SIS Forum (Malaysia)

Religious Conservatism:

Between Faith and Freedom

Understanding Religious Conservatism in Malaysia

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Content

Foreword

"After decades of Islamisation, where are you, Malaysia?

I guess the easy answer is: **lost**.

We have lost the dominant national narrative of who we were, who we are, who we want to be, and what we believe in."

– Zainah Anwar, SIS co-founding member.

The rise of religious conservatism and Islamisation has shaped Malaysia in significant ways over the past 50 years.

In simple terms, this means that stricter or more conservative interpretations of Islam have become increasingly influential in government policies, laws, schools, and everyday social expectations.

The quote from Zainah Anwar, a well-known advocate for Muslim women's rights, highlights a growing worry: that one narrow religious viewpoint is starting to overshadow Malaysia's diverse identity and the values it was founded on.

SIS Forum (Malaysia) and its supporters celebrate after the Federal Court's decision at the Palace of Justice in Putrajaya

SIS Forum (Malaysia), formerly known as Sisters in Islam (SIS) is a non-governmental organisation working towards advancing the rights of Muslim women in Malaysia.

SIS was founded in 1988 by a group of Muslim women who came together to address the injustice women face under the Shari'ah (Islamic law) system. Our critical reading of the Quran through a hermeneutical approach opened a world of Islam that we could recognise: a world for women that was filled with love and mercy, and with equality and justice.

Our mission is to promote the principles of gender equality, justice, freedom and dignity in Islam and empower women to be advocates for change.

We envision a progressive and democratic society that upholds freedom of expression, gender equality and social justice for all. We aim to be recognised as the national and global leader for gender equality and justice in Islam.

Introduction

This booklet aims to explain how and why Malaysia has gone through an Islamic revival and a conservative shift, and what this means for the balance between religious belief and personal freedom.

At the heart of this issue is a basic question: how do we balance religious faith with democratic rights? Malaysia's move toward religious conservatism raises tough questions.

Can Islamic teachings and constitutional rights, including gender equality, work together? How have politics and religion become intertwined in shaping what it means to be Malaysian? And how can Malaysians protect their multicultural society as conservative pressures grow?

These challenges are not unique to Malaysia. Many Muslim-majority countries, such as Indonesia, Pakistan, Türkiye, and Tunisia, faced similar debates about the role of Islam in modern life. By looking at Malaysia's experience alongside these international examples, we can better understand how religious conservatism can either support or limit values like gender equality, democratic diversity, and basic freedoms.

Chapter 1

Crowds in Tehran welcome a returning leader as a revolution transforms the nation from monarchy to an Islamic republic.

Source: Brookings Institution

Rise of Islamic Revivalism in Malaysia (1970s–Present)

To understand religious conservatism in Malaysia today, we need to look back at the Islamic revival that began in the 1970s and has continued to shape the country ever since.

This revival, often called "Islamisation", refers to the growing influence of Islamic values, symbols, and norms in government, public life, and society. Several global and local forces came together in the 1970s to drive this shift.

The first Malay students traveling to Egypt to study, set against its legacy as a historic center of Islamic learning, featuring Al-Azhar.

Source: The Patriots

Global Influences

Events in the wider Muslim world had a strong impact on Malaysia. During the 1970s, many Muslim countries experienced a renewed interest in Islamic identity and governance.

One major turning point was the 1979 Iranian Revolution, which replaced a secular monarchy with an Islamic state and inspired Islamist movements elsewhere. Groups like Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood and Pakistan's Jamaat-e-Islami spread ideas calling for stricter Islamic governance, and the newly formed Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) helped strengthen ties among Muslim nations.

These ideas reached Malaysia through diplomatic engagement, international conferences, and student exchanges. Many young Malaysians studied in the Middle East, where they encountered more conservative interpretations of Islam and brought these ideas home.

Another major factor was the surge of oil wealth in the 1970s. Countries like Saudi Arabia used their new financial power to fund religious schools, scholarships, and missionary activities across the Muslim world.

By the 1980s, Saudi-funded programmes had expanded into Southeast Asia, including Malaysia, promoting a more puritanical Wahhabi-Salafi style of Islam. Islamic books, ranging from the writings of Muslim Brotherhood thinker, Sayyid Qutb to conservative guides on social behaviour, were translated into Bahasa Malaysia and widely distributed with foreign support.[1]

Together, these global influences helped create a climate in which Islamic identity felt connected to a larger global Muslim community, or ummah.

[1] Saudi Religious Influence in Indonesia | Middle East Institute. https://www.mei.edu/publications/saudi-religious-influence-indonesia

Domestic Socio-Political Changes

Local developments were just as important. The May 13, 1969, racial riots exposed deep tensions between the Malay and Chinese communities. In response, the government promoted a stronger Malay-Muslim identity as a unifying force. Because Islam is closely tied to Malay identity, religion became more intertwined with nationalism.

The New Economic Policy (NEP), introduced in 1971, was meant to improve the economic position of Malays. Although it was an economic policy, it indirectly supported the Islamic revival by enabling more Malay Muslims to enter universities and study abroad. Many of these students encountered revivalist ideas overseas and returned with a stronger Islamic outlook, forming a new generation of Islamist thinkers and activists.

One key figure from this era was Anwar Ibrahim (10th Prime Minister of Malaysia), who co-founded Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (ABIM) in 1971. ABIM promoted Islamic education, moral reform, and social justice among young Malays. It was not radical, but it helped make Islamic values more appealing to educated Malays who were searching for moral guidance in a rapidly modernising society. This marked a shift from earlier decades, when secular nationalism dominated public life.

Anwar Ibrahim mengepalai pemimpin pelajar menemui Haynes Mahoney, Pengarah perkhidmatan penerangan Amerika di Malaysia. Perjumpaan ini semasa demonstrasi anti Amerika berhubung isu Timur Tengah.

Key Developments in the 1970s

Islamic Student Movements

University campuses became hubs of Islamic activism. Students returning from the Middle East and the West formed groups like Suara Islam and the Islamic Representative Council (IRC).

These organisations were influenced by global Islamist movements and often pushed for more political and systemic change than ABIM.

King Faisal was received by Sultan Abdul Halim Mu'adzam Shah in June 1970.

Key Developments in the 1970s

Government Support

The government began adopting more Islamic elements in its policies and public messaging. State Islamic departments expanded their outreach and religious education programmes.

By the late 1970s, Malaysia was hosting international Islamic conferences and strengthening ties with Muslim countries, signalling that Islam was becoming central to official discourse.

Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak briefing on National Economic Policy to government agencies on 31 July 1975.

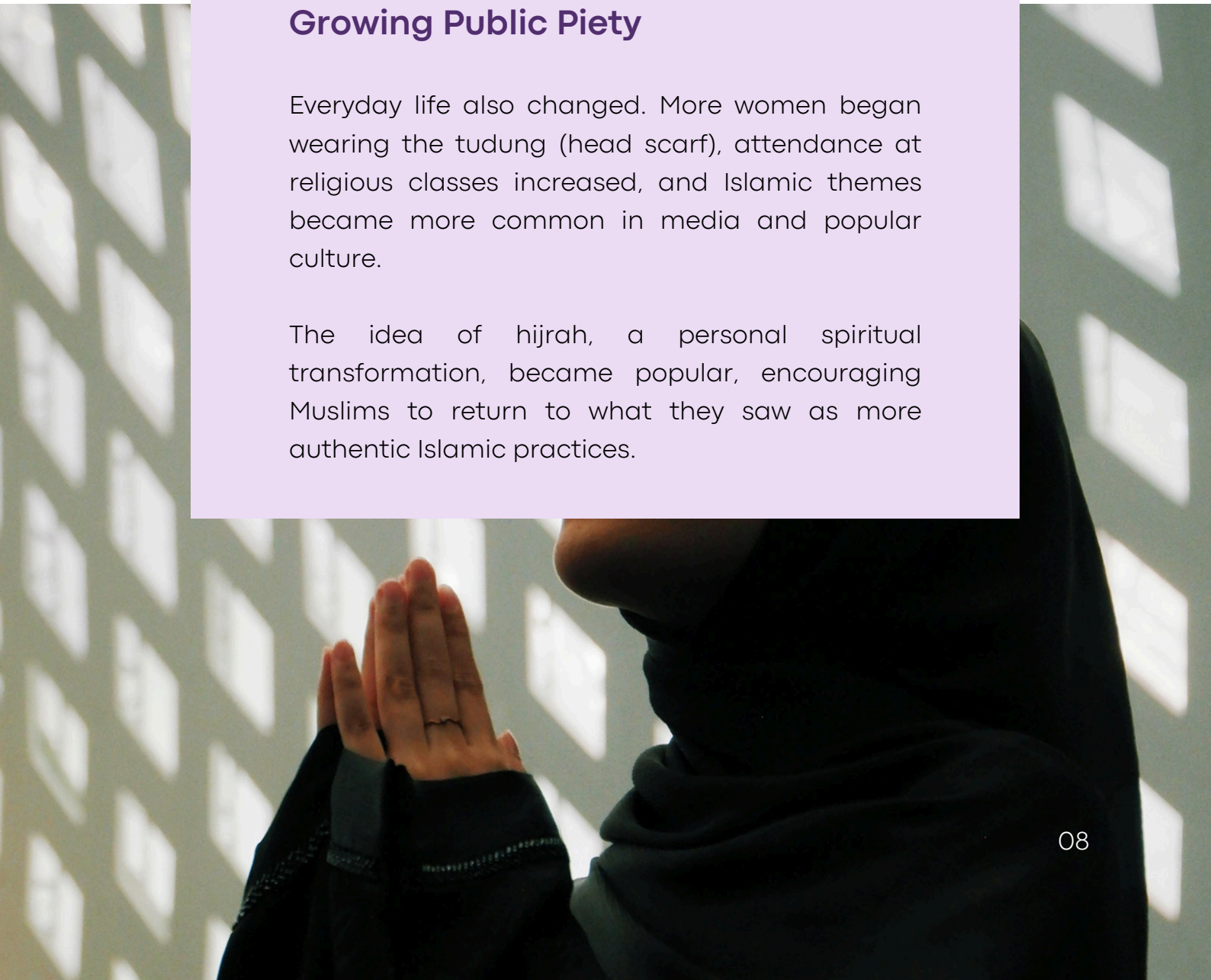
Source: National Archives Malaysia,

Key Developments in the 1970s

Growing Public Piety

Everyday life also changed. More women began wearing the tudung (head scarf), attendance at religious classes increased, and Islamic themes became more common in media and popular culture.

