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Blurring the future: AI regurgitation and the Singapore Muslim community

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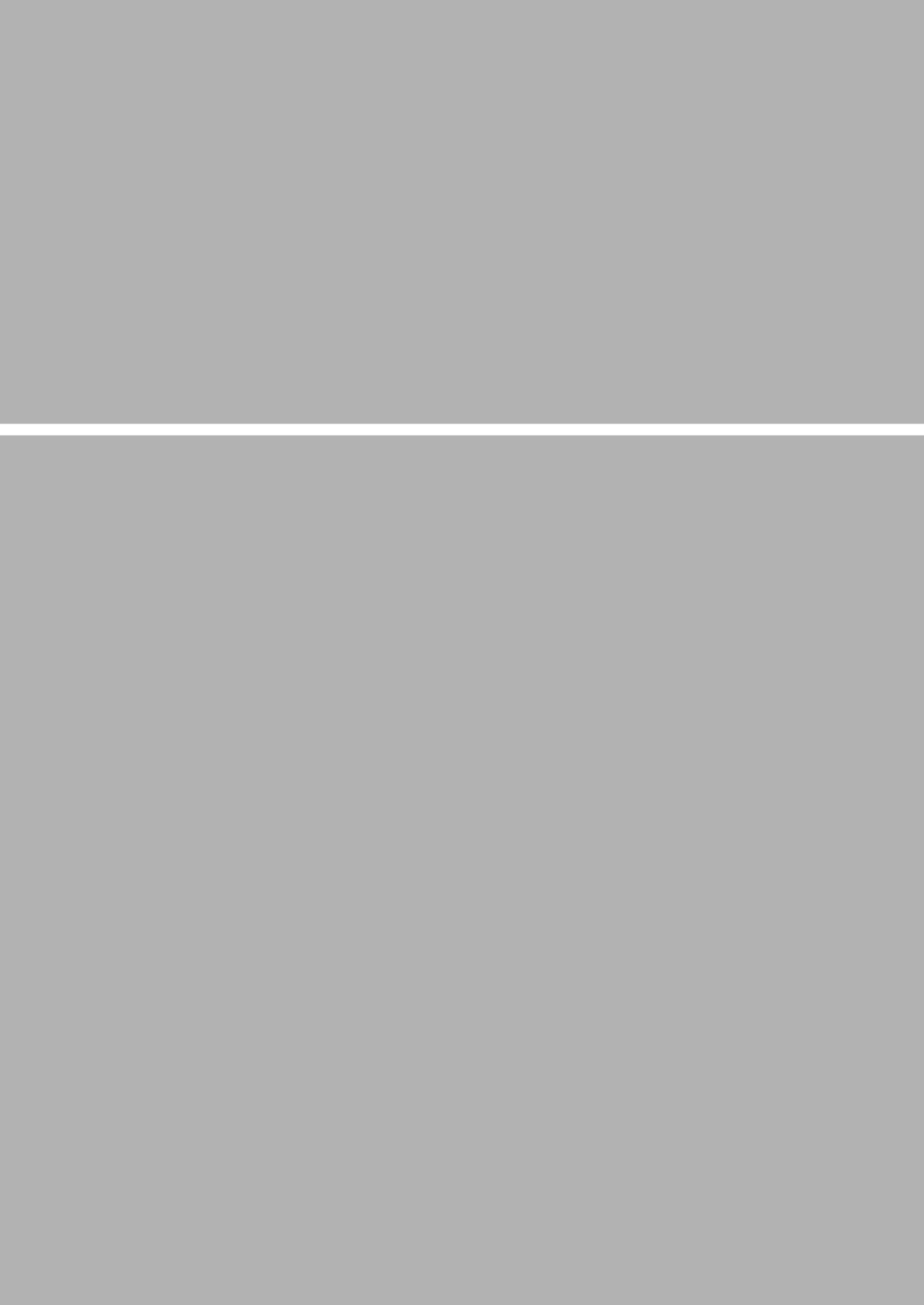
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Chapter 3

The Future of Fatwa

INTRODUCTION: “AI IS HERE SO WE HAVE TO USE IT.”

I was, yet again, nervously waiting in Huggs to meet an interlocutor. Huggs is a Singaporean chain of coffeeshops and co-working spaces, which abound in the city’s CBD. During my fieldwork I found myself spending an unexpectedly large amount of time in their coffeeshops, and others like them, in part because my interlocutors chose them as locations to meet. As mentioned in Chapter 1, my attempts to conduct research in the offices of MUIS, and to contact GovTech, had been rebuffed. However, this did not preclude me from meeting MUIS staff outside the office in coffeeshops like Huggs. On that day, I was there to meet with Abdul, a MUIS researcher focused on the Islamic Ethics of AI use. I was nervous because I had been courting this relationship for three weeks already with a dinner (off the record), a second dinner (off the record), and this coffee meeting for which he was already 15 minutes late.

I had asked to meet because I wanted to understand how MUIS was implementing the epistemological ideals of AI and the Smart Nation. I was interested in what happened when the smooth ideals of algorithmic reason met the messy reality of religious governance. As the researcher doing the theoretical work of understanding the implications of that transition, Abdul seemed like the perfect person to help me explore that interface. Little did I know, Abdul’s role was far less theoretical than I had imagined. Abdul arrived after twenty minutes, and with coffee in hand we dove right in. Over the last year, it turned out, Abdul had been involved in a MUIS project to create an AI Fatwa bot. This AI would assist the Fatwa committee to reach non-binding religious opinions on emerging theological questions. The aim of this bot would be to function as a research assistant to the Fatwa committee, speeding up their processes and allowing them to remain ahead of technological developments.

However, Abdul had his misgivings about this AI project. He had been reading Farish Noor (2019), who argues that colonial use of mapping and census making was implemented to control and divide the region. In Abdul’s view, newer forms of data extraction, including those used to empower AI systems, could act similarly. Further, he was concerned about the implications of using AI on human cognition. Here he drew on the work of Joseph Weizenbaum, computer scientist, and designer of the first AI Chatbot ELIZA, to argue that outsourcing our intelligence to a machine would diminish our humanity. As Weizenbaum wrote, and Abdul

quoted, we “must strive to be a whole person...[something] instrumental reason alone cannot lead to” (Weizenbaum 1976, 280). Abdul linked this to an Islamic context through the work of Amana Raqaib who argues that under the concept of *Maslaha* Islamic ethics must aim to “maximise welfare for the majority or to prioritise the recognition of static intrinsic human values” (Raquib 2023, 73). For Raqaib, AI fails at both these goals because it harms many people in the process of its creation and does not value the intrinsic value of human cognition. The Quran, Abdul told me, even says, “O you who have believed, if there comes to you a disobedient one with information, investigate, lest you harm people out of ignorance and become, over what you have done, regretful” (Qur’an 49:6 Sahih International). It was this idea that using an AI could mislead the public which concerned Abdul most of all. As a result, he wanted to create a curriculum which would teach people how to go about using generative AI without being misled.

