

Visit to Ba'alwie Mosque

By Wong Fung Shing
IPS Research Assistant



(Photo: IPS)

On 24 November, researchers and administrative staff from the Institute of Policy Studies visited the Ba'alwie Mosque at Lewis Road, a stone's throw from the NUS Bukit Timah campus. The visit was arranged as an opportunity for staff members to learn about the history of the mosque and the practice of Islam in Singapore's multi-cultural context. Here is an account of the visit by IPS Research Assistant Wong Fung Shing.

Many among us have never visited a mosque. This visit was an opportunity for us to better understand Islam as a significant part of Singaporean culture and history, and learn about the work of the Inter-Religious Organisation (IRO), which was set up over 60 years ago to promote peace and religious harmony here.

It was cold and damp as we departed IPS for the Ba'alwie Mosque, but in a clear indication of our hosts' warmth and hospitality, they came out to the carpark of the mosque with umbrellas to provide us shelter on the way in.

We were introduced to the Imam of the mosque, his son, and Mr Noor Marican, the former president of the IRO in a humble room not far from the main prayer hall. Despite its simplicity, one of the walls was lined with photographs of the many religious leaders and dignitaries that the Imam has played host to; from this, we knew that we were in company of someone who is widely respected.

Imam Syed Hassan al-Attas, or Habib Hassan as he is more affectionately known, is the son of Habib Muhammad bin Salim Al-Attas, founder and first Imam of the Ba'alwie Mosque. Habib Hassan has been the head of the Ba'alwie Mosque since 1976, and is a prominent figure amongst inter-faith leaders, both locally and internationally. After his basic education in Singapore, his father sent him to Saudi Arabia to study under a few well-known scholars and spiritual leaders.

He described a secular education as being aligned with an Islamic education; the former allowed an individual to grow in knowledge and relate to others in the community, which was part of being a good Muslim, he said. And as the 22 IPS staff members took turns to introduce ourselves, Habib Hassan diligently took down our names in a notebook. It was a sincere effort to know his guests, despite the short duration of our visit.

Located just off Bukit Timah Road, the Ba'alwie Mosque is surrounded by a residential estate in which there are admittedly not many Muslims. Nonetheless, believers come from all across the island. IPS staff, for instance, are among those who perform their Friday prayers at the mosque. On some occasions, congregations can grow up to 5,000, a testament to Habib Hassan's popularity. Mr Noor Marican said that the mosque's "pull-factor" was in the way the Imam communicates with others. He is well versed in religious scripture and world history, understands the human condition well, and is hospitable, making him a popular figure among believers and non-believers alike, said Mr Marican.

Habib Hassan gave us a short introduction to the mosque, and our conversation subsequently moved on to the basic tenets of Islam. Questions were raised about the diversity of Islam in Singapore, where Sunni and Shi'ah traditions are practised. Despite the different traditions and many schools of thought, the Imam maintained that differences are largely historical. While ritualistic differences exist, the essential five pillars of Islam remain the same. Habib Hassan also demonstrated willingness to engage in "sensitive" topics during the conversation. Alluding to recent events in Paris and around the region that had cast the faith in negative light for some, the Imam categorically condemned the actions of those who threaten harmony and peace in the name of Islam. He maintains that the "religious" conflict and incidents of confrontation that we witness today is the result of egoistic personalities that do not necessarily have a good understanding of their faith. Mr Marican also drew upon his rich experiences as IRO president, and shared anecdotes of interactions with other religious leaders, both local and from the region, to demonstrate the importance of good leadership.

Habib Hassan's conviction towards inter-faith cooperation and harmony was clearly evident through his speech and actions. He demonstrated a deep appreciation for the beauty of the

human spirit; particularly in instances when people of different faiths and backgrounds interact. Often citing verses from the Koran and using examples from different points in human and religious history, we got a good understanding of how his conviction is rooted in his faith.



Habib Hassan giving us a tour of the mosque (Photo: IPS)

Following our conversation, we were given a tour around the mosque, where we learnt more about the rituals and practices of Islam. Habib Hassan's intellectual interest in the world has resulted in him having a small museum of sorts in a corner of the mosque. There were several artefacts that showcased the history Islam and how it was practised in different parts of the world, various translations of the Koran from different countries, and a collection of antique religious texts, such as Korans, Torahs and Bibles.

After the tour, our hosts invited us to stay for lunch where we were treated to an eclectic spread of food, while we continued discussions. The visit was not long, but we left feeling that we had been enriched by the experience. We not only got to better understand a significant part of Singaporean history and culture, but also came out feeling very heartened that religious leaders like Habib Hassan exist. He possesses a genuine concern for others and has a strong conviction for inter-faith harmony, deep knowledge and humility to engage in sensitive topics, and the courage to take a stand on important matters.



A group shot with Habib Hassan (Photo: IPS)

Wong Fung Shing is with the Society and Identity research cluster at IPS, which studies a wide range of social issues, including racial and religious relations, social inclusion, education and social service provision.

If you have comments or feedback, please email ips.eneews@nus.edu.sg



© Copyright 2015 National University of Singapore. All Rights Reserved.
You are welcome to reproduce this material for non-commercial purposes and please ensure you cite the source when doing so.