The idea of hijrah, a personal spiritual transformation, became popular, encouraging Muslims to return to what they saw as more authentic Islamic practices.

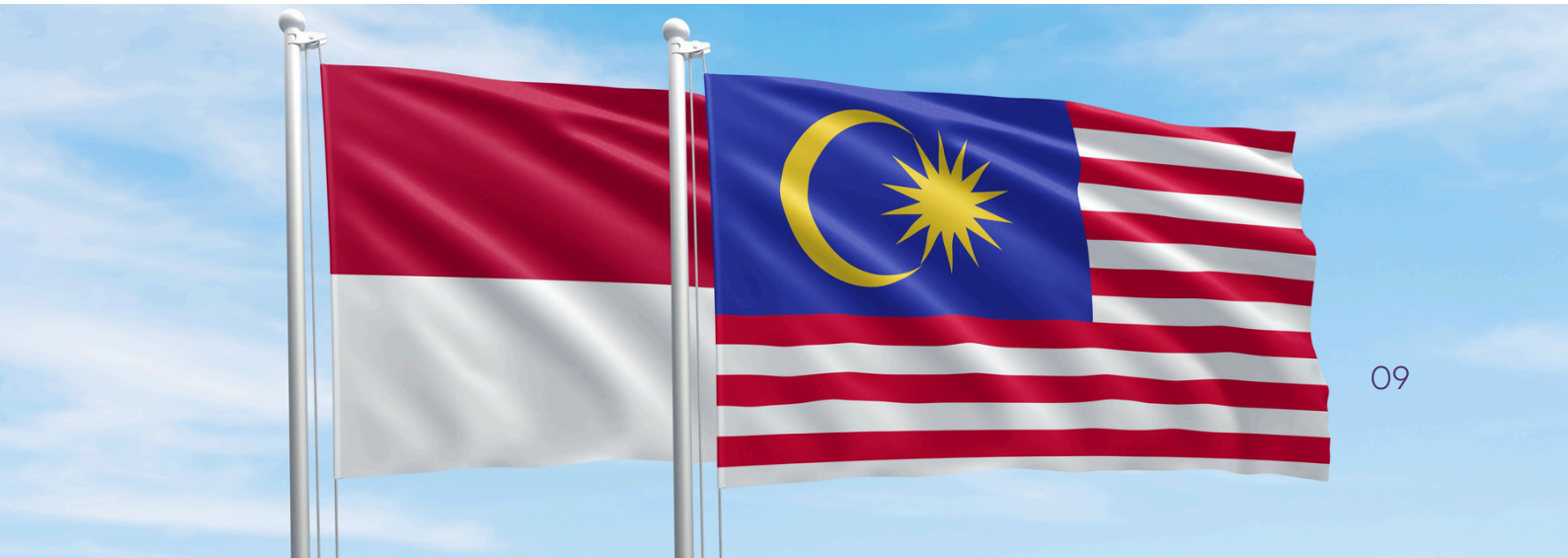


These trends were not unique to Malaysia. Indonesia saw a rise in mosque-based youth groups and Quran study circles. In Pakistan, political leaders made concessions to Islamist demands, such as declaring the Ahmadiyyah community as non-Islamic and banning alcohol in 1974. By 1980, an Islamic resurgence was sweeping across many Muslim societies, and Malaysia was very much part of this broader movement.[2]

By the late 1970s, Islamisation in Malaysia had become a powerful and growing force rather than a trend. It was driven by a mix of government actions and grassroots movements. Global events such as the Iranian Revolution and Saudi-funded religious outreach have given revival new energy and ideas.

At the same time, local developments like the NEP's impact on education and the push for national unity after the 1969 riots gave Islamisation a uniquely Malaysian purpose. A whole generation of Malay Muslims was coming of age with a renewed sense of religious identity, laying the groundwork for major changes in Malaysia's politics, society, and culture in the decades that followed.

[2] Islam as Political Tool in Pakistan – From Zia-ul-Haq's Islamization to the Modern "Jihad Culture" – Explaining History Podcast. https://explaininghistory.org/2025/11/06/islam-as-political-tool-in-pakistan-from-zia-ul-haqs-islamization-to-the-modern-jihad-culture/



Political Landscape and Shifting Alliances

Religion and politics in Malaysia have long been closely connected. From the 1970s onward, Islam became one of the main battlegrounds for political competition.

The rivalry between the two major Malay-based parties, i.e. the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) and Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS), played a major role in shaping how Islamisation unfolded in the political arena. Both parties claimed to defend Malay-Muslim interests, but they promoted very different ideas about how Islam should shape the country.

UMNO vs. PAS, Competing Visions

UMNO, founded in 1946, was the dominant force in Malaysia's ruling coalition for most of the country's history after independence. It championed Malay nationalism and presented itself as the protector of Malay rights and Islam, but always within Malaysia's multi-ethnic, constitutional framework.

PAS, founded in 1951, took a different path. It positioned itself as an Islamist party that wanted Malaysia to become an Islamic state governed strictly by Shari'ah law. Throughout Malaysia's post-independence period, UMNO and PAS competed for support from the Malay majority, especially in rural areas.

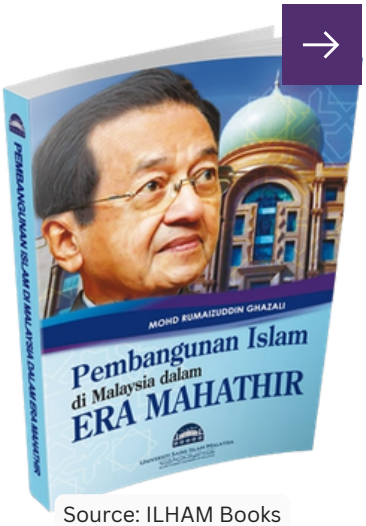
Religion became the key point of difference between them. UMNO promoted a more moderate, government-led version of Islam, using Islamic institutions, welfare programmes, and state initiatives to strengthen its support. PAS, meanwhile, pushed for a more uncompromising form of Islam and often accused UMNO of being too secular and tolerant.

This rivalry created what many observers describe as an "Islamic arms race," with each party trying to appear more Islamic than the other. For instance, when UMNO built new mosques or expanded Islamic schools, PAS would accuse it of political showmanship. PAS also demanded the implementation of stricter Islamic criminal laws (hudud). On the other hand, when PAS gained popularity through its religious messaging, UMNO would respond by introducing more Islam-friendly policies to avoid losing ground.

Source: Perdana Leadership

UMNO's Shift Toward Islamisation

In the 1980s, the competition between UMNO and PAS over Islamic legitimacy intensified. When Dr Mahathir Mohamad became Prime Minister in 1981, he was known for his modernising vision, but he also recognised the growing importance of Islamic sentiment among Malays.



Source: ILHAM Books

In a strategic move, Mahathir brought Anwar Ibrahim, the influential president of ABIM, into UMNO in 1982. This not only absorbed a major Islamist figure into the ruling party but also signalled UMNO's intention to take Islamic issues seriously.

Under Mahathir, state-driven Islamisation gained significant momentum. His government created Malaysia's first Islamic bank (Bank Islam Malaysia Berhad) and introduced Islamic insurance (Takaful). He also established the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM) to centralise and strengthen the management of Islamic affairs nationwide. These initiatives were designed to show that UMNO could champion Islamic causes more effectively from within the government than PAS.

Mahathir's strategy was to merge Islamic values with modern development, rather than turning Malaysia into a theocratic state. He often spoke about building a modern Malay-Islamic civilisation that embraced progress, technology, and global engagement while grounding public policy in Islamic moral principles.

PAS's Rise and Islamic Agenda

PAS holds a long-term vision of Islamic governance that goes further than what UMNO proposed. From the late 1970s onward, PAS leaders openly campaigned for the eventual implementation of hudud (Islamic criminal punishments) and for Malaysia to be declared an Islamic state.

The party's strongest support came from rural, Malay-majority states on the east coast, Kelantan and Terengganu, and in the northern peninsula, Kedah and Perlis.

In states where PAS formed the government, it introduced conservative policies. These included enforcing dress codes, limiting alcohol sales, and separating men and women in certain public spaces. Over time, PAS steadily grew its influence.

