

# MALAYSIA 2017 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

## Executive Summary

The constitution states Islam is the “religion of the Federation; but other religions may be practiced in peace and harmony.” Federal and state governments have the power to mandate doctrine for Muslims and promote Sunni Islam above all other religious groups. Other forms of Islam are illegal and subject to action by religious authorities. The government maintains a parallel legal system, with certain civil matters for Muslims covered by sharia. The relationship between sharia and civil law remains unresolved in the legal system. In August the ruling government coalition permitted a bill drafted by the opposition Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) to be introduced in parliament that would significantly raise current limits on sharia courts’ punishment powers, although lawmakers did not vote on the bill. Sedition laws criminalize speech that “promotes ill will, hostility, or hatred on the grounds of religion.” Despite closed circuit television footage of the kidnapping of a Christian pastor and eyewitness testimony, police reportedly made little progress investigating the incident. Authorities announced they would investigate reports the pastor was involved in proselytizing Muslims. The government arrested hundreds of persons practicing forms of Islam other than Sunni, including Shia Muslims celebrating Ashura, and individuals whom authorities said insulted religion or incited “religious disharmony.” The government continued to bar Muslims from converting to another religion and imposed fines, detentions, and canings on those classified under the law as Muslims who contravened sharia codes. Non-Muslims continued to face legal difficulty in using the word “Allah” to denote God. The government canceled a Christian prayer gathering to be held in Melaka State, saying it would upset the sensibilities of Muslims during Ramadan. A Muslim government-supported consumer group implied it could take violent measures against the Ahmadiyya Muslim community; police intervened to prevent the group from protesting outside the community’s headquarters. Non-Sunni religious groups continued to report difficulty in gaining registration as nonprofit charitable organizations or building houses of worship; religious converts had difficulty changing their religion on their national identification cards.

Local human rights organizations and religious leaders again stated that society continued to become increasingly intolerant of religious diversity. They continued to cite some Muslim groups’ public condemnation of events and activities they said were “un-Islamic,” as well as other statements targeting Muslim and non-Muslim groups. Citing 400 cases of Muslims appealing to sharia courts to convert to another religion, the chief executive officer of a government-linked human

rights group called for a ban on the Christian evangelism movement, a move he implied was necessary for “national security.” Muslim women who did not dress in what others considered modest attire continued to report incidents of public shaming.

U.S. embassy officials regularly discussed with government officials and leaders at the Ministry of Home Affairs, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Prime Minister’s Department, among others, issues including constitutional guarantees of freedom of religion, proposed legislation affecting religious groups, and increasing religious intolerance. Embassy representatives also met with members of religious groups, including those not officially recognized by the government. The embassy’s continued engagement with the government and religious organizations included speaker programs and visitor exchanges to promote religious tolerance and freedom. The Ambassador led a “Harmony Walk” with faith leaders in Kuala Lumpur to promote religious tolerance; the embassy disseminated photos and video of the event to highlight the importance of interfaith dialogue and acceptance.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 31.4 million (July 2017 estimate). Census figures from the most recent census in 2010 indicate that 61.3 percent of the population practices Islam; 19.8 percent, Buddhism; 9.2 percent, Christianity; 6.3 percent, Hinduism; and 1.3 percent, Confucianism, Taoism, or other traditional Chinese philosophies and religions. Other religious groups include animists, Sikhs, and Bahais. Ethnic Malays, who are defined in the federal constitution as Muslims from birth, account for approximately 55 percent of the population. Rural areas – especially in the east coast of peninsular Malaysia – are predominantly Muslim, while the states of Sabah and Sarawak on the island of Borneo have relatively higher numbers of non-Muslims. Reports indicate that a growing number of converts to Christianity are ethnic Chinese middle-class individuals who were originally Buddhists or Confucianists.