However, despite all these concerns, Abdul concluded, “but AI is here now, so we have to use it” – a sentiment which echoed the words I had heard at the AISG event on the environmental impact of AI. Despite his personal theological concerns about AI, Abdul’s job at MUIS, and by proxy as part of the state, was to implement AI into their processes. In several ways, this meeting at Huggs speaks to the way states act on two levels: as a collection of individuals, and as an institution. As an institution, MUIS had refused to engage with my research; however, individuals who worked within MUIS as researchers, on boards, and as religious scholars made up most of my interlocutors. In those interactions they tried to distinguish themselves from the organisation, as Abdul did in this meeting. We met not in Abdul’s office, but at a coffeeshop nearby. Further, he explained his personal misgivings about the AI project. At the same time, however, he outlined how those misgivings shaped his approach to conducting the implementation of AI anyway. Whilst Abdul was an individual member of the Muslim community, with his own misgivings about the theological implications of AI, he was also part of an institution of the state.

Up until now, this thesis has treated the state as a monolith by examining how the epistemology of AI technologies fit within the ideology of the PAP. However, in this chapter I explore what happens when algorithmic reason encounters the messy social realities of religious governance. In particular, I will show how managing the interface between government and community creates an authority bind for MUIS. I define an authority

bind as a situation where an organisation's authority is drawn from two contradictory sources. For example, MUIS draws its authority over the administration of the Muslim community from the state. However, this relationship to the state reduces the trust of the community—trust which is integral to their religious authority. This lack of trust caused many of the Muslims I met in Singapore to look abroad for theological opinions, something which has long been a concern of MUIS, who see this as a fragmentation of their authority. Further, as Abdul expressed in relation to AI, the turn towards religious scholars from abroad raises concerns at MUIS that Singaporeans will be misled by deviant teaching.

In response to this authority bind, MUIS has used technology to assert its vision of Singaporean identity. The latest among these attempts is the proposed AI Fatwa bot. However, when I discussed technological attempts to maintain religious authority with my interlocutors, some of whom worked at MUIS, they invariably recounted three stories which centred around the mismanagement of Ramadan in 2023. At first, I could not understand what these stories had to do with my questions about AI. However, as I will explore here, these stories express a dissatisfaction among the community with their engagement with MUIS. In this chapter I will describe these three stories and show how MUIS as an institution regurgitates the ideals of algorithmic reason espoused by the state.

I conclude that within the governance processes of MUIS, AI is imagined as smoothing the messy relations between the state and the Muslim community. Consequently, the anti-politics described in the previous chapter re-emerges. As the stories from Ramadan 2023 show, MUIS turns to data and technology to depoliticise contentious issues in the same way that the state sees data as being able to turn unruly social problems into technical glitches. However, in the case of MUIS this appears to instead worsen the relationship with the community who feel their voices are subordinate to technological systems. To contextualise the messy interface between the state and the Muslim community, I must first outline why that relationship has become so fraught in Singapore.

Theoretical Framework: Religious and Political Authority in Singapore

Established in 1968 under the Administration of Muslim Law Act (AMLA), MUIS is a statutory board of the Singaporean government. The organisation is governed by The Council of MUIS, which is comprised of the Mufti, the president, chief executive, and members assigned to the council by

the Minister of Muslim Affairs. The organisation is represented in parliament by the Minister of Muslim Affairs. MUIS is, therefore, intimately tied to the Singaporean state and the PAP.

However, the relationship between MUIS and the ruling PAP is complicated and contradictory. When the union between Singapore and Malaysia began in 1963, the ruling PAP had several concerns about their nation-building partner. Chief among them were racial politics, particularly the prioritisation of the Malay community who would be the majority race in this new country. The political elite within Singapore, who were mostly English educated Chinese, were concerned about the balance of power within Singaporean politics. As then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew wrote in 1962 prior to the merger, “the English educated want to be assured that the merger does not mean that [a] four to one ratio between Malays and non-Malays will apply in the Singapore section of the civil service” (Lee 1962, 78).

However, the merger was not to last long. In 1965, the two countries once again split. Race riots in 1964 are often cited as the reason the merger failed. In turn, these riots were blamed on the Malay community, and turned a political concern around race into an emotive one within Singaporean politics. In his famously tearful television speech after the split with Malaysia, Lee Kuan Yew assured the nation that “we are going to have a multiracial nation in Singapore...this is not a Malay nation. This is not a Chinese nation. This is not an Indian nation. Everybody will have his place” (CNA 2025). This was the beginning of a conscious policy of multiracialism within Singapore, wherein “Each ethnic group is allowed space to practice its own culture but is expected to transcend difference” (Abdullah 2016, 214). For their supposed role in the 1964 race riots, and because of their presumed racial loyalties to Malaysia, the Malay community was consequently perceived as failing to transcend their race, and thus as a potentially destabilising minority within Singapore’s new National project.

Though the Malay community of Singapore was viewed with suspicion by the PAP, the Singaporean state did not want to risk the ire of Malaysia by sidelining Malays completely. Therefore, the PAP sought a way to control the Malay community whilst simultaneously giving them a vested interest in the new state. They in turn aimed to signal to Malaysia that Malays would be protected. The result was twofold: first, Singapore’s new constitution acknowledged Malays as the indigenous population of

Singapore and offered them special protections; second, the MUIS was created in 1968. As a statutory board of the state, MUIS reports to the Minister of Muslim Affairs and is tasked with managing everyday Islam within Singapore. Through the Mosque Building Fund, they build and maintain Mosques. They run madrassa and design their curriculum. Further, they organise daily spiritual life, administering zakat and hajj as well as writing all mosque sermons in consultation with the Minister of Muslim Affairs. Via these sermons, MUIS became a useful tool for promoting the political messaging of the PAP in the Muslim community (Musa 2022, 116). By creating such an institution, the PAP was able to centralise management of Islamic religious life away from the disparate village mosques and institutions which had managed religious life prior to independence.