A major turning point came during Malaysia's 14th and 15th General Elections (2018 and 2022). In 2018, PAS won control of Terengganu (alongside Kelantan, which it had governed for many years). In the 2022 election, PAS made a historic leap, becoming the single largest party in Parliament. By 2023, PAS and its coalition partners governed four states, giving the party more national influence than ever before.

This electoral strength encouraged PAS to push its Islamic agenda more assertively in mainstream politics. Unlike UMNO's pragmatic approach, which often tried to balance religious priorities with economic and diplomatic considerations, PAS took a firmer stance. It called for stricter Shari'ah laws and opposed policies it felt were not sufficiently Islamic. PAS's grassroots networks, such as usrah (study circles), mosque committees, and active youth groups, helped build a loyal base of supporters. Many of them viewed PAS as the genuine representative of Islamic values in politics, in contrast to what they saw as UMNO's more government-driven or institutionalised version of Islam.

An International Perspective

Malaysia's political struggle over religion can be seen in other countries. In Türkiye, for example, the long-standing secular establishment rooted in Atatürk's legacy spent decades competing with rising Islamist politicians. In the 1990s, the Islamist Refah (Welfare) Party, led by Necmettin Erbakan, briefly came to power.

This paved the way for the later rise of the AKP, a party that combined economic growth with a stronger public role for Islam.[3] Türkiye's experience shows how an Islamist-leaning party can gain power through elections and gradually weaken secular norms, an evolution that mirrors some of PAS's long-term ambitions in Malaysia.

Pakistan offers another variation of this dynamic. The mainstream political parties often cooperated with or made concessions to religious hardliners to strengthen their own legitimacy. As a result, Pakistan saw the Islamisation of laws even when Islamist parties themselves did not win national power. The common thread across these countries is that political actors frequently use religion as a tool to gain public support, a pattern clearly visible in the UMNO-PAS rivalry in Malaysia.

Malaysia's political landscape has long been shaped by a contest to define the nation's identity through Islam. UMNO's dominance meant that Islamisation often came from the top down, through government policies and state institutions, as a way to counter criticism from the Islamic opposition. PAS, meanwhile, created bottom-up pressure through religious scholars, preachers, and conservative supporters who pushed for a more explicitly Islamic state. Over time, this competitive dynamic reshaped not only laws and institutions but also the national narrative.

[3]Erdogan dismisses secular criticism on Türkiye's new curriculum | Reuters. https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/erdogan-dismisses-secular-criticism-Türkiyes-new-curriculum-2024-06-07/

Chapter 2

Mahathir's Islamisation Policies: Blending Modernity with Islam

It is impossible to discuss Islamisation in Malaysia without looking at the era of Prime Minister, Dr Mahathir Mohamad (1981–2003).

During his long first tenure, Mahathir pushed hard to modernise Malaysia's economy and society, famously setting the goal of becoming a developed nation by 2020. At the same time, he made a deliberate effort to weave Islamic values into this modernisation project.

Unlike Islamist movements that aimed for a full religious state, Mahathir's vision was different: he wanted Malaysia to be a modern, high-tech, prosperous country that could also stand as a leading Muslim nation. His policies, therefore, tried to balance tradition with progress.

Institutionalising Islamic Education

Education was one of Mahathir's main tools for shaping a modern Islamic identity. One of his important initiatives was the creation of the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) in 1983. IIUM had a bold mission: to excel in modern fields like science, law, and engineering while grounding students in Islamic ethics and thought. Using English and Arabic as teaching languages, it attracted students from across the Muslim world and produced graduates who were comfortable navigating both Islamic scholarship and modern professional disciplines.

This idea, where Western-style education and Islamic worldviews could complement each other, was also emerging elsewhere. Pakistan, for example, established the International Islamic University Islamabad in 1980 with a similar goal of blending religious and secular studies.

Mahathir's government also expanded or established other institutions with Islamic orientations, such as Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), which focused on uplifting Bumiputera students, and later Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM), which specialised in Islamic sciences. In national schools, Islamic Studies became a core subject for Muslim students, and religious and moral education were strengthened. School curricula were reviewed to ensure they aligned with Islamic teachings.

In 1985, Mahathir introduced the “Policy of Incorporating Islamic Values” in the public administration. This policy aimed to instil values such as honesty, diligence, and responsibility among civil servants, and they were framed through an Islamic lens to emphasise their moral importance.

Interestingly, Malaysia was not alone in this trend. In the 1980s, Türkiye also expanded its religious vocational schools (Imam Hatip schools) as part of a broader attempt by its secular leaders to accommodate rising Islamic sentiment. These parallels show how education often becomes a key arena for shaping a country’s religious identity.

Economic Islamisation: Islamic Finance

Under Mahathir, Malaysia also became a global pioneer in Islamic banking and finance, aligning economic modernisation with Shari'ah principles. The country's first Islamic bank, Bank Islam, was established in 1983. Soon after, Malaysia issued its first sukuk (Islamic bonds) and introduced takaful (Islamic insurance). These initiatives were part of a broader strategy to connect Malaysia with the growing Muslim world economy and attract investment from the Middle East.

To support this new sector, the government created regulatory bodies such as the National Shari'ah Advisory Council to ensure that financial products met Islamic requirements. By the 1990s, Malaysia had developed one of the world's most advanced Islamic financial systems, demonstrating that economic growth and Islamic principles could reinforce each other.

Other countries took different paths. In Pakistan, for example, General Zia ul-Haq attempted to eliminate interest from the banking system in the 1980s. This caused financial disruption and had to be revised later. Malaysia avoided such instability by allowing Islamic banking to grow alongside conventional banking, gradually increasing its share over time.

The result was that Malaysia gained international recognition as a leader in Islamic finance, an area where religious ethics, such as the prohibition of usury and excessive uncertainty, were combined with modern financial innovation.

Islamisation of the Bureaucracy and Law

Mahathir's government also wove Islamic ideas more deeply into the machinery of the state. As mentioned earlier, Islamic values were introduced into civil service training. In practice, this meant that government events more frequently included Quranic verses or sayings of the Prophet, modest dress codes were encouraged for official functions, and more mosques were built within government complexes. Islam was increasingly presented not just as a personal faith, but as a source of moral guidance for public policies, whether in poverty reduction, healthcare, or social welfare. A major part of this shift involved strengthening the religious bureaucracy. Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia (JAKIM), the federal department in charge of Islamic development, received more funding and influence. State Islamic councils and Syariah courts were also supported so they could administer Islamic matters, especially family law, more effectively.

One of the most controversial moments of the Mahathir era came in the late 1990s and early 2000s, when he attempted to frame Malaysia as an "Islamic State." Although the Constitution remains secular in structure, Islam is the "religion of the Federation," but freedom of religion is protected. Mahathir declared in 2001 that Malaysia was already an Islamic state in practice. This was widely seen as a political move aimed at weakening PAS's argument that UMNO was not Islamic enough. The debate that followed highlighted the tension between symbolism and substance in Malaysia's Islamisation process. Critics warned that using the "Islamic State" label could undermine minority rights and blur the Constitution's secular foundations. Mahathir, however, appeared to use the label mainly for domestic political advantage. On the international stage, Malaysia continued to present itself as a moderate, Muslim-majority democracy.

Challenges and Criticisms

Mahathir's Islamisation policies won him support from many Malays and even praise from other Muslim countries, but they also drew criticism and produced unintended consequences. Critics argued that embedding Islamic institutions within the state, such as expanding Syariah court jurisdiction and funding religious bodies, risked creating a parallel legal and moral system that could clash with Malaysia's civil law and multicultural reality. Non-Muslim minorities grew anxious that the narrative of an "Islamic state" might one day erode their rights as equal citizens.

Progressive Muslims, including groups like SIS Forum (Malaysia), cautioned that state-driven Islamisation often reflected the most conservative interpretations of Islam, and government-appointed religious officials tended to be rigid. Over time, centralising Islamic authority in bodies like JAKIM reduced the diversity of Islamic thought, silencing more liberal or local practices in favour of uniformity. For example, Mahathir's policies did not actively promote women-friendly interpretations of Islam; thus, even as women gained education and economic opportunities under his modernisation drive, they continued to face discriminatory rules in Islamic family law.

Another criticism was that Mahathir's integration of Islam was selective. He embraced aspects that fit a modern nation-state narrative, such as Islamic finance, administration, and ethics, but avoided tackling deeper democratic deficits.

While his government invoked Islamic values of justice, it also relied on laws like the Internal Security Act (ISA) to detain dissenting voices, including some Islamist figures, which many saw as contradictory. The 1987 Operasi Lalang, in which several PAS and ABIM activists were detained, revealed that the government would not tolerate challenges to its tightly controlled version of Islamisation. In sum, Mahathir's legacy is a double-edged sword: he propelled Malaysia to the forefront of a model where a country could be Muslim, modern, and moderate on the world stage, yet internally, he laid the groundwork for a powerful religious bureaucracy whose long-term influence would be difficult to roll back.

To support this new sector, the government created regulatory bodies such as the National Shari'ah Advisory Council to ensure that financial products met Islamic requirements. By the 1990s, Malaysia had developed one of the world's most advanced Islamic financial systems, demonstrating that economic growth and Islamic principles could reinforce each other. Other countries took different paths. In Pakistan, for example, General Zia ul-Haq attempted to eliminate interest from the banking system in the 1980s. This caused financial disruption and had to be revised later. Malaysia avoided such instability by allowing Islamic banking to grow alongside conventional banking, gradually increasing its share over time.