## **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

### **Legal Framework**

The federal constitution states that “every person has the right to profess and practice his religion,” but gives federal and state governments the power to control or restrict proselytization to Muslims. The constitution names Islam as the

“religion of the Federation,” and gives parliament powers to make provisions regulating Islamic religious affairs. Federal and state governments have the power to “control or restrict the propagation of any religious doctrine or belief among persons professing the religion of Islam.” The constitution identifies the traditional rulers, also known as sultans, as the “Heads of Islam” within their respective states. Sultans are present in nine of the country’s 13 states and are the highest Islamic authority; in the remaining four states and the Federal Territories, the highest Islamic authority is the king. Sultans oversee the sharia courts and appoint judges based on the recommendation of the respective state Islamic religious departments and councils who manage the operations of the courts. In states with no sultan and in the Federal Territories, the king assumes responsibility for this process. The law allows citizens and organizations to sue the government for constitutional violations of religious freedom. Federal law has constitutional precedence over state law, except in matters concerning Islamic law. A 1996 fatwa, supported by state laws, requires the country to follow only Sunni teachings of the Shafi’i school and prohibits Muslims from possessing, publishing, or distributing material contrary to those teachings.

Muslims who seek to convert to another religion must first obtain approval from a sharia court to declare themselves “apostates.” Sharia courts seldom grant such requests and can impose penalties on apostates, including enforced “rehabilitation.” In the states of Perak, Melaka, Sabah, and Pahang, apostasy is a criminal offense punishable by a fine or jail term. In Pahang, up to six strokes of the cane may also be imposed. The maximum penalty for apostasy in the states of Kelantan and Terengganu is death. These laws have never been enforced and their legal status remains untested. Nationally, civil courts generally cede authority to sharia courts in cases concerning conversion from Islam, and sharia courts remain unwilling to allow such conversions for those who are born Muslims and reluctant to allow conversion for those who had previously converted to Islam. In some states, sharia allows one parent to convert children to Islam without the consent of the second parent.

There are laws that restrict and punish speech seen as criticizing Sunni Islam.

Sedition laws regulate and punish, among other acts, speech considered hostile to ethnic groups, which includes speech insulting Islam. Convictions can result in prison sentences of three to seven years, or up to 20 years if there is physical harm or damage to property. The law also bars speech that “promotes ill will, hostility, or hatred on the grounds of religion.”

The federal Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM) and state Islamic authorities prepare Friday sermons for congregations as well as oversee and approve the appointment of imams at mosques. JAKIM and state Islamic officials must formally approve all teachers of Islam before they may be allowed to preach or lecture on Islam in public.

There is no legal requirement for other religious groups to register, but in order to become approved nonprofit charitable organizations, all groups must register with the government's registrar of societies (RoS) by submitting paperwork showing the organization's leadership, purpose, and rules, and paying a small fee. Once registered, these organizations continue to be registered as long as they submit annual reports to the RoS as legally required.

Tax laws allow a tax exemption for registered religious groups for donations received and a tax deduction for the individual donors. Donors giving *zakat* (tithes) to Muslim religious organizations receive a tax rebate. Donors to government-approved charitable organizations (including some non-Muslim religious groups) may receive a tax deduction on the contribution rather than a tax rebate.

The law forbids proselytizing of Muslims by non-Muslims, with punishments varying from state to state, and including imprisonment and caning. The law allows and supports Muslims proselytizing others. The law does not restrict the rights of non-Muslims to change their religious beliefs and affiliation. A non-Muslim wishing to marry a Muslim must convert to Islam for the marriage to be officially recognized. A minor (under the age of 18, according to federal law) generally may not convert to another faith without the explicit permission of his or her guardian; however, some states' laws allow conversion to Islam without permission after age 15.

All Islamic houses of worship – including mosques and *surau* (prayer rooms) – fall under the authority of JAKIM and corresponding state Islamic departments; officials at these departments must give permission for the construction of any mosque or *surau*.

Islamic religious instruction is compulsory for Muslim children in public schools; non-Muslim students are required to take nonreligious morals and ethics courses. Private schools may offer a non-Islamic religious curriculum as an option for non-Muslims.

Sharia courts have jurisdiction over Muslims in matters of family law and religious observances. A constitutional amendment provides that civil courts have no jurisdiction with respect to any matter within the jurisdiction of the sharia courts. Non-Muslims have no standing in sharia proceedings, leading to some cases where sharia court rulings have affected non-Muslims who have no ability to defend their position or appeal the court's decision, most frequently in rulings affecting custody, divorce, inheritance, burial, and conversion in interfaith families. The relationship between sharia and civil law remains largely unresolved in the legal system. Two states, Kelantan and Terengganu, have symbolically enacted *hudood* (the Islamic penal law) for Muslims, although the federal government has never allowed the code to be implemented. The states cannot implement these laws without amendments to federal legislation and the agreement of the sultan.

