Cosmopolitan Adaptation: Singaporean Malay-Muslim Migrants in Australia

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This project examines how first-generation Muslim immigrants adapt in Western environments through the case study of Singaporean Malay-Muslim communities in three carefully selected cities of Australia: Melbourne, Brisbane and Sydney. The research interrogates and extends the current literature on adaptation strategies of Muslim immigrants in the West, particularly in the light of the September 11 attacks in New York City which unleashed the rise of Islamophobia, anti-immigrant sentiments and the preponderant view of Muslims as a “suspect” and “problem community”.

Scholars on Muslim immigration in the West have expounded three main approaches undertaken by first-generation Muslim immigrants. The first strategy is enclavement. This is a defensive posture taken by Muslim immigrants especially those from conservative backgrounds. The second approach is described as “selective integration” which points towards Muslim guarded tolerance of the differences in cultures, beliefs and worldviews between them and non-Muslims. The third approach is total assimilation into the cultures and ways of life of their host societies as part of the Muslim immigrants’ endeavour to secure social acceptance and gaining employment.

This research seeks to develop the concept of “cosmopolitan adaptation” as an unexplored strategy among Muslim immigrants in the West. This is a hypothesis based on pilot studies that have already been conducted. The researchers of this project are not trying to prescribe emigration strategies. We are open to new discoveries and questions in the course of fieldwork.

Be that as it may, as a hypothesis to be validated by the deeper research, cosmopolitan adaptation involves a few processes and practices. First, it points towards Singaporean Malay-Muslims willingness to reconfigure their established understanding and observance of Islam to embrace the religious practices of other Muslims while showing deference and tolerance towards Western secular values in as long they do not infringe upon their own beliefs. Secondly, cosmopolitan adaptation is an undertaking that involves the expansion of social networks to include Muslims from other nationalities and, more so, with non-Muslims. Above all, another dimension of “cosmopolitan adaptation” is to be found in the Singaporean Malay-Muslim immigrants’ choice of residence and jobs. They have lived and worked in places where they could learn about cultures and identities that are uniquely Australian or distinctly mainstream.

More crucially, this study fills a gap in current studies on Singaporean migration. Much of the current writings are still overwhelmingly focused on inward migration into Singapore. This pattern of scholarship has been growing steadily due to the influx of economic migrants and foreign talent into Singapore. Singaporean emigration and adaptation strategies, however, remain a relatively underexplored field of enquiry. There have been some studies of Malay-Singaporeans journeying across the borders of Malaysia, Indonesia and the United Kingdom, but as a whole, Malay-Muslim migration out of Singapore remains inadequately understood. Their strategies of adaptation have yet to be analyzed. The case of Singapore Malay-Muslim immigrants in Australia is an important research theme because it adds to our understanding of how a segment of the Singaporean community coped with their new environments and how their notions of belonging, identity and aspirations evolved through their experiences overseas.