The function of MUIS as a mouthpiece of the Singaporean state is effectively illustrated by their roll out of the Singaporean Muslim Identity (SMI). In the Wake of 9/11, racialization of Singaporean Muslims shifted as Muslims around the world, and especially in minority contexts, were pressed to “prove their normalcy” (Echchaibi 2018, 58). As the Singaporean state scrambled to align themselves with the United States of America, their multiracial governance shifted towards a more proactive surveillance of Singaporean Muslims to pre-empt the influence of fundamentalism (Febrica 2010, 576). Under this new outlook, what primarily marked the Muslim community as deviant was no longer the Malay race but Islamic faith. As former PM Lee Kuan Yew argued, “I would say today, we can integrate all religions and races except Islam” (Abdullah 2016, 222). Consequently, the role of MUIS refocused on ensuring that Singaporean Muslims aligned with the normative expectations of Singaporean citizens.

MUIS was therefore tasked with creating the SMI (Singapore Muslim Identity). The SMI is a list of ten attributes the Muslim community should embody to be good citizens. Chief among them was the need to put their Singaporean identity above their religion. Signs that Singaporean Muslims may be heading down the path to extremism were thought to be as innocuous as not eating with non-Muslims (Ab Razak 2019). More seriously, critiquing the state could make you a “bad Muslim” under the SMI (Hassan and Abdullah 2022). The SMI principles were then distributed through the Mosques in Friday Sermons. Through the SMI, MUIS continues to assert a particular vision of what Islam and being Muslim should mean for Singaporeans.

This is not to suggest that MUIS is merely the state's mouthpiece, though the institution is sometimes seen in this way by my interlocutors. As Pasuni (2018) has shown, MUIS can push back against government policy. For example, in the 1970s and 80s the Singaporean government, in an attempt to control population growth, offered tax breaks for people willing to be sterilised. These policies disproportionately affected the economically deprived including marginalised parts of the Muslim community. At this time, MUIS pushed back by issuing Fatwa against sterilisation. Whilst MUIS is "formally dependent on the state, yet autonomous enough to challenge it" (Pasuni 2018, 81), association with the state offers legal and bureaucratic authority, which can be harnessed to resist State authority.

Therefore, MUIS is a unique case of religious authority. Even within Singapore, MUIS is the only religious organisation which is part of an otherwise secular state. Further, the PAP created the organisation not out of a shared religious affiliation, but instead, out of suspicion of the community, and fear of their larger, more Muslim neighbour. The creation of MUIS was, as a result, less aimed at governing Islam – spiritually or otherwise – and more so designed to control Muslims. Yet those working within MUIS do not want to be merely government functionaries, but also to guide the spiritual life of their fellow Muslims. To explore how the relationship between MUIS and the Singaporean government plays out, I turn now to an event which occurred during my fieldwork during Ramadan 2023. This was a story I heard multiple times, from various people, including MUIS staff, Muslims not affiliated with the organisation, and interlocutors who maintained a blurrier relationship with the institution. This latter category included, for example, Ustaz who were not employed by the government but who were still affiliated with and drew authority from MUIS.

Stories in Authority: Void Decks

Underneath Singapore's social housing, known colloquially as HDBs, are empty spaces known as void decks. These spaces serve a myriad of social purposes: Chinese Singaporeans celebrate Hungry Ghost Festival in the void decks, weddings were formerly held there, children played football there (although this is against the rules), and I even once met a group of budgie enthusiasts comparing birds at a void deck in Hougang. Void decks hold significance because they are one of the few communal spaces which remain after many Singaporeans were moved out of villages and into high rise 'HDBs' in the 70s and 80s as part of the state's urbanisa-

tion policies (Loh 2009). In fact, those bird men in Hougang were given their first budgies by the state as part of a deal to coax them away from the Kampong and into the city. For the Muslim community in particular, void decks have traditionally been a space for Tarawih prayers during Ramadan. These prayer spaces acted not only as religious sites, but also as meeting places for elderly, where support was provided for under-served members of the community.

During the early pandemic years, none of these social activities could happen, except maybe the illicit football. So it was with excitement that 27 HDBs around Singapore applied for and received approval to hold Tarawih prayers in their void deck for Ramadan 2023. However, one week before Ramadan began, MUIS made an announcement which said:

“After re-evaluation, MUIS has concluded that there will be sufficient prayer spaces in our mosques during Ramadan. Accordingly, MUIS and our mosques recently issued rescindment letters to the Qaryahs (neighbourhoods), as there was no longer any need for prayers to be conducted at void decks.”

Organisers were frustrated, and one told independent media outlet Rice Media, “I cried for 15 minutes because all my efforts had been put to waste.” Many went on to complain to both MUIS and their local MPs, leading to a retraction. However, I can find no official retraction on the MUIS website under either their press releases, or the “MUIS clarifies section.” The only official statement came from the Facebook page of then PM Lee Hsien Loong who posted, “I am glad that after discussions with MUIS, we have come to an understanding, and MUIS has been able to allow many qaryah groups to proceed with their original plans.”

Despite the reversal, for many of my interlocutors the damage had been done. They felt that such decisions undermined community spirit by removing communal space. As one activist who had reported on the void deck incident told me,

“This has been going on since the 80s as a result of people moving out of their Kampong, their old neighbourhoods and they didn’t have a communal space to conduct religious activities so then they turned to the void decks of HDB flats.”

Activities like void deck prayers are not just administrative, and the decision to cancel them based merely on data about mosque capacity seems to show a lack of understanding of the community's needs. As my interlocutor continued, "...this upset a lot of people because...a lot of people have nostalgia...it's an emotional thing." This failure to understand the emotional aspect of void deck prayers also led some to question whether the data the decision was based on was valid. As one interlocutor told me:

"Firstly, they never showed that data. Secondly, I mean the people on the ground can tell, it's not the same, just because on average we have enough space but not everyone lives everywhere, some areas have more Muslims, and those areas are underserved so why won't you allow them to pray at the void decks?"

This interlocutor concluded that the void deck decision had been made by the PAP ministers and was merely being administered by MUIS. In fact, the persistent rumour I heard was that this conclusion is close to the truth, as an organiser of void deck prayers told me,

"I've spoken to some people, and they've said that it was not entirely MUIS decision, but it was pressures from other ministers or other agencies in Singapore, which look into social affairs in Singapore."