The legal age of marriage is 16 for Muslim females and 18 for Muslim males, although they may marry before reaching those ages with the permission of their parents and the sharia courts. Non-Muslims must be 18 to marry.

National identity cards specify religious affiliation and are used by the government to determine which citizens are subject to sharia. The cards identify Muslims in print on the face of the card; for members of other recognized religions, religious affiliation is only encrypted in a smart chip within the identity card. Married Muslims must carry a special photo identification of themselves and their spouse as proof of marriage.

The country is not a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

### **Government Practices**

*Summary Paragraph:* Police made little progress investigating a Christian pastor's kidnapping by armed individuals that was caught on closed circuit television. The government continued to forbid any non-Sunni practice of Islam, arresting at least 25 Shia and detaining others for celebrating Ashura. It barred Muslims from converting to another religion, and imposed fines, detentions, and canings on those classified under the law as Muslim who contravened sharia codes. In August the ruling government coalition permitted a bill to be introduced in parliament that significantly raised current limits on sharia courts' punishment powers, although lawmakers did not vote on the bill. It also limited proselytization by non-Muslim religious groups and restricted the distribution of religious texts. Restrictions remained on the use of the word "Allah" by non-Muslims. The government

canceled a Christian prayer gathering to be held in Melaka State, saying it would upset the sensibilities of Muslims during Ramadan. Police intervened to prevent a Muslim government-supported consumer group from protesting outside the Ahmadiyya Muslim community's headquarters. The consumer group had implied it could take violent measures against Ahmadiyya Muslims. The government prosecuted some individuals deemed to have "insulted Islam." Since Islam, Malay ethnic identity, and the ruling United Malays National Organization (UMNO) political party were closely linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity.

In February a group of armed individuals abducted Raymond Koh, a Christian pastor, from his vehicle on a suburban Kuala Lumpur highway. Despite closed circuit television footage of the kidnapping and eyewitness testimony, police made little progress investigating the incident, leading to widespread speculation among the public that government officials were involved in an attempt to intimidate the Christian community, a charge the police denied. The inspector general of police later announced that police would investigate reports that Koh was involved in proselytizing Muslims, adding, "It would not be fair if we only investigated Raymond's disappearance." Police reportedly made little progress in investigating the separate disappearances in 2016 of another Christian pastor, Joshua Hilmy, and his wife Ruth, in addition to Amri Che Mat, a Muslim activist said to be linked to Shia teachings. In May the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights' Regional Office for South-East Asia said in a statement, "Enforced disappearances are rare in Malaysia and it is deeply concerning that little progress has been made in these cases." In October the Malaysian Human Rights Commission initiated a public inquiry into the disappearances; the public inquiry remained in progress at year's end.

The government continued to monitor Shia Muslims and take action against those engaged in practicing their religious rituals, which the government continued to consider "deviant" activity. In September the Selangor State Islamic Department (JAIS) temporarily detained 200 Shia Iraqi nationals participating in an event marking the Ashura holiday. Separately, religious authorities arrested 21 Shia men in Johor State and four Shia men in Kedah State for observing Ashura. The 200 Shia Iraqi nationals were quickly released, reportedly following pressure from Iraqi authorities. Under sharia law, which differs by state, individuals convicted of "deviant" religious activity face up to three years in prison or a 5,000 ringgit (RM) (\$1,200) fine for "insulting Islam."

In September immigration authorities temporarily detained Mustafa Akyol, a Turkish journalist and visiting fellow at a U.S. university, as he attempted to board a flight departing the country. Akyol and Ahmad Farouk Musa of the Islamic Renaissance Front had previously been summoned by the Kuala Lumpur Islamic Affairs Department in relation to a speech Akyol delivered at a private club on apostasy in Islam. The Islamic Renaissance Front also canceled a speech Akyol was scheduled to give later in Kuala Lumpur on the advice of the Islamic Affairs Department. Authorities said Akyol was in violation of a law prohibiting individuals from teaching “any matter relating to the religion of Islam” without authorization. The government also banned Akyol’s book *Islam Without Extremes: A Muslim Case for Liberty* and its Bahasa Malaysia translation, arguing it was “prejudicial to public order” and likely to “alarm the public.” In November another prominent private club in Kuala Lumpur announced it was cancelling a lecture by a visiting U.S. academic and would reject any future requests to host religion-related events on its grounds to avoid breaking government restrictions on religious forums.