The result was that Malaysia gained international recognition as a leader in Islamic finance, an area where religious ethics, such as the prohibition of usury and excessive uncertainty, were combined with modern financial innovation.


BANK ISLAM

Chapter 3

Islamisation in Education and Cultural Life

By the late 1980s and into the 1990s, Islamisation in Malaysia was no longer just about politics. It began shaping everyday life, especially in schools, universities, social norms, and even popular culture. This period saw Islamic conservatism influencing how young Malaysians were taught, how they dressed, and how they understood their place in society.

In schools, Islamic Studies classes for Muslim students placed a stronger emphasis on traditional teachings. Lessons focused heavily on memorising scripture and following rituals, sometimes leaving little room for critical thinking. Non-Muslim students, meanwhile, took Moral Studies, which, although not Islamic, often drew on religiously inspired ethics.

This raised debates about whether the national curriculum was becoming too religious. For example, science textbooks were reportedly checked to ensure they did not contradict Islamic views on creation or morality.

Islamisation of knowledge

Universities also reflected this trend. The idea of "Islamisation of knowledge" gained ground, with scholars at institutions like the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) trying to align modern academic subjects with Islamic perspectives. Economics courses promoted interest-free finance, while medical ethics classes examined issues like organ donation or euthanasia through a Shari'ah lens. Campus life itself became more conservative: by the 2000s, many universities unofficially enforced modest dress codes, discouraging short skirts or sleeveless tops. Student groups linked to Islamist movements also grew in influence, organising talks and shaping campus policies to reflect conservative values.

Another influence came from abroad. Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, Malaysia sent many students and scholars to study in the Middle East and South Asia, in countries like Jordan, Egypt, India and Pakistan. When they returned, some brought back stricter interpretations of Islam, shaped by movements such as Salafism or the Muslim Brotherhood's enthusiasm. They promoted ideas like strict dress codes, gender segregation, and rejection of local Malay traditions. Many entered government service or religious institutions, embedding these views into policies.

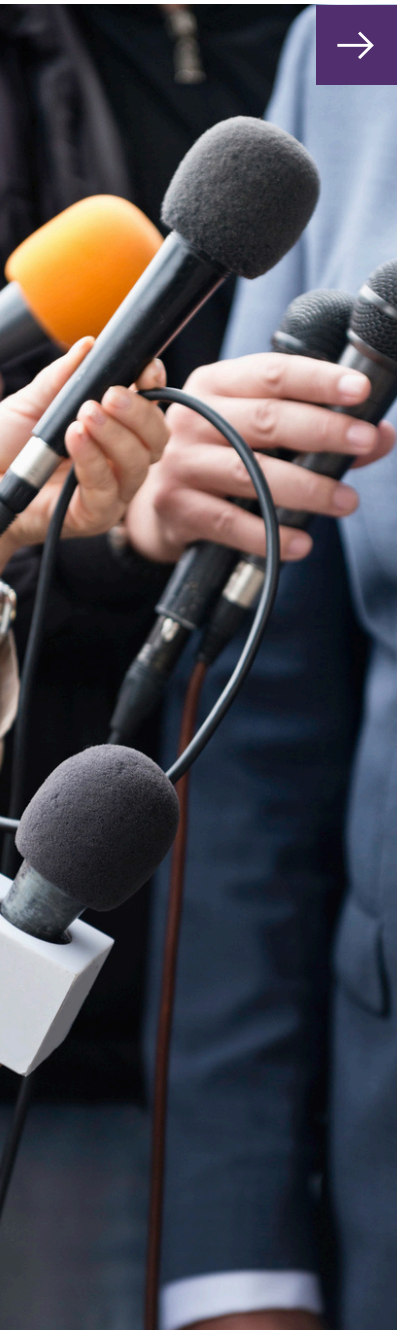
At the same time, the concept of hijrah, literally "migration," referring to the Prophet's journey from Mecca to Medina, took on new meaning in Malaysia. It came to symbolise a personal transformation toward deeper religious observance.

During the 2000s, Malay professionals and even celebrities announced their own hijrah, adopting the hijab, leaving the entertainment industries seen as un-Islamic, or encouraging followers to repent and live more piously. This trend made religious devotion fashionable among the middle class.

Indonesia experienced a similar wave. Pop culture icons and youth embraced the hijrah movement, using social media to promote conservative lifestyles. Popular preachers attracted millions of followers online and held mass gatherings that rivalled rock concerts. While these movements encouraged faith, moderates worried they also carried a hardline edge, sometimes fostering intolerance toward those who did not follow "proper" Islamic conduct, or portraying secular lifestyles as spiritually empty. Observers warned that such trends could threaten Indonesia's pluralistic society.[4]

[4]Indonesia's Muslim youth find new heroes in Instagram preachers - The World from PRX. https://theworld.org/stories/2019/03/26/indonesia-s-muslim-youth-find-new-heroes-instagram-preachers

Chapter 4



Cultural Narratives and Media

By the 2000s, Malaysia's entertainment and media scene was swept up in an Islamic cultural resurgence. Television began offering more religious programming, from talk shows to dramas with Islamic themes. One of the most notable examples was Imam Muda ("Young Imam"), a reality TV show launched in 2010, where young men competed in Islamic knowledge and leadership tasks to be crowned as an imam. Its success proved that religious content could attract mass audiences, especially younger viewers, by blending faith with modern entertainment formats.

The music industry also reflected this shift. Nasyid groups, which performed inspirational songs with Islamic messages, moved into the mainstream. At the same time, government and religious authorities kept a close watch on cultural products. Some concerts by Western artists were banned or allowed only under strict dress and behaviour rules, while films with sensitive religious themes were vetted or censored.

Rise of Halal Lifestyle

The idea of halal expanded beyond food into lifestyle sectors such as entertainment, travel, and fashion. Halal travel packages catered to Muslim families by offering prayer facilities and alcohol-free environments, while Islamic fashion shows showcased modest yet stylish clothing. Malaysia, alongside Indonesia, became a global hub for the modest fashion movement, presenting hijab-friendly designs that appealed to modern consumers.

The rise of the "halal lifestyle" showed that one could be cosmopolitan and enjoy global consumer goods while still adhering to Islamic values. Internationally, this trend was part of a broader Muslim market boom, with cities like Dubai and Istanbul hosting modest fashion weeks and global brands such as Uniqlo collaborating with Muslim designers. Cultural discourse increasingly promoted hijrah narratives. Celebrities and public figures who embraced stricter religious observance were celebrated as role models. A prominent example is Neelofa, a Malaysian actress-turned-entrepreneur who publicly shifted towards Islamic modesty and helped popularise the niqab among young women. Such figures often described their transformation as a journey toward inner peace and empowerment through faith, giving a positive image to the conservative turn.

Yet critics warned that this glamorisation of religious conservatism could create social pressures. Ordinary women, for instance, might feel compelled to don hijab to be seen as "good Muslims," while artists could self-censor their work to avoid backlash. In this way, the cultural resurgence carried both inspiration and tension, reshaping Malaysia's media and lifestyle landscape in complex ways.

Chapter 5

Constitutional and Human Rights Implications

As Islamic conservatism is prominent in Malaysia's social and political life, it raises difficult questions about the country's legal system and human rights protections. Malaysia operates under a dual legal framework, a legacy of colonial and post-colonial arrangements. In this system, Syariah courts handle certain matters for Muslims, such as family law and religious observances, while civil courts oversee criminal law and issues involving non-Muslims. The growing influence of Islamisation has tested the fragile balance between these two systems, and between religious authority and constitutional supremacy.

The Federal Constitution declares Islam as the religion of the Federation, but it also guarantees freedom of religion and equal protection under the law. Traditionally, civil courts, including the High Courts, Court of Appeal, and Federal Court, had authority over all Malaysians.

Syariah courts, meanwhile, were limited to specific domains for Muslims, as Islam is considered a state matter within Malaysia's federal structure. Over time, however, conservatives pushed for greater autonomy and power for Syariah courts, arguing that they were essential for upholding Islamic laws without interference from secular judges. This push created jurisdictional overlaps that often led to legal tugs-of-war.

One common flashpoint involved cases of religious conversion. For example, if one parent converted to Islam and sought to change a child's religion, both civil and Syariah courts might claim the right to decide, sometimes issuing contradictory judgments. These conflicts highlighted the tension between constitutional guarantees and religious authority.

Lawyers for Lina Joy: from the left in the back row, Yapp Hock Swee, Steven Thiruneelakandan, and Dato' Dr. Cyrus Das (center, front row)

Landmark cases

A landmark case that illustrates this struggle is Indira Gandhi vs. Jabatan Agama Islam (JAI) Perak (2018). Indira, a Hindu mother, challenged the unilateral conversion of her three young children to Islam by her ex-husband after he converted. Syariah courts initially validated the conversions, but Indira fought in civil courts for nearly a decade. In 2018, the Federal Court ruled in her favour, declaring the conversions were unconstitutional and affirming that civil courts have jurisdiction in interfaith custody and conversion matters. This ruling reasserted the supremacy of constitutional rights, including parental rights and freedom of religion for the children. However, the judgment has drawn criticism from Islamist groups, who argued that religious courts were being undermined by secular ones.