In the case of the void deck incident, the decision was seen as bureaucratic, a failure to understand the communities' emotions in favour of following the data. However, with this mistrust came an inkling that this decision in fact was a government one. Even though, at least publicly, it was MPs and even the prime minister himself who turned the decision around, it was the association with the state that undermined MUIS authority.

The MUIS Authority Bind

The historical and political context of MUIS' creation causes a kind of contradiction which I am going to refer to as an authority bind. As a result of their intimate relationship with the state, MUIS has a tremendous amount of administrative authority. Simply put, they influence all religious institutions in Singapore. As we saw in the story of void deck prayers, even religious affairs which happen outside of official institutions like the mosque must seek approval from MUIS. Yet the source of this authority, the PAP government, simultaneously undermines their

standing in the community. As the void deck prayers incident proves, MUIS proclamations are perceived as coming not from the religious organisation, but from the PAP. Unsurprisingly then, given the PAP's long and well documented history of mistrusting the Muslim community, my interlocutors concluded that this decision did not have their interests at heart. This must be particularly vexing for the staff at MUIS who are part of the community and of the state simultaneously.

If we assume rumours around the void deck incident to be true, then MUIS agreed for the prayers to go ahead, only for government officials to step in and, for whatever reason, cancel them. MUIS was then left with the unenviable job of communicating the cancellation. For the MUIS staff involved who likely grew up with void deck prayers (given that this tradition began in the 1970s), this must have been frustrating. Then, to add insult to injury, the reversal of this decision came not from MUIS, but from Prime Minister Hsien Loong. Despite the role of the PAP, the void deck incident undermined trust in MUIS, who my interlocutors perceived as functionaries of the state who failed to effectively advocate for their interest.

As I will now explore, theories of religious authority suggest that instances such as these serve not only to diminish trust in the administrative capabilities of religious institutions, but also their spiritual authority. For Campbell (2010), religious authority can be divided into three categories 1) legal which covers the ability to administer religiosity and assert a particular interpretation of faith; 2) traditional, or the ability to control historical institutions of faith which produce those interpretations such as madrassa and Fatwa committees; and finally 3) charismatic authority, or the ability to compellingly communicate with the faith community. Bano (2018) argues that in an Islamic context this authority is particularly associated with scripture. He argues, therefore, that authority is derived from textual knowledge, the moral authority to assert that knowledge and the ability to relate scripture to the realities of the time. Whilst these concepts differ from Campbell's, they do widely converge. Textual knowledge is generally conferred by traditional institutions, as Bano asserts, like Al-Azhar University in Egypt. Further, as Campbell and Bano argue, moral authority can both be helped and hindered by relationships with the state, or what Campbell calls legal authority. Finally, charismatic authority and relating scripture to the present are of course intertwined.

However, I am inclined to agree with Alatas (2021) that the distinctions between these different categories of authority are not necessarily helpful because of how intimately they are connected. Alatas (2021) argues that the creation of religious authority is the work of operating between governments and the community. He refers to this process of managing these different relationships through consistent engagement and dialogue as labour. Through labour, Alatas claims that religious authority is based on the ability to negotiate different publics, and that making scripture relevant to the political and historical moment is a product of that negotiation. It is on this messy interface between state and community that MUIS struggles to assert authority in the story of void deck prayers. For this reason, despite the dispute over void deck prayers being largely to do with administrative matters, it diminished not only their authority in legal, administrative matters, but also the institution's charismatic and traditional authority.

MUIS finds itself in a bind when it comes to religious authority. Its relationship with the Singaporean state means that it holds a huge sway over everyday Islam in Singapore. Conducting daily Islamic practice means engaging with MUIS institutions and, by proxy, the PAP government. However, drawing authority from the state means also acting as an intermediary between the government and the Muslim community. For many Muslims in Singapore, the state, in the form of the PAP, is an institution which has historically marginalised them. Consequently, the association between MUIS and the state is widely seen in an unfavourable way. This bind is emphasised whenever MUIS announces news which is unpopular. Interestingly, whilst it is widely acknowledged that the government is the source of many unpopular announcements, it still undermines MUIS authority. I would argue this is because, as my interlocutors perceived, these announcements as a failure to do what Alatas calls “labour”. My interlocutors felt that in the case of the void deck prayers, MUIS did not effectively communicate across the messy interface between the state and the community. The result is that the community did not feel represented. However, given the authority bind MUIS finds itself in, it is hard to imagine a different outcome. This is illustrated further through another story from Ramadan 2023, wherein this issue of representation reappears.

Stories in Authority: Migrant Workers and Hari Raya 2024

Migrant workers make up a significant portion of the construction workforce in Singapore. As of June 2024, there are around 442,900 migrant

workers with permits to work in construction (MOM 2024). Despite their importance to the construction industry, Wee, Lam and Yeoh, argue that the construction industry uses strategies of detachment which make these workers less visible in Singapore (Wee, Lam, Yeoh 2022, xxii). This includes housing them in dormitories on the outskirts of the city, transporting them in the back of lorries with construction materials, and generally excluding them from public spaces. These exclusionary practices are supported by a lack of regulation from the state. For example, ministers refused to enforce regulations which would prevent the transport of workers in lorries, citing traffic concerns. Further, during the early years of the pandemic, 90% of covid-19 cases in Singapore “occurred among the 300,000 migrant[s] construction workers” (Yeoh, Wee, Lam 2022, i).

Whilst there are no official statistics on the national origins of migrant workers in Singapore, a 2017 study found that 250,000 of the country’s migrant workers were South Asian. Of those, 120,000 were from Bangladesh, of whom many are Muslim (Yeoh, Wee, Lam 2022, xix). These workers therefore are a significant but marginalised part of the Muslim community in Singapore.

During Ramadan 2023, the Singapore Bangladesh Society (SBS) circulated a memo from MUIS asking migrant workers to avoid mosques on Hari Raya. The now retracted memo stated that workers performing prayers in their dormitories would “help to avoid overcrowding and road blockages and ensure the health and safety of everyone”. Coming just weeks after the void deck incident, the announcement was met with understandable anger and scepticism. Was there enough space in the mosques or not? It was rightly pointed out that it was unfair to ask migrant workers to avoid the mosque while no such message was given to their Singaporean counterparts. Following the public furore, MUIS published a clarification on its website. The statement said that the migrant community “have never been segregated from our community or our mosques”, and concluded, “We regret the wording of the SBS circular.”