JAKIM continued to implement established federal guidelines concerning what constituted deviant Islamic behavior or belief. According to the government, authorities identified 17 “deviant teachings” in the country during the year and arrested a total of 246 individuals for their involvement in practicing such beliefs. There are 56 groups that JAKIM has deemed “deviant.” State religious authorities generally followed these guidelines. Those differing from the official interpretation of Islam continued to face adverse government action, including mandatory “rehabilitation” in centers that teach and enforce government-approved Islamic practices. The government forbade individuals to leave such centers until they completed the program, which varied in length, but often lasted approximately six months. These counseling programs continued to be designed to ensure the detainee adopted the government’s official interpretation of Islam.

In March a civil appeals court ruled in the case of the nongovernmental organization (NGO) Sisters in Islam (SIS) against Selangor State Islamic Council (MAIS) authorities that the case should be heard again by the lower court, but with a different judge. In July the Federal Court allowed MAIS’ appeal of the March decision; the case remained ongoing at year’s end. The case stemmed from a 2014 fatwa with the force of state religious law labeling the NGO a “religiously deviant organization for subscribing to liberalism and pluralism.” In 2016 a lower civil court ruled that only the sharia court had the authority to decide on the validity of the fatwa.

State Islamic religious enforcement officers continued to have the authority to accompany police on raids of private premises and public establishments, and to enforce sharia, including for violations such as indecent dress, distribution of banned publications, alcohol consumption, or *khalwat* (close proximity to a nonfamily member of the opposite sex). In January the Federal Territories Islamic Religious Department (JAWI) arrested a married couple for close proximity despite proof of their marriage. The couple subsequently sued JAWI, accusing the agency of violently detaining them and causing injuries. The case remained pending at the end of the year. In September state religious authorities required a Muslim man to attend a “counseling session” after he was stopped for wearing shorts in public. According to some state laws, Muslims could be fined RM 1,000 (\$250) if they did not attend “counseling” after being found guilty of wearing what the authorities deem to be immodest clothing.

Civil society activists said the government selectively prosecuted speech allegedly denigrating Islam and largely ignored criticisms of other faiths. In November the government stated atheism was unconstitutional and threatened to use sedition laws against anyone spreading its tenets. The government did not take any action against those issuing violent threats against nonbelievers.

In October Zamihan Mat Zin, a preacher and former JAKIM official, criticized the hygiene practices of Chinese Malaysians in a speech defending a controversial Muslim-only launderette. Police arrested him under sedition laws for criticizing the Sultan of Johor, who had ordered the launderette to reverse its policy. The preacher was not charged by year’s end.

Officials at the federal and state levels oversaw Islamic religious activities, distributed all sermon texts for mosques to follow, used mosques to convey political messages, and limited public expression of religion deemed contrary to Sunni Islam.

The government maintained restrictions on religious assembly and provisions which denied certain religious groups the ability to register as charitable organizations. Many churches and NGOs continued to find registration difficult, with the RoS denying or delaying many applications without explanation or for highly technical reasons. Representatives of religious groups continued to say the registrar had no consistent policy or transparent criteria for determining whether to register religious groups. In cases in which the government refused to register a religious group, the group could pursue registration as a company. Religious groups reported that registering as a company was generally relatively quick and

provided a legal basis for conducting business, did not limit the group's religious activities, and allowed the organization certain activities such as holding a bank account and owning property, but did not give the organization tax-exempt status or government funding. Examples of groups that continued to be registered as companies included Jehovah's Witnesses and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons).

In June the government canceled the "Jerusalem Jubilee," a Christian prayer gathering to be held in Melaka State, saying it would upset the sensibilities of Muslims during Ramadan. In response to the Jerusalem Jubilee event, a PAS member of parliament said Muslims must "rise up to defend the community and country from the savagery of Christian evangelists."