One of the famous cases was the Lina Joy case in 2007. Lina Joy, a Malay Muslim woman who had converted to Christianity, wanted her new faith to be legally recognised so she would no longer be identified as Muslim. The civil courts, however, ruled that leaving Islam fell under the jurisdiction of the Syariah courts. In practice, Syariah courts make it extremely difficult for Muslims to renounce Islam.

As a result, Lina Joy was denied a change of religion in her identity card. This outcome showed how freedom of religion, which is guaranteed under Article 11 of the Constitution, is restricted for Muslims when it clashes with Islamic rules on apostasy. The case sent a strong signal that in certain conflicts, religious authority could override individual rights, a precedent that continues to discourage other Muslims who might wish to change their faith.

Landmark cases

Another important case, though less well known, was Jamaluddin Othman @ Yeshua Jamaluddin in 1989. Jamaluddin, a Malay man, converted out of Islam and became a priest. He was detained under the Internal Security Act (ISA) for allegedly trying to spread Christianity to other Muslims. He challenged his detention, and the High Court ruled in his favour, freeing him and affirming that personal belief is not a matter of national security. This was a victory for civil liberty, and it took place during a period when the state was aggressively using security laws to maintain public order amid rising Islamic conservatism. The Jamaluddin case highlighted how the state's interest in enforcing religious conformity can collide with basic freedoms like freedom of thought, and how, at times, the judiciary stepped in to draw a line.

Taken together, these cases reveal an uneven legal landscape in Malaysia. At times, the courts have defended fundamental liberties, such as Indira Gandhi's right as a parent or Jamaluddin's protection from arbitrary detention. Yet in other instances, like the Lina Joy case, they have sided with a conservative religious stance that treats Islamic law as final for Muslims. This inconsistency creates uncertainty about how far constitutional rights truly extend when they overlap with religious matters.

The situation is further complicated by Malaysia's federal structure, where Syariah courts are administered by individual states. This means interpretations can vary: a more conservative state may enforce stricter rules, while a more moderate state may take a softer approach. The result is a patchwork application of Islamic law across the country, leaving citizens with different experiences of justice depending on where they live.

Chapter 6

Impact on Minorities and Social Cohesion

The rise of Islamisation in Malaysia has directly affected religious minorities: Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, and others who make up about 40% of the population. Although the Constitution formally protects their right to worship, disputes have increasingly surfaced. Some of these involve the demolition of temples or churches deemed "illegal" by local authorities, or the bureaucratic hurdles faced when trying to build new non-Muslim places of worship.

For many non-Muslims, such moves feel like encroachments on Malaysia's pluralist traditions. One of the most high-profile examples was the "Allah" controversy. In 2009, the Catholic Church sued for the right to use the word Allah, the Malay term for God, in its Malay-language newspaper, after the government banned it. The legal battle dragged on for years, swinging between different courts, until 2021, when the High Court finally ruled that Christians could use Allah in their publications. While this was celebrated as a victory for minority rights, it also sparked outrage among Islamist groups, showing how identity politics can be inflamed by religious conservatism and strain communal harmony.

Chapter 7

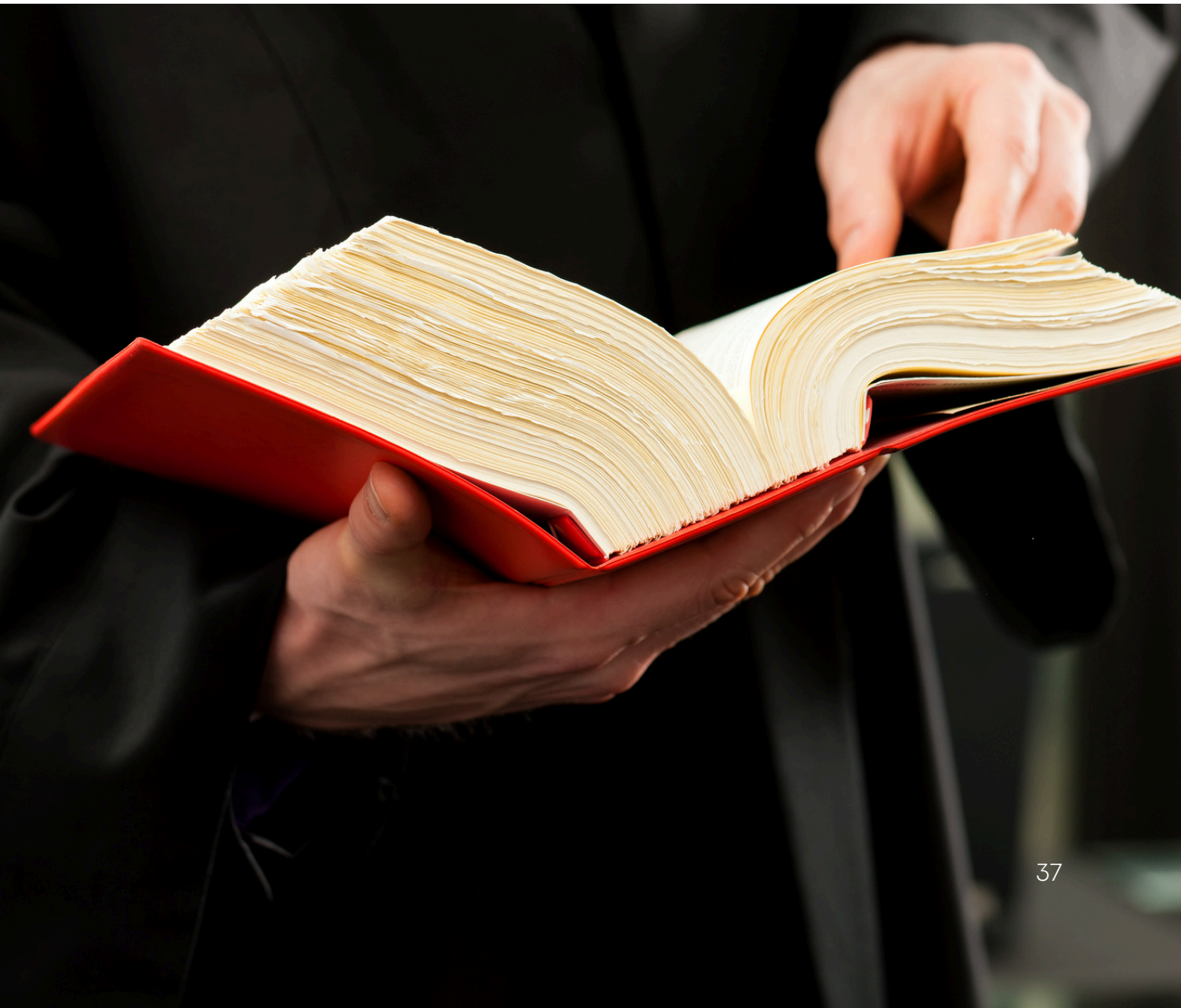
Constitutional Amendments and State Islamisation

Since independence, Malaysia's Constitution has been amended many times, but its basic secular framework remains intact. Islam is recognised as the religion of the Federation in a ceremonial sense, not as the foundation of a theocratic state, and fundamental liberties are still listed. Yet conservative lobbyists have occasionally pushed for amendments to elevate the status of Syariah courts to be equal to civil High Courts. If realised, such changes would remove the possibility of appealing Shari'ah rulings in civil courts. So far, these proposals have not succeeded, largely due to resistance from civil society and the caution of the multi-ethnic ruling coalition's wary of backlash.

Instead, Islamisation has advanced through state-level legislation and executive policies. For example, Kelantan and Terengganu passed hudud enactments in the 1990s and 2010s, introducing Islamic criminal laws, though they cannot be enforced without federal approval. Religious authorities have also issued guidelines enforcing Islamic morals, and enforcement officers have conducted raids on hotels to catch Muslims accused of khalwat (proximity between unmarried couples).

In cases where non-Muslims were involved, legal ambiguities sometimes arose, highlighting how the creeping jurisdiction of Islamic authorities can bypass constitutional safeguards.

In practice, this means the constitutional principle of equal protection is sometimes undermined. While Malaysia's legal framework still presents itself as secular and pluralist, the gradual expansion of religious authority has created grey areas where rights are unevenly applied, depending on faith and circumstance.



Chapter 8

Gender Equality and Legal Challenges

The effects of religious conservatism in Malaysia are more visible in women's rights. Islamisation has shaped laws and social policies around marriage, family, and personal morality, areas that often affect women most directly. Practices such as polygamy, child marriage, and moral policing have become flashpoints, raising questions about how Malaysia can reconcile its international commitments to gender equality with religious-based laws at home.

Malaysia is a signatory to the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Yet, in practice, certain religious laws conflict with the universal standards of gender equality that CEDAW promotes. For instance, Islamic family law in Malaysia allows Muslim men to marry multiple wives and sets different standards for divorce and inheritance between men and women.

These provisions have long been criticised by human rights advocates as discriminatory.

Progressive Muslim activists argue that such practices are rooted more in patriarchal cultural interpretations than in the true spirit of Islam. They point out that the Quran emphasises justice and fairness, values that should support equality rather than undermine it. These activists often bring forward constitutional guarantees, such as Article 8, which promises equality before the law, to challenge discriminatory treatment in family and morality laws.