Many accepted this clarification, with one of my interlocutors saying, “So that was just poor...communication.” For others, though, the claim that the whole issue was caused by poor communication only made the situation worse. As one interlocutor told me “The response from MUIS was “oh it was just poorly worded” – You know that is very convenient and what does it even mean?” The feeling was that MUIS was refusing to take responsibility for the misstep. As another interlocutor explained:

“The response is people don’t understand. The migrant workers misunderstood the statement. Every single time it is the community who is not understanding what you smart folks are saying. That’s the first thing and secondly, if after 58 years of independence the community doesn’t understand, then you are not doing your job.”

Once again, as with the void deck prayers, the perception was that MUIS did not represent the community by excluding Muslim migrant workers. However, what really infuriated some of my interlocutors was the failure of MUIS to properly engage in dialogue. Instead of listening to the community and apologising for the mistake, MUIS had turned the incident into a failure of the community at large to understand their proclamation. As with void deck prayers, MUIS were seen as not representing the community in all its diversity by excluding the migrant community, and subsequently through its messaging deferring responsibility.

Representing a Community of Diversity

Once again, the exclusion of migrant workers was seen as a failure to stand for the communities’ interests in favour of the governments. In this story we can see how the historical discrimination of the state can filter into the decisions of MUIS despite their best intent. The view that migrant workers and their safety can be excluded is starkly shown by COVID-19 rates and the existence of the lorry rides. The Hari Raya prayers incident suggests that this disregard was being replicated within MUIS. Whilst this is another case of MUIS struggling to manage the messy interface between the state and their constituents, it is also another part of the authority bind MUIS finds itself in – the difficulty of representing a diverse community.

The Singaporean Muslim community is diverse, that goes without saying. For my interlocutors, the Hari Raya incident was an example of how MUIS could not represent all that diversity because of its relationship to the state. However, this was not the only such incident in recent years. In testament to the intimacy of the relationship between MUIS and the PAP government, the religious organisation was informed a few months early that Singapore would be repealing 377a, the law which made same-sex relationships illegal. Informing the religious organisation early was deemed necessary so that MUIS could strategize how to communicate the change. In particular, the repeal was seen as contentious because of its potential to cause a rift between liberal and conservative parts of the Muslim community. Consequently, MUIS decided that the safest approach

would be to take a middle way between the groups by neither supporting nor opposing the government. Ultimately, this served to make everyone unhappy, as one interlocutor told me with regards to the Mufti's position: "He was roundly criticised for that. Especially by conservatives, but also by liberals...I would say the easiest way to put it is that he was waffling."

Behind the scenes, the Mufti was aware that this was about to become a thorny issue for MUIS. An interlocutor and Ustaz for MUIS informed me that at a meeting before the repeals announcement the Mufti told them, "If anyone is going to take the fire let it be me because...if we are not sure what to say, it is best that we don't say anything about it. Because we might make the mess even messier." Internally, the repeal of 377a was seen as a no-win situation – they could not outright contradict the PAP, and if they did it would upset liberal parts of the community, and yet full support would create tension with conservatives. In the end they decided to say little definitively on the subject which allowed both sides of the debate to conclude that MUIS did not represent their voices. This is again surely a frustrating situation for MUIS staff who likely hold opinions which run the entire gamut of liberal to conservative. However, their roles required them to act not as individual members of a community, but as representatives of an institution which is in turn an intermediary of the state.

Due to their dissatisfaction with MUIS, my interlocutors from across the conservative to liberal spectrum sought their religious education from outside Singapore. This is well encapsulated by a mother and son that I met. Whilst the son was politically engaged, including sitting on several MUIS boards, and was interested in seeking out a 'liberal' teacher, his mother was far more conservative. For him it was hard "finding a teacher who is progressive enough and learned enough" within Singapore. His mother, who is deeply invested in the traditions of Islam, sought someone who could help her to improve her Quranic Arabic. She is so invested in following tradition, the son explained, that when flying internationally she asks him to calculate when they will need to pray mid-flight. Yet despite being from different ends of the conservative-liberal spectrum, both family members felt dissatisfied with the ability of MUIS to provide for their spiritual needs. Interestingly, they both found teachers who suited their needs in Saudi Arabia who they now meet via facetime.

Of course, this is nothing new in Singapore. As Saat (2018) shows, Singaporean Madrassa students have historically chosen to receive their

university degrees at Al-Azhar University in Egypt. This is a trend that continues to the present and holds true for many MUIS authorities, including both the current Mufti and his predecessor (Saat 2018, 58). This is not surprising, as Singapore's Muslim population is small, with little motivation to provide world class tertiary studies in Islamic Sciences. The link with Egypt's Al-Azhar is also unsurprising given its reputation as a moderate school which follows the Shafi'i madhab, the same legal tradition used throughout Nusantara. It is also not something unique to Singapore, as much of the Muslim world looks to al-Azhar for religious knowledge. This relationship does, however, demonstrate that religious authority at least in terms of Islamic knowledge has consistently been drawn from outside Singapore.

What is new is how MUIS is responding. At a meeting in 2021, MUIS staff explained to me that their primary concern was on managing misinformation online. Their apprehension was that when Singaporean Muslims went online to find religious information, they would encounter deviant teachings, or Islamic practices which would not fit within multi-racial Singapore. This outcome went against their institutional role to assert the SMI, which aims to inculcate among the local Muslim community a Singaporean identity that is tied to the state's conception of multi-racialism and modernity. To counter religious education found online, MUIS has turned to SEO tactics (Search Engine Optimisation). Using their proprietary app MuslimSG, Google statistics, and frequently asked questions on their query hotline, they identify trending topics. They then write articles on these topics which promote SMI principles. By using SEO, they ensure that these articles are the ones which appear first when Singaporean Muslims search religious questions online.

This focus on how internet technologies effect religious authority is central for MUIS. At a conference in 2022, current Mufti Dr. Nazirudin Mohd Nasir gave a keynote in which he emphasised the challenges social media technologies bring to religious discourse, saying:

“How do we address...controversial and confrontational hermeneutics, i.e. the reinterpretation of religion and its laws that challenge mainstream and traditional viewpoints? We are increasingly dealing with exceptionally complex issues, made more challenging by a social media that democratises religious and social discourse.”