The government launched an investigation into a meeting of atheists after a photo of an "Atheist Republic" event in Kuala Lumpur spread on social media in early August. A government minister was quoted in local media calling on authorities to "track them down and identify each one of them," referring to those who appeared in the photo. In response to the incident, the Mufti of Negeri Sembilan State told the media that Islam prescribes death for Muslims who become atheists, although he added that Malaysian sharia courts could not implement such punishments.

The federal and state governments continued to forbid religious assembly and worship for groups considered to be deviant Islamic groups such as Shia, Ahmadiyya, and Al-Arqam. While Ahmadi Muslims in the country reported generally being able to maintain a worship center, government religious authorities did not allow them to hold Friday prayers as these could only be performed in an officially registered mosque. In October the Muslim Consumer Association of Malaysia (PPIM), a government-supported group, held a press conference denouncing the Ahmadiyya Muslim community and implied PPIM could take violent measures against its members. Police intervened to prevent a PPIM protest outside the Ahmadiyya Muslim community's headquarters outside Kuala Lumpur, although PPIM remained vocal in its call for the government to close down the organization and its mosque. Local authorities have permitted billboards proclaiming "Ahmadis are not Muslims" to be placed in front of the group's headquarters for the past several years.

Restrictions remained on the use of the word "Allah" by non-Muslims. An appeal by the Sidang Injil Borneo, an evangelical church based in Sabah and Sarawak, for the right of the church and its Malay language-speaking congregation to use the word "Allah" in Bibles and other religious publications remained ongoing. A

lawyer in the attorney general's department said in June the Home Ministry would file an expert opinion in a separate case in support of the government's position that the word "Allah" is for the exclusive use of Muslims.

The government continued to ban books for promoting Shia beliefs, mysticism, and other beliefs the government determined "clearly deviated from the true teachings of Islam."

State governments had exclusive authority over allocation of land for, and the construction of, all places of worship, as well as land allocation for all cemeteries. Non-Muslim groups continued to report regular difficulties in obtaining permission from local authorities to build new places of worship, leading many groups to use buildings zoned for residential or commercial use for their religious services. Observers said that this practice remained largely tolerated, but also left the religious groups vulnerable. In April the state government of Selangor stated it would suspend clauses in state guidelines and planning standards that placed restrictions on non-Muslim places of worship. The standards included the recommendation that non-Muslim places of worship not be built within 50 meters (165 feet) of a Muslim home, new places of worship be lower in height than the nearest mosque, and non-Muslim places of worship in multiracial communities would require the consent of residents within a 200-meter (650-foot) radius. According to a state government official, the guidelines were enacted in 2007, removed in 2010, and reinstated early in 2017. The same official said Johor, Melaka, and Negeri Sembilan states had similar provisions.

In March the state government of Penang announced that 32 plots of state land would be made available to non-Muslim religious groups to build churches and temples. The government said the land was made available after groups complained about the lack of suitable places to construct houses of worship.

Some government bodies, including the federal Department of National Unity and Integration, were tasked with encouraging religious harmony and protecting the rights of minority religious groups. Many faith-based organizations, however, continued to state they believed that none had the power and influence of those that regulated Islamic affairs, citing the large footprint and budget for JAKIM, compared to the more limited funding for the Department of National Unity and Integration. In the 2018 budget, the Department of National Unity and Integration was allocated approximately RM 275 million (\$68 million), while RM 1 billion (\$247 million) was marked for the development of Islam, including RM 811 million (\$201 million) for JAKIM.

During the year, JAKIM funded a wide variety of Islamic education and mosque-related projects. There were no specifically allocated funds in the government budget for non-Muslim religious groups, although some religious groups reported continuing to receive sporadic funding for temple and church buildings and other activities.

At public schools at the primary and secondary level, student assemblies frequently commenced with recitation of an Islamic prayer by a teacher or school leader. Particularly in the peninsula of the country, community leaders and civil liberties groups said that religion teachers in public schools pressured Muslim girls to wear the *tudong* (Islamic head covering) at school. Some private schools required Muslim girls to wear veils covering their faces, except for their eyes. In a public school in Selangor State, the government launched an investigation after photos spread on social media of separated drinking cups for Muslims and non-Muslims. Homeschooling remained legal, but some families reported difficulty in obtaining approval from the Ministry of Education.