On the other side, religious conservatives and clerics insist that these practices are part of Shari'ah and therefore cannot be easily changed. They argue that reforms, if any, must remain strictly within religious boundaries. This clash of perspectives has created a deep divide: one side pushing for reinterpretation and reform in the name of justice and equality, the other defending tradition as immutable.

Polygamy

Muslim men are allowed to have up to four wives, as permitted by Malaysia's Islamic Family law. To do so, they should obtain permission from the Syariah courts and prove that they can meet certain conditions, such as being financially capable and treating all wives fairly. In practice, however, women's rights groups argue that these conditions are often not met. Many cases show that men take additional wives without truly fulfilling the requirement of equal treatment, leaving earlier wives and children facing emotional neglect or financial hardship.

From the rights perspective, activists say polygamy inherently places women in an unequal position. They call for tightening the conditions, and abuse becomes impossible. Reformists often point out that other Muslim-majority countries, such as Tunisia, prohibited polygamy in 1956, making it a criminal offence and grounding the prohibition that true justice between co-wives is impossible.[5] Türkiye outlawed polygamy in the 1920s, as part of its civil code.

Even in countries where polygamy remains legal, such as Indonesia or Pakistan, it is relatively rare and usually requires court approval or the consent of the first wife, though enforcement is often weak.

In Malaysia, proposals have been made to limit polygamy. Yet these efforts face strong resistance from conservative factions, who argue that polygamy is divinely sanctioned and therefore cannot be prohibited. This ongoing debate reflects the broader struggle between reformist calls for gender equality and conservative insistence on preserving traditional practices.

[5]Poll misrepresents women's rights in Tunisia | Features | Al Jazeera. https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2013/11/28/poll-misrepresents-womens-rights-in-tunisia

Child Marriage

Child marriage highlights the clash between international human rights standards and conservative religious norms. Under civil law, the minimum age of marriage is 18 (or 16 with the chief minister's consent for non-Muslims). Under Islamic Family law, as applied in various states, girls below 16 can marry with the approval of the Syariah courts. In some states, there is no clear minimum age of marriage.

Religious authorities often justify child marriage by saying it is acceptable once a girl has reached baligh (puberty), or by arguing that it prevents sins such as premarital sex.

Research has shown that early marriage harms girls. It disrupts their education, exposes them to health risks from early pregnancies, and limits their future opportunities. Over the past decade, Malaysian civil society groups and some political leaders have campaigned to end child marriage. They pointed out that many Muslim-majority countries have already moved toward setting 18 and higher as the minimum age of marriage. Indonesia, for example, raised the minimum age for girls to 19 in 2019, making it equal to boys.

Public outrage in Malaysia has also grown after high-profile incidents, such as the case in 2018 when a 41-year-old man married an 11-year-old girl in Kelantan. In response, the government introduced a National Strategy Plan for Handling the Causes of Child Marriage. Yet progress has been slow, with legal reforms stalled. 11 states were reluctant to raise the minimum age of marriage to 18. The religious authorities often argue that raising the marriageable age contradicts religious allowances.

This problem remains urgent. Thousands of underage marriages have taken place in Malaysia over the past decade. In 2018, 1,856 children were married off. Many of these cases involve teenage girls due to premarital pregnancies and poverty. Families believe marriage will secure their daughter's future. For reformist and child advocates, the human cost is clear. They argue that true Islamic justice, guided by maqasid al-shari'ah (the objectives of Shari'ah), should prioritise protecting children from harm. Ending child marriage is not only a matter of children's rights but also faithfulness to Islam's core values of justice and compassion.

Moral Policing

Islamisation in Malaysia also expanded the scope of moral policing, the monitoring and enforcement of individuals' behaviour in public. State religious enforcement officers, often referred to as "religious police," were given powers to uphold public morality provisions under Islamic law. This led to raids targeting khalwat (situations where unmarried men and women are found in proximity), surveillance of nightclubs and parks, and arrests of Muslims allegedly of not fasting during Ramadan.

Women have often become victims of these measures. There have been cases of women fined for wearing attire deemed "immodest," such as short sleeves in public buildings, or for acting "indecently" simply by spending time with male friends. In some states, regulations have gone further, requiring workplaces to ensure Muslim women wear the tudung (headscarf) in certain contexts. There have even been attempts to segregate male and female seating in cinemas or at public events.

Conservatives justify these measures as necessary to uphold Islamic morals and prevent social problems. Human rights advocates, however, argue that the authorities infringe on personal privacy and autonomy, creating a climate of fear, humiliation or legal penalties for private acts. The growth of such policing has further constrained women's freedom of choice and everyday autonomy.

Occasionally, moral policing has also affected non-Muslims. In one case, a non-Muslim woman was mistakenly arrested during a khalwat raid, highlighting the risks of overreach. Similar patterns can be seen elsewhere in the region. In Indonesia's Aceh province, where Shari'ah law is enforced, women have been caned for moral offences, and local regulations on dress have sparked strong opposition from human rights groups. Moral policing often ends up restricting individual rights and undermining personal freedom.

Critical Perspectives and Advocacy

Women's rights organisations, with SIS Forum (Malaysia) (SIS) at the forefront, have been persistent in challenging gender injustices that arise from religious conservatism. SIS work spans public education programmes, campaigns, legal battles in court, and proposals for legislative reform. One of the key strategies is to operate within the Islamic framework itself. For example, SIS published books, booklets, bulletins, and infographics that emphasise justice and equality, and SIS trained women to become agents of social change so they can argue for women's rights either in Syariah courts or in communities.

SIS and its allies also stress that Malaysia's constitutional values and international reputation are at stake. Malaysia presents itself as a moderate Muslim nation and has achieved global recognition in areas like education and Islamic finance. Yet, why should the country fall behind when it comes to women's equality? SIS reminds policymakers of Malaysia's commitments under international agreements such as the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG).

By framing advocacy in Islamic terms and in the language of constitutional and international obligations, women's rights groups aim to show that advancing women's rights is not a threat to Malaysia's identity, but a fulfilment of its values and responsibilities.

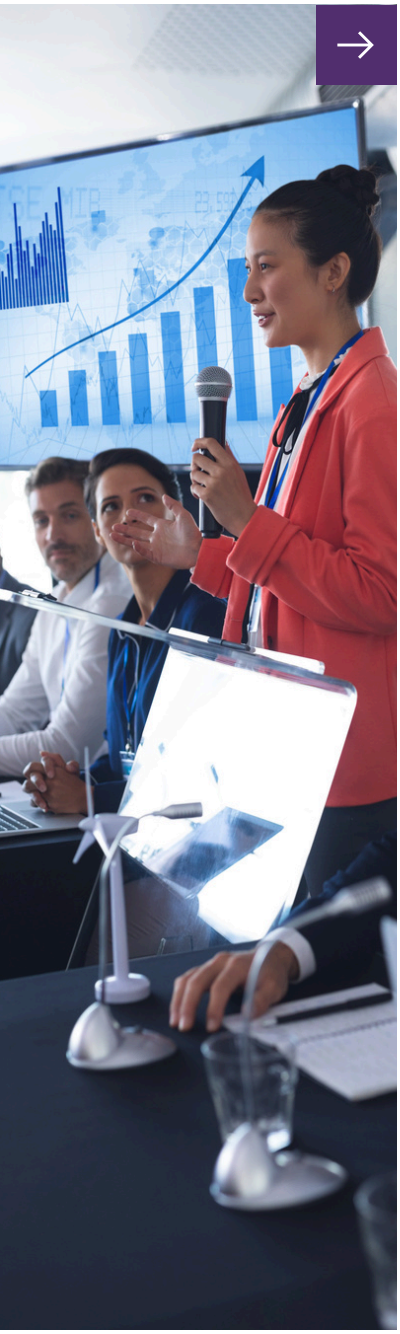
Aceh, Indonesia: When Dating Meets Sharia Law - The Diplomat. https://thediplomat.com/2019/07/aceh-indonesia-when-dating-meets-sharia-law/

Aceh flogs 13 young people for breaking its strict Islamic laws. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/oct/17/aceh-flogs-13-young-people-for-breaking-islamic-laws-sharia-intimacy-indonesian-province

Chapter 9

The Role of SUHAKAM: Human Rights within an Islamic Framework

One institution has played a crucial role in mediating between human rights principles and religious conservatism: the Human Rights Commission of Malaysia (SUHAKAM). Established in 1999, SUHAKAM's mandate is to promote and protect human rights by advising the government and conducting public inquiries. Operating in a society where Islamic conservatism has grown stronger, the commission has had to carefully balance universal rights standards with Malaysia's Islamic and cultural context to remain effective and credible.



SUHAKAM has engaged with sensitive issues such as freedom of religion, women's rights, and minority protections. To avoid being seen as "foreign" or disconnected from local values, it often frames its recommendations by drawing on international standards and Islamic teachings. For example, when advocating against child marriage, SUHAKAM cites not only the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) but also fatwas from Malaysian Islamic authorities that highlight the harms of underage marriage. On freedom of religion, the commission has defended the rights of minorities to worship and called for compassion in handling apostasy cases, reminding policymakers of the Qur'anic principle that "there is no compulsion in religion."

