihadis who aim to overthrow supposedly apostate regimes in the Muslim world through violence. However, Haziq argued that this common typology of Salafism is incongruent with the development of Salafism in Singapore. It is not easy to typecast Salafis in Singapore as Singapore's socio-political context restricts and influences how Salafis can emulate the Salaf in all aspects of life. It results in significant overlaps among the Salafis in Singapore who would have fit in either the Quietist or Politico category.

Contextualising Salafism

Against this backdrop, the study adopted a framework to better understand the ideas and positions of Salafis on issues important to Singapore's context. Salafis in Singapore are divided based on their views regarding various issues of contention, including the extent Muslims should emulate the Salaf in contemporary life, approaches towards Islamic legal rulings and 'aqida, and attitudes towards the religious 'other', 'the West', politics, and cultural practices. Through this framework, the researchers were able to identify different groups and explore the diversity of opinions on politics and civic engagement within the Salafi community who share the same theological leanings. Salafis in Singapore can generally be categorised into three main groups and

they are: the Modernist Salafists, Muhammadiyah, and the Mamlaka Alumni.

According to Huzaifah, the modernists, also known as kaum muda, were the pioneers of the Salafi manhaj in Singapore. This manhaj emphasised referencing the religious texts and the Salaf to purify the religion from 'deviant' practices. Notably, their purifying efforts were directed towards social reforms rather than theological considerations. For the modernists, emulating the Salaf meant leading the community towards socio-political success. The influence of the modernists dissipated with the demise of the al-Imam publication, which was considered their magnum opus. However, their reformist efforts were sustained by the Muhammadiyah movement that has roots in Indonesia. Like the kaum muda, the Muhammadiyah movement did not engage in ex-communication (takfir) and adopted a progressive approach towards modernity. However, from the 1990s onwards, a group of graduates from universities in Saudi (mamlaka) emerged who were influenced by Saudi Salafism, were not as sympathetic towards modernity as their predecessors and started to have a theological emphasis in their discourse. During this period, the idea of takfir was revived by some Salafi scholars in the Middle East to legitimize the killings of Westerners and Shiites. Nonetheless, it is important not to paint Mamlaka graduates with the same brush.

Negotiating Structural Constraints

Based on their interviews with the Mamlaka alumni, there are two streams of Salafis, namely the moderates and the quietists. On the one hand, the moderates are aware that they have to contextualise their religious teachings in Singapore due to its multi-cultural and multi-religious setting that is foreign to Saudi Arabia. Additionally, the existence of several structural constraints such as the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act (MRHA) and the Asatizah Recognition Scheme (ARS) further incentivise the Mamlaka alumni to contextualize what they had learned in their respective universities. On the other hand, the quietists

have trouble fitting into the social fabric of Singapore because unlike the moderates, they firmly reject civic engagement and are exclusivist towards non-Salafi Muslims and the religious 'other'. Huzaifah pointed out that these extremist views are usually taught in unregulated religious circles (halaqah) outside universities that are not part of their curriculum. Technically, the university aligns with the government's strategic goals as it is regulated. If the government wants the university to promote its modernisation efforts, it has to comply. Huzaifah gave the example of a graduate who learned about al-Wala wal-Bara (Disavowal and Loyalty) from the halaqah and not the university. They were taught to hate the religious 'other' and regard the West as the enemy of Islam. Thus, the structural constraints serve an essential role in moderating exclusivist aspects of Salafism that are pernicious to Singapore's social fabric.

Salafism and Jihadism

Although the Singapore government did not openly single out Salafism as a problematic sect of Islam, the securitisation of Islam and Muslims globally, notably after 9/11, created a false assumption that Salafism is linked with Jihadism. However, this connection is a false assumption mainly for two reasons. Firstly, the study has shown that the heuristics of the Salafis in Singapore are complex and nuanced. Furthermore, most Salafis in Singapore are confident that their beliefs can be malleable to fit Singapore's context. This malleability, however, is unique to Singapore due to the structural constraints. Secondly, Jihadism is not unique to Salafis as there were instances where non-Salafi groups resorted to political violence, such as the Al-Ma'unah in Malaysia. It only proves that exclusionary thinking exists when one sees the world in binaries, and it sets the stage for hatred and violence regardless of whether one is Salafi. Haziq also raised the problem of being fixated with an assumption as it might not apply to reality and would consequently persecute innocents,

especially when it comes to issues related to security. To put the blame solely on one group would be a form of misplaced responsibility as it discounts historical and political realities that have shaped the complex nature of Muslim actors.

Contesting the quest for 'purity'

A common denominator between the different strains of Salafism is the attempt to purify Islam which stems from their manhaj. Huzaifah argued that this quest for purity is not unique to Salafis as there are non-Salafi groups that blame Westernisation for the dissolution of Islamic values. However, this civilisational bifurcation has more to do with one's anxieties rather than an accurate account of the 'other'. Fabricating the 'other' as an antithesis provides one control to construct normative beliefs that are seemingly unadulterated, Islamic and devoid of the precarious 'other'. This defensive mode of thinking is disassociated from the Islamic civilisational experience that is rich and diverse. Furthermore, the idea of tradition in Islam is not static; instead, it is discursive and takes into account the broader social and political factors. Huzaifah highlighted that change is a constant that religion cannot disregard. It is impractical to insist on emulating 7th century Arabia blindly when the demands of the 21st century are unique to us.

Future Areas of Research

According to Haziq, Salafism, as practised and viewed by lay Salafis in Singapore, is a research area that is yet to be studied. These Salafis are very strong in their beliefs and are visible on social media platforms. Their form of Salafism slightly differs from the Salafism practised by local asatizah. Furthermore, they are not fully moderated by structural constraints such as the ARS. Thus, an in-depth study on this issue would further enrich the available scholarship on Salafism in Singapore. As concluded in the study, contemporary Salafism in Singapore may, in the long run, evolve into something unique and different from other Salafi trajectories globally.

About the Speakers



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