This view that the internet challenges religious authority was particularly prevalent in the early days of the internet. The idea was that given the diversity of voices, and the democratisation of information available online, people will turn away from traditional leaders. In their study of Muslim politics, Eickelman and Piscatori (1997) argued that the rise of print media and widespread education would lead to a fragmentation of religious authority. Over a decade later Robinson (2009) agreed, arguing that lay believers online were able to use internet affordances to challenge traditional authorities. In his view this meant that “for growing numbers of Muslims, Islam has become a matter of individual conscience, individuals have come to interpret the faith” (Robinson 2009, 340).

However, empirical studies of online religion seem to contradict these conclusions, even in their earliest guises. For example, Barker (2005), who did some of the earliest research on new religious movements (NRMs) online, concluded that whilst the internet did risk the authority of charismatic leaders of NRMs by exposing their followers to outside influences, the internet also offered new tools for the extension of their control. In relation to Islamic religious authority online, Bunt’s (2003) early research of Islam online argued that traditional authorities were likely to maintain importance given the huge investment they had made in this new technology. Further, he argued that the internet would become just another medium for scriptural knowledge, as print, animal skins and stone tablets had before it (Bunt 2003, 211). These early empirical studies predicted that rather than undermining religious authority, the internet would transform and, in some cases, extend it.

Later studies of religion online seem to bear out these early predictions. As Knowles (2013) discusses, internet spaces have created new possibilities for traditional gate keepers to assert their authority, such as through the moderation of online spaces. Further, Selby and Sayeed (2023) show that Canadian Muslims judged the trustworthiness of online sources based on their affiliation with well-known Islamic institutions. In Southeast Asia, Solahudin and Fukhuroji (2019) demonstrate that whilst many online scholars have emerged as new authorities in Indonesia, these scholars are still frequently drawn from mainstream religious authority. They found that many of these new religious authorities were educated and held certificates from established religious seminaries. Solahudin and Fukhuroji conclude that this has extended the influence of traditional authorities who can now reach different audiences online.

Further, as Slama and Barendregt argue, it is not simply a case of undermining or supporting authority but that “today’s Muslim Southeast Asia is a novel constellation of interfaces...facilitated by new media, which provides opportunities for both the (re)assertion of authority and its questioning” (Slama and Barendregt, 2018 19). Bunt makes the case that non-traditional authorities can use their digital nativism to engage specific groups not represented by mainstream authorities (Bunt 2018, 65). However, Bunt concludes that the core content, namely scripture and traditional forms of knowledge, remain durable. This means that whilst traditional centres of authority may be outmanoeuvred, it is still interpretation stemming from their teaching which these new authorities spread.

What the theoretical literature suggests, therefore, is that in general religious authority online follows the patterns of religious authority offline. As we have seen, the choice to look abroad for religious education for Singaporeans, at least among my interlocutors, was dissatisfaction with the ability of MUIS to represent their interests. As we understand from preceding sections, because of its relationship to the Singaporean government MUIS struggles to engage in the labour necessary to assert religious authority in Singapore. This section shows how authority is further divided by the diversity of the community. When transmitting the state's policies, as with Hari Raya and the 377a incident, MUIS frequently find themselves in a situation where they cannot avoid disappointing large segments of the community. This drives Singaporeans to seek religious authority abroad. However, whilst the literature and empirical examples suggest that online authority is correlated with institutional power offline, MUIS views the choice to seek religious knowledge abroad as a technological problem. Interestingly, the solution to that problem is imagined to be technological. To explore why this is, I turn to one final story from Ramadan 2023.

Stories in Authority: Hari Raya Announcement 2023

Ramadan 2023 was a difficult one for MUIS. In the first year since the pandemic measures were lifted both the void deck prayers and migrant workers incidents had shaken confidence in MUIS authority, at least among the Singaporean Muslims I had met. Still, there was one more hurdle for MUIS: announcing the end of Ramadan. For several years, the announcement of Hari Raya Puasa has been a contentious issue in Singapore. In 2022, MUIS announced that Hari Raya would be celebrated on May 3rd, a day later than neighbouring Malaysia and Indonesia. This

caused uproar in the community, many of whom celebrate across the border with family in Malaysia. MUIS explained at the time that the discrepancy was caused by the difficulty in sighting the moon in Singapore because of cloudy skies. Instead, they used astrological calculations to predict the location of the moon. These calculations were agreed upon by the MABIMS countries (Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore).

The incident brought into question how MUIS was determining the Hijri Calendar. How could Malaysia and Singapore sight the new moon on different days given their geographic proximity? If the same astrological requirements are observed by Malaysia and Indonesia, then why the discrepancy? As one Singaporean on the MUIS Facebook page commented “We are not questioning when is the Hari Raya [sic]. What we don't understand is, why these 4 Muslim countries cannot come to one decision as to when is the Hari Raya and be steadfast about it otherwise it will be maslaha (public interest) to many.” Another stated, “If the new moon would have been sighted this evening, would it have changed anything? If not, why did you even attempt to do so? Setting a date for convenience is not in the right spirit.” However, many of the comments on the Facebook announcement were positive, thanking the Mufti for his clarification. Once again, this is a case of the MUIS authority bind. Agreement over the date of Hari Raya is regularly a point of contention in Indonesia and Malaysia. Yet, Singaporeans feel a particular irritation with MUIS because of its relationship to the state, which casts it in antagonistic terms with the community they serve.

Despite its strong religious administrative authority, MUIS still struggles in cases like this one to assert their authority. MUIS staff who I met with in 2022 reflected on the Hari Raya incident which was caused by anxiety over tradition. They argued that the use of astrological calculation instead of sighting the moon by eye had raised concerns over whether MUIS was correctly following tradition. As the 2022 clarification explained, the new methodology agreed upon in 2021 was “based on more than 700 data points of crescent sightings from around the world.” The feedback they had received showed that the community did not trust the use of data to make such important determinations. They even considered posting a video of the Mufti going out to sight the moon. No video was ever posted, possibly because it would contradict the explanation that Singapore was too cloudy to use this method.

In their 2022 statement, MUIS acknowledged that the discrepancy over Hari Raya dates would persist and perhaps even become more common. Therefore, in 2023 MUIS pre-emptively put out a statement explaining its approach to determining the end of Ramadan. Despite their proactive approach, there was still some grumbling from the community over the announcement, perhaps also prompted by the other MUIS missteps of Ramadan 2023. Despite their control over religious administration, there is still widespread mistrust of religious decisions from MUIS. In the case of the Hari Raya calculation, this was compounded using technology. Even though this approach was agreed upon by several countries in the region, it still made Singaporean Muslims nervous. Whilst MUIS concluded that this was caused by a mistrust of the technology, the stories of authority from across Ramadan 2023 suggest a different story.