Beyond issuing recommendations, SUHAKAM has created platforms for dialogue. It has organised seminars that bring together Islamic scholars, legal experts, and civil society groups to discuss how Shari'ah goes along well with human rights. By fostering these conversations, the commission seeks to bridge misunderstandings and build common ground on difficult issues.

Challenges and Conservative Pushback

Despite its efforts, SUHAKAM has often faced strong resistance from conservative forces. Hardline groups and some figures within the government have accused the commission of promoting "Western agendas" or interfering in Islamic matters. For instance, when SUHAKAM proposed reforms to ensure greater equality for women, such as standardising the minimum age of marriage to 18 or amending inheritance laws, certain state muftis and politicians publicly rebuked the suggestions, claiming they went against Islam.

SUHAKAM faces pressures from political figures as well. In one case, a commissioner's term was not renewed, allegedly because she had spoken out on sensitive issues, including the disappearances of a Christian pastor and a Muslim social activist. Moreover, SUHAKAM's reports, whether annual human rights reviews or thematic studies, are frequently ignored by the government when they touch on religious matters. Conservative NGOs have staged protests, accusing SUHAKAM of undermining Malay rights or the position of Islam.

Internal Dynamics and Autonomy

In recent years, concerns have grown that SUHAKAM itself may be influenced by the rise of religious conservatism. Commissioners are appointed by the King on the advice of the government, and observers have noted that some appointees come from conservative or establishment backgrounds, including former officials from Islamic affairs departments or individuals sympathetic to Islamist views. This has raised fears that SUHAKAM's positions could become less progressive, or that its recommendations might be diluted by internal disagreements.

One example of this shift was SUHAKAM's stance on persecuted Muslim minority sects such as the Shiah and Ahmadiyyah. While the commission initially spoke boldly in defence of their rights, later statements were noticeably more cautious, suggesting internal hesitation.

Another limitation is SUHAKAM's lack of enforcement power. It can investigate and recommend, but it cannot compel the government to act. For instance, SUHAKAM carried out a detailed inquiry into child marriages and issued strong recommendations, but implementation depended on political will. Even when governments showed some intention to reform, such as during the Pakatan Harapan administration from 2018 to 2020, political upheavals and conservative pushback often stalled progress.

As a result, SUHAKAM frequently plays the role of a persistent advocate and moral conscience, reminding the authorities of their responsibilities. Its effectiveness lies less in direct power and more in its ability to keep human rights issues on the agenda, even in the face of resistance.

Strengthening SUHAKAM could be crucial in balancing Islamisation with pluralism. Giving the commission more power, such as the ability to enforce its recommendations or ensuring that commissioners are appointed with strong human rights credentials, would make it a more effective guardian of rights. SUHAKAM itself has suggested that it should be accountable directly to Parliament rather than the Prime Minister's Department, and that its advice should carry greater weight in policymaking.

Challenges and Conservative Pushback

SUHAKAM's effectiveness depends on the political climate. A government confident in a moderate mandate might embrace SUHAKAM's findings and use them to push through reforms. A government reliant on conservative support, by contrast, may prefer to keep SUHAKAM at arm's length.

SUHAKAM's Role in Malaysia's Bigger Picture

On the positive side, the existence of SUHAKAM shows that Malaysia recognises human rights as important. It gives ordinary people a place to voice their concerns and makes it possible to openly discuss sensitive issues that might be ignored.

SUHAKAM has openly suggested that it should report directly to Parliament rather than to the Prime Minister's Department, and that its recommendations should be taken more seriously. This reflects its desire to be seen as an independent body with real influence.

At its best, SUHAKAM has helped bring about real change. For instance, it influenced the government to drop a bill that discriminated against certain groups and pushed for police training that respected the right to peaceful assembly.

Even with these challenges, SUHAKAM continues to play an important role. Its ongoing work ensures that human rights remain part of Malaysia's national conversation. By keeping issues such as equality, freedom of belief, and the rights of vulnerable communities on the table, SUHAKAM helps the country navigate the delicate balance between religious values and individual freedoms.

Malaysia's success also caught global attention. Countries with small Muslim populations, such as Britain and Japan, issued sukuk to attract investors, while Pakistan and Sudan tried to Islamise their entire banking systems, though with mixed results. Malaysia's approach stood out because it combined financial innovation with religious oversight. Shari'ah boards regularly audited products to ensure they avoided interest and excessive uncertainty, while still allowing new ideas like Islamic credit cards and Shari'ah-compliant investment funds.

This was a source of pride, proof that Islamic principles could thrive in a modern economy. For pluralists, Malaysia's dual banking system showed that Islamic and conventional finance could coexist without major conflict. Still, some critics argued that Islamic banks often charged "profit rates" that looked very similar to conventional interest, raising questions about whether the difference was more about form than substance.

Beyond banking, Malaysia branded itself as a global halal hub. Halal certification became a booming industry, with Malaysia's JAKIM certification recognised internationally. This extended into food, cosmetics, pharmaceuticals, and even tourism, with hotels offering alcohol-free stays and prayer facilities. These developments created new economic opportunities while reinforcing the idea that daily life could, and perhaps should, align with Islamic values.

In this way, Islamisation did not necessarily clash with modern living. Instead, it blended into it, strengthening Malaysia's global image and soft power while reshaping how ordinary people experienced business, culture, and community.

Chapter 10

Islamisation in Everyday Life: Finance, Culture, and Community

The influence of religious conservatism in Malaysia is not limited to politics or schools. It is felt in daily life, in the way businesses operate, how people spend their leisure time, and how communities are shaped through dakwah (missionary) activities. Together, these changes show how Islamisation has become woven into the fabric of society.

Islamic Finance and the Halal Economy

Malaysia was one of the first countries to develop Islamic finance, and by the 2000s it had built a full ecosystem around it. Almost every bank offered Islamic products, most corporate bonds were issued as sukuk, and the stock exchange even had a Shari'ah index. By 2020, one in four loans and financing arrangements in Malaysia were Islamic.

This shift was highly visible to the public. Banks promoted "Islamic mortgages" and "hibah savings accounts," insurance agents sold takaful policies, and everyday people became familiar with terms like mudharabah (profit-sharing) and ijarah (leasing). What started as a niche idea became mainstream.

Popular Culture and Media

The influence of Islam in Malaysia is seen in the way people consume entertainment and culture. Over the years, Islamic themes have become more visible in television, music, and fashion, shaping what society views as normal and respectable.

Television shows and dramas increasingly feature storylines about repentance or portrayals of ideal religious families. These programs often carry moral lessons that encourage modest dressing, respect for parents, and avoiding close interaction between men and women. At the same time, mainstream entertainment has faced restrictions. International artists whose performances or lyrics were considered offensive to religious values often had their concerts cancelled or protested. Even local music videos have been censored for scenes deemed inappropriate.

As a result, many in the arts industry began to adapt. Some chose to self-censor, while others created content that appealed directly to conservative audiences. Nasyid boy bands emerged in the early 2000s as an alternative to mainstream pop music, offering religiously themed songs with a modern twist.

Another striking trend has been the rise of celebrity preachers. These are religious figures who gained massive followings through television and social media, like televangelists elsewhere. Personalities like Don Daniyal and Ebit Lew became household names, while in Indonesia, figures such as Abdul Somad attracted millions of viewers online.

Their charismatic style made religious devotion appear "cool," especially among younger audiences. Social media amplified their reach, with sermons on YouTube and Facebook drawing millions of views. While their messages often encouraged a return to fundamental practices, some content also sparked controversy, particularly when it was seen as divisive.

Fashion has also been reshaped. Modest fashion influencers and hijab stylists turned Instagram into a platform showcasing how one could be stylish while fully covered. This gave young women more choices, making modest fashion empowering in one sense. Yet it also reinforced the expectation that a respectable woman should cover her hair and body.

These cultural shifts created an aura that being visibly pious brings social respect, and social respect encourages more visible piety. Importantly, this shows that Islamisation is not imposed by authorities. It often grows from within society itself, driven by trends, peer influence, and commercials. When soap operas promote certain family values or when famous actresses leave entertainment for religious reasons, these choices send powerful signals about what is considered virtuous.

Dr. Zakir Naik, a prominent and controversial Islamic preacher, speaking at an event in Malaysia.

The Cumulative Impact of Dakwah Movements

Over the decades, dakwah movements have left a clear mark on Malaysian society. Outward signs of Islamic adherence are now everywhere, and public discussions often begin from a conservative moral standpoint. To picture this change, imagine walking through urban Malaysia in 1970 compared to 2020. Today, you would see more women wearing headscarves, some shops playing nasyid songs instead of pop music, public events open with Quranic recitations, and debates whether Malaysia Airlines stewardess uniforms should be more Shari'ah-compliant. These are visible outcomes of Islamisation becoming part of everyday life.

Many Malaysians feel the Islamic revival has brought discipline, purpose, and unity. The emphasis on charity, through zakat and volunteerism has supported countless poor families. Islamic banking has given devout Muslims peace of mind in their financial dealings.

At the same time, challenges remain. When a dominant religious identity is projected too strongly, people of other faiths or those with more liberal views may feel excluded or treated as second-class citizens. For Malaysia to thrive, it must find a way to balance these aspects of public life, allowing faith to be a source of personal and communal strength without turning into a cause of division or social regression.

Public talk by Zakir Naik titled "Duty of a Muslim Professional," held at Universiti Utara Malaysia, Kedah, on 18th April 2019.