The MUIS AI Fatwa Bot

As Ramadan 2023 demonstrates, MUIS finds itself in an authority bind caught between its contradictory demands as a statutory board of the State, and as a community leader. They draw administrative authority from the State, but that relationship undermines trust from the community and therefore undermines their ability to engage in 'Labour'. MUIS tends to construct these tensions around religious authority, at least in part, as a technological issue because of the role communication technologies have played in democratising access to religious authorities overseas. The anxiety that internet technologies diminish the institution's authority has also been transposed onto emerging AI technologies. As Abdul, who we met in the beginning of this chapter, explained, his primary concern about AI technologies is that Muslims would seek its religious advice and be 'misled' by misinformation. Similarly, an Ustaz who worked in content moderation at a social media company told me that they already saw how AI amplified existing problems of misinformation online. Another Ustaz working in tech seconded this view and was especially concerned with the ability of generative AI to produce convincing images which could be used to corroborate false narratives on the internet. Despite these apprehensions about AI technologies, they are still seen as a possible solution to MUIS' authority bind.

This contradiction should not come as a surprise. As MUIS staff explained to me, they already use internet technologies to try to counteract these authority issues. As we saw earlier, MUIS already implements SEO tactics to try and influence where Singaporean Muslims get their religious information online. Further, what unifies the stories of authority from

Ramadan 2023 is the way in which MUIS leaned on technology to smooth the communication of unpopular news. In the void deck prayers incident, they argued that data showed there was enough space in the mosque. With the exclusion of migrant workers on Hari Raya, data then showed that there was not enough space. Finally, in the case of moonsighting, appeals were made for the use of data and algorithms to determine the Hijri calendar and explain why the date differed from Singapore's neighbours.

Just as concerns about the internet have persisted and transformed while AI emerges, so have hopes that technology could also hold the answer. Consequently, MUIS now turns to AI for solutions. In October of 2023 MUIS was invited to participate in a Google run event called "AI trailblazers." Over the course of the event, members of MUIS staff worked with tech experts to develop a minimum viable product based around AI technology. These minimum viable products aim to show that a technology can be used to solve a problem before the technologies are fully developed. In this case, MUIS aimed to use AI to speed up the research process of its AI Fatwa committee. This initial AI model for this project was built on top of Google's proprietary generative AI, Gemini. Since then, the AI Fatwa lab was formed and has begun to fully develop the bot. Unlike the version built in October 2023, the updated Fatwa Bot is being made with ChatGPT as its underlying software. However, they are not using the commercially available OpenAI product, but an adapted version which has additional software provided by the Singaporean state's technology agency, GovTech. This use of ChatGPT by the State is likely a result of Singapore's large stake in OpenAI, purchased via the government's investment arm, Temasek.

This is part of an increasing investment in AI by the Singaporean state, which between 2019–2023 invested 500 million SGD. In that time, OpenAI's ChatGPT became integrated into the software of Singaporean Civil servants, and 900 million SGD was committed to the research and development for AI, robotics, and super computers (Tham 2019). In early 2026, the government doubled down on their commitment to AI investing 1 billion in AI development until 2030 (MDDI 2026). Meanwhile, in May of 2026 the Singaporean Government signed a memorandum of understanding with OpenAI who in turn announced that its first overseas lab would be located in Singapore with an investment of 300 million SGD in the project (Open AI 2026). These investments make it clear that the

Singaporean State sees OpenAI as a key partner in its AI development strategy, and likewise, Open AI sees Singapore as a vital market.

When I met for coffee with the head of the AI Fatwa Lab and Abdul, the lab lead explained that the aim of this new system was not to replace the Fatwa committee. This is an idea reiterated by the Mufti in his address at the Fatwa in Contemporary Societies Conference where he stated, “We are not suggesting for AI to replace the Fatwa Committee, Mufti or religious leaders – some of us still need our jobs for now.” Instead, the AI Fatwa bot will act as a machine in the loop. A play on the widely used concept within AI ethics of “human in the loop” which argues that to maintain human agency, a human overseer should vet all algorithmic derived decisions (Enarsson, Enqvist and Naarttijärvi 2022). In the case of the AI Fatwa Lab, all Fatwa committee decisions would be supported by an AI which would boost the speed and scope of the research process. The bot, which is currently being trained on a corpus of MUIS religious and legal decisions, will be able to analyse rulings from throughout Singaporean history, with the idea that this would be too much to read for individual members of the committee.

The bot will not only look at religious texts but will also consider the wider legal frameworks of the Singaporean state. The bot is also being trained with scientific and social scientific texts allowing the system to consider what the head of the MUIS AI Fatwa lab called “thick data”. This way, the bot will produce religious rulings which cater to the specific needs and legal environment of Singapore. When I asked him what he hoped the AI Fatwa bot would achieve the head of the fatwa lab told me that in the long run he imagined it rolling out to the general public to combat online misinformation. He envisioned every Singaporean Muslim having the AI Fatwa Bot on their phone to provide rulings on newly arising issues, rather than turning to online advice. At this point, Abdul jumped in, “that is many years in the future.” What is happening here? Why is AI seen as such a viable solution to the complex sociological problems that MUIS faces in Singapore?

I would argue that the allure of technological solutions is an example of how the Singaporean state's ideological and epistemological approach to AI filters down into agencies like MUIS and gets regurgitated into policy. Further, the stories of Ramadan 2023 show how the epistemological view of AI becomes alluring for MUIS.

Therefore, I would argue there are three key takeaways from the MUIS Fatwa Bot project to consider. First as we explored in the preceding chapter, by analysing more information than any individual can, algorithms are given an aura of objectivity (boyd and Crawford 2012). As the lead engineer of the AI Fatwa Lab emphasised, the ability of AI to consider more texts than any single committee member ever could was a central motivator of the project. The appeal of this aura of objectivity is its ability to defer authority to a ‘non-political’ actor. If AI systems are objective, or, to put it in the words of the PAP, “pragmatic”, then their choices can be construed as non-political. We can see how the perceived objectivity of data is already enacted in the stories from Ramadan 2023. For example, when announcing something contentious, MUIS continually relied on appeals to data. This is useful to an organisation like MUIS who manages the messy interface between state and community. They are frequently in a no-win position, as in the case of the repeal of 377a, and data’s aura of objectivity can shift authority away from the organisation.

Second, data is seen as able to operate smoothly across scales. As Aradau and Blanke (2022) explain, by using data about individuals to predict group behaviours and then extrapolating those large-scale trends to understand the behaviour of individuals within that group, data is seen as meaningful in any context. As we saw in the previous chapter, this perceived ability of data to work across differences means that lawmakers turn to data to appease all stakeholders, even those who are not consulted. This produces what Zandbergen (2020) and Cardullo (2021) refer to respectively as anti- and post-politics, in which members of the public are not consulted and instead there is an appeal to ‘trusting in data,’ which is seen as a reliable stand-in for all perspectives. Likewise, this is an alluring offer for MUIS, who as we have seen must operate across scale, between state, community, and individual, but also across difference. The stories from Ramadan 2023 and the repeal of 377a show how MUIS struggles to represent the diversity of the Muslim community. If the AI Fatwa Lab is a success, its creators hope to roll it out to the public so that no religious questions need go un-answered. This also has the advantage of meaning that every Muslim in Singapore will have access to a tailored answer to their question and circumstance. Consequently, the Fatwa Bot will not only provide ‘objectivity’ at a national level, but also for everyone. A replication of the “smooth” anti-political governance we saw in the AI epistemology of the Singaporean state where data is able to offer answers at all scales.

Finally, these two aspects– the ability to work across scale, and the aura of authority– are seen as able to mitigate an apparent contradiction. As we have seen, MUIS is concerned about the influence of internet technologies on their authority. This is in part because of the historical and political conditions which brought about the creation of MUIS, which aims to centralise religious authority over the Muslim community within the Singaporean State both geographically and administratively. The introduction of an AI system therefore seems contradictory because it defers authority to an outside influence. After all, whilst trained with local data, the MUIS AI Fatwa Bot is still built on top of ChatGPT, an OpenAI product developed outside Singapore using data which is not specific to the Singaporean context. However, this is mitigated for two reasons. First, as the lead engineer explained, the Fatwa Bot is trained not only on religious rulings, but also social science papers and non-religious Singaporean laws. The AI is thus perceived as able to work at the Singaporean scale whilst using global data. Secondly, as already described, the Fatwa Bot is seen as a non-political actor because of its aura of authority. Therefore, despite being an authority from outside MUIS, it is not perceived as such.

CONCLUSION: RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY AS A TECHNICAL PROBLEM

In many ways, Abdul's position on AI reflects the broader governance position that MUIS occupies. Although he personally and religiously disagreed with how AI functions, his institutional role required him to envision how it could function within the organisation. Similarly, many individuals working within MUIS may not have personally supported the pronouncements issued during Ramadan 2023, but their institutional role within the state apparatus compels them to communicate and enforce them. I refer to this tension as the authority bind. Further I show how the structural entanglement between MUIS and the state causes the organisation to regurgitate the state's epistemological approach to data and AI. As chapter two and the following interlude have shown, turning towards the epistemology of the state fundamentally transforms sociological and political issues into technical ones imagined as solvable through technological innovation. We see this again in the context of MUIS wherein rather than confronting the social roots of religious contestation, MUIS, caught in the authority bind, frames these challenges as technical problems solvable by tools like AI.

MUIS has long functioned as a mechanism for the state to exercise control over the Muslim community. Initially that control aimed to resist Malaysian influence over Singaporean Malays after the separation in 1965. MUIS's role was then reasserted and reframed after 9/11 and with the introduction of the Singapore Muslim Identity (SMI), now aimed at resisting not just Malaysian religious influence, but the authority of global Islamic actors by promoting a uniquely Singaporean Islam. The internet, however, destabilises this position by connecting Singaporean Muslims to a transnational religious discourse beyond MUIS's control.

This historical and political backdrop generates the authority bind that continues to shape MUIS's actions. As the stories from Ramadan 2023 illustrate, MUIS is frequently caught between adherence to the state and accountability to the community. Its position within the state grants it authority over Islamic institutions, but this comes at a cost. In cases like the ban on void deck prayers or the exclusion of migrant workers from Hari Raya celebrations, MUIS serves as the vehicle for unpopular state messaging. Open resistance to such policies risks institutional survival. Compliance, on the other hand, breeds distrust within the community. This bind inhibits the kind of bottom-up, dialogical religious authority that Alatas conceptualises as labour.

Despite knowing that many of MUIS's pronouncements likely originated from the PAP, my interlocutors directed their frustrations at MUIS itself, highlighting the intermediary role it plays between the state and a diverse Muslim community. The reaction to the repeal of 377A underscores this complexity. No stakeholder felt satisfied, and the Mufti himself acknowledged it was a no-win scenario. The authority bind, then, is a structural position. MUIS must navigate the messy interface between a centralised state and a pluralistic, globally connected religious community. For those within or adjacent to MUIS, this bind was not abstract, but deeply felt and frustrating.

In this context, many of my interlocutors turned to religious authorities outside Singapore. Yet MUIS often frames this move not as a political consequence of state-religion tensions, but as a technological challenge posed by the internet. The internet is understood as a threat to traditional religious authority, and so MUIS turns to technological solutions, such as SEO strategies, to reassert control. The latest of these is the AI Fatwa Bot, first developed in partnership with Google and now built on OpenAI's software. This response reflects how state ideologies around technology

are regurgitated into governance, complex socio-political dynamics are recast as technical problems with technical fixes.

These technologies are cloaked in the aura of objectivity, allowing decision-makers to defer difficult religious and political judgments to seemingly neutral systems. At the same time, tools like AI are imagined as adaptable across stakeholders and scales, smoothing over the frictions between state and citizen. If successful, the Fatwa Bot promises personalised religious answers contextualised within Singapore, an ideal technological bridge between state goals and community expectations.

Yet this creates a paradox. While MUIS is charged with safeguarding Islamic authority in Singapore, and by extension, reinforcing the state's ideological coherence, it simultaneously defers religious authority to a system developed beyond its borders. Built on global data and powered by foreign technology, the Fatwa Bot effectively transfers interpretive power to an external, non-local source. This is possible, I argue, because systems like ChatGPT are perceived as neutral, objective, and therefore apolitical actors. In the chapter that follows, I challenge this perception by analysing ChatGPT as an archive.