Chapter 11

Recommendations for Future Policy

Malaysia faces the challenge of balancing religious conservatism with its commitments to democracy, equality, and pluralism. To move forward, policies must be carefully designed so that the country remains inclusive and fair, while still respecting the role of Islam in national life.

Comprehensive Policy Review and Reform

The government should carry out a thorough review of laws and policies that have been shaped by the Islamisation drive, to check whether they align with constitutional rights and human dignity. Over the years, the growth of Islamic institutions such as JAKIM and state religious departments has created overlapping jurisdictions and sometimes conflicting authorities. For example, disputes between civil and Syariah courts in conversion cases, or the overlap between religious enforcement officers and the civil police in matters of moral policing, have caused confusion and tension.

To address this, a high-level commission under Parliament could be set up to examine:

- Jurisdictional boundaries, ensuring that fundamental rights remain under the authority of civil courts.
- The necessity and impact of certain Shari'ah laws, asking whether criminalising personal moral behaviour truly serves the public interest or simply infringes on privacy.

Legal reforms should follow. In a case of child marriage, the government should raise the minimum marriage age to 18 for all Malaysians, including Muslims, through federal law. This would provide a uniform safeguard consistent with international standards. If religious justification is needed, Malaysia can point to examples from other Muslim-majority countries such as Egypt, Morocco, and Indonesia, which already set 18 and 19 as the minimum age.

Similarly, reforms to Islamic family law could help improve gender equality. This might include stricter judicial checks on polygamy or making divorce rights more balanced between men and women. Other Muslim societies offer useful lessons: Türkiye's civil code and Tunisia's Personal Status Code show that it is possible to uphold Islamic identity while granting women equal rights. The countries have demonstrated that Islamic jurisprudence has room for more equitable interpretations.

Strengthening Human Rights Institutions

Malaysia can benefit from giving more power to independent bodies like SUHAKAM so they can play a stronger role in balancing religious practices with human rights. SUHAKAM should not just be a symbolic institution; it should have the authority to review new laws, including Shari'ah-related ones, to ensure they comply with human rights standards. Its recommendations should be taken seriously, debated in Parliament, and not dismissed outright.

To make SUHAKAM more effective, its membership should be diverse, including progressive Islamic scholars, lawyers and activists. This would give its statements more weight in religious discussions.

Judges, both civil and Shari'ah, should receive ongoing training in human rights standards and the higher objectives of Islamic law (maqasid al-Shari'ah). This would help them interpret laws in ways that protect rights. Pakistan's higher courts have sometimes struck down discriminatory laws by appealing to Islamic principles of fairness, Malaysia's courts could do the same if equipped with strong arguments.

Another useful idea would be to establish an Ombudsperson's Office for Shari'ah matters, where citizens, especially women and minorities, could lodge complaints about abuses by religious authorities and have them addressed transparently.

Upholding Constitutional Integrity

Malaysia's Federal Constitution is the highest law of the land, and this principle must be reinforced through policy and education. Any law, whether civil or Shari'ah, that contradicts constitutional rights should be reviewed. Leaders should make clear that Malaysia's identity includes Islam as a central pillar but also guarantees the rights of non-Muslim citizens.

Constitutional law courses should be compulsory in both civil and Islamic law faculties, since many Shari'ah lawyers are not deeply trained in constitutional rights. Public discussions should highlight historical examples of pluralism in Islamic governance, such as the Charter of Medina under Prophet Muhammad, which respected diverse tribes and faiths. The example must show that modern constitutions are not necessarily at odds with Islam.

Interfaith initiatives should also be supported. Forums where religious leaders jointly address issues like hate speech or domestic violence can demonstrate shared values. Education plays a role too: civics classes should highlight the contributions of all communities to Malaysia and promote unity in diversity, as envisioned in the national philosophy of Rukun Negara.

Promoting Moderation and Inclusive Narratives

To counter extremism and the dominance of ultra-conservative voices, Malaysia should actively promote moderate and progressive Islamic thought. This means giving more space to scholars, activists, and organisations that advocate for compassionate, context-sensitive interpretations of Islam.

The government and private sector can support this by funding research, publications, and lecture series featuring respected moderate scholars. For example, inviting speakers from Indonesia's Nahdlatul Ulama, which has spoken out against extremism, or Tunisian scholars who have supported women's rights, could broaden perspectives.

The media is also crucial. Platforms such as TV shows, documentaries, and social media campaigns can highlight progressive Islamic perspectives; how Islamic teachings support environmental protection or how religious law can evolve to meet modern needs.

Youth engagement is key. Universities and schools could host debate clubs, exchange programs, and internships that expose students to diverse interpretations of Islam. For example, exchanges between Malaysian and Indonesian students who went to traditional boarding schools (pesantren) and were exposed to the concept of gender from a young age. "Ulama internships" could place young religious teachers in civil society organisations, while NGO activists could spend time in religious departments, building mutual understanding and breaking stereotypes.

The goal is to create a counter-narrative to hardline conservatism. If one preacher says "women must obey or be cursed by angels," there should be other voices saying "men and women are garments for each other, as the Quran teaches, implying mutual love and respect." With institutional and public support, these alternative voices can gradually shift public sentiment toward moderation and balance.

Community-Level Initiatives and Dialogue

At the local level, Malaysia can strengthen harmony by encouraging open dialogue and bridge-building activities. Mosques can serve as more than just places of worship. Some have already hosted open days for non-Muslims, creating opportunities for neighbours to understand one another better.

Dialogue within the Muslim community is equally important. Malay culture has historically been moderate and shaped by local customs (adat), and these traditions deserve space alongside stricter interpretations.

The media and the arts can also play a role in easing tensions. Films or theatre productions that respectfully portray interfaith friendships or highlight strong, independent Muslim women can challenge stereotypes and spark thoughtful conversations gently.

Regional and International Cooperation

Malaysia is navigating the balance between faith and modern life. There is much to gain from regional and global cooperation. Within ASEAN, Malaysia could spearhead an initiative on Faith and Tolerance, bringing together policymakers and NGOs from countries such as Thailand (southern part), Indonesia, Brunei, and the Philippines (Mindanao island). These exchanges could share best practices, for instance, Indonesia's approach to Islamic education in multi-faith schools, or Malaysia's expertise in Islamic finance, while jointly developing strategies to counter extremist propaganda.

On the global stage, Malaysia's reputation as a functioning Muslim nation gives it a unique platform. It could champion human rights improvements within the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). This could draw inspiration from Morocco's Moudawana or the Cairo Declaration on Human Rights in Islam, with an update from today's realities. Malaysia could also engage with global reform movements such as Musawah (which advocates for equality in the family) or the Marrakesh Declaration (which promotes minority rights in Muslim countries), lending legitimacy to domestic reforms.

Implementing these recommendations will not be easy. It requires political will, courage, and strong public support. They provide a roadmap for Malaysia to remain true to the best of its Islamic heritage, values of compassion, justice, and learning, while ensuring that the rights and dignity of all citizens are upheld in a modern democratic framework.

Conclusion

Malaysia's journey with religious conservatism over the past few decades is a complex story of change. It has brought progress and challenges. On the positive side, Islamisation has helped build national identity, giving Malay-Muslims pride in their heritage, creating internationally respected institutions such as Islamic banks and the International Islamic University Malaysia, and giving the country a strong voice in the Muslim world. Malaysia today is often seen as proof that an Islamic society can be modern, dynamic, and economically successful.

At the same time, the conservative turn has raised difficult questions about how to balance religious authority with constitutional freedoms. It has tested Malaysia's founding principle of pluralism and strained the idea of equal citizenship. Islamisation is not a fixed or one-way process. It shifts over time, with moments of progress and moments of pushback. The ongoing debates about court rulings, dress codes, or school syllabuses prove that Malaysia's path is still unfolding.

The religious conservative movement takes place in other countries as well. Indonesia struggles with rising religious conservatism against its pluralist traditions. Türkiye wrestles with religion's role under a secular constitution. Pakistan still deals with the legacy of past Islamisation in its laws and governance. Tunisia, after bold reforms for women's rights, now faces pressure from newer conservative currents.

Each country has its own context, but the common challenge is clear: finding a balance between faith and freedom, between respecting religion and protecting the rights of all citizens. It warns how easily politics can use religion, how rights can shrink if not defended, and how conservative norms, once entrenched, are hard to undo. Yet it also shows how Islamic principles and modern governance can co-exist.

Moving forward, Malaysians must commit to the nation's core values: constitutionalism, justice, and inclusivity. Policymakers need courage to reform laws even in the face of opposition. Educators and civil society must find creative ways to build understanding across differences. Religious leaders must emphasize Islam's core values of mercy and compassion rather than punitive enthusiasm. The message is clear: one can be both a good Muslim and a good citizen in a multi-religious democracy.

Malaysia currently finds itself at a crucial juncture. History indicates that societies sacrificing freedom and dignity in the name of religion do not achieve lasting peace or prosperity. Conversely, those who integrate faith into a broader framework of human rights and knowledge tend to thrive and make significant contributions to civilisation.

Malaysia possesses the essential elements to belong to the latter group: a diverse population, a moderate Islamic heritage, and strong institutions. Although the path ahead may be challenging, through perseverance, dialogue, and a shared faith, both spiritual and in our common humanity, Malaysia can continue to be an example of how a Muslim-majority nation can embrace modernity without losing its essence.

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