Lawyers, civil liberty groups, and non-Muslim religious leaders said that when civil and sharia jurisdictions intersected, civil courts continued largely to give deference to sharia courts, creating situations where non-Muslims were affected by sharia judgments. The media and lawyers continued to report that sharia courts often decided child custody cases where one parent converted to Islam while the other did not – and have historically favored the Muslim parent. When facing competing orders by civil and sharia courts regarding custody, they stated the police generally sided with the sharia decisions.

In October, in a rare public statement, the country's Council of Rulers expressed concerns about the actions of Muslims whose views on religious practices have "gone beyond all acceptable standards of decency, putting at risk the harmony that currently exists within our multireligious and multi-ethnic society." The statement was in response to reports of Muslim-only laundrettes in two states. The owner of one laundrette said he was protecting Muslims from "impurities" that could be present on non-Muslims' clothing, such as dog fur or pork, an argument Johor's mufti publicly supported.

In April the Mufti of Perlis published a poem that some individuals said they considered offensive to Hinduism. Authorities did not take any action against him.

The family of a Hindu man in the state of Negeri Sembilan initiated court proceedings in September against officials from the state Islamic affairs department after authorities reportedly took the body of the man, Mahat Sulaiman, from a local hospital and buried him in an Islamic cemetery against the deceased's wishes. Religious authorities reportedly acted unilaterally because the man's name appeared to be Muslim.

Court proceedings continued in the case of Prasana Diksa, who was abducted in 2009 by her father after he converted from Hinduism to Islam, and a federal court was expected to rule on the case in early 2018. The case involved the issues of civil court review of sharia courts' decisions as well as whether the consent of both parents was required for the conversion of a minor child. In 2010, a civil court awarded Prasana's mother, Indira Gandhi, custody of her daughter; however, police did not execute the civil court's order to arrest Prasana's father for contempt of court, nor did the police take action to locate Prasana.

After opposition from some Muslim leaders, in August the government withdrew a bill from parliament that would have prevented one parent from converting his or her child to another faith without the consent of the second parent. A government minister said the bill was withdrawn "to preserve the harmony between the races and faiths" and asked that "no party politicize" the decision.

The government continued not to recognize marriages between Muslims and non-Muslims and considered children born of such unions illegitimate. In July the Court of Appeal ruled that the National Registration Division was not bound by edicts issued by the National Fatwa Committee, a religious body, regarding when a child conceived out of wedlock could take his or her father's name; however, the government appealed the case and successfully applied for a stay in implementing the decision. A 2003 edict by the committee declared children to be illegitimate, and therefore unable to take their father's name if they were born fewer than six months after the marriage of their parents.

In August the ruling government coalition permitted a bill drafted by the opposition PAS to be introduced in parliament that would significantly raise existing limits on sharia courts' punishment powers; limited proselytization by non-Muslim religious groups; and restricted the distribution of religious texts. Proceedings were suspended before lawmakers could vote on it, however. Under existing law, states must limit sharia court punishments to three years in prison; RM 5,000 (\$1,200) fines; and six strokes of the cane. The most recent version of the PAS bill proposed to raise those limits to 30 years in prison; RM 100,000

(\$24,700) fines; and 100 strokes of the cane. The bill generated substantial public discussion, with some Muslim groups and some official state Islamic authorities supporting the effort. Some Muslim and non-Muslim groups opposed the legislation, which they stated infringed on the country's civil laws and represented a first step toward the eventual enforcement of *hudood*. Some government officials argued that non-Muslims did not have the right to criticize the legislation because it would only apply to Muslims.

In December PAS President Hadi Awang supported a Muslim-only cabinet, which he said could accept non-Muslims playing a role in professional and management positions other than in policymaking. The PAS vice president later denied that the president supported a Muslim-only cabinet.

It remained difficult for those registered as Muslims to have their religious identification changed by the authorities. In February the Federal Court agreed to hear the appeal of three converts to Islam who later said they had left Islam and wanted their identification information changed accordingly, although the court did not set a date for the hearing by the end of the year. In 2016 the Court of Appeal in Sarawak State ruled against the three converts.

In September the city of Kuala Lumpur denied an application to hold a "Better Beer Festival," despite approving the festival in previous years, after some religious leaders and PAS complained that such an event would "lead to extremist activities" and could lead the nation's capital to be "known to the world as Asia's biggest vice center." Police later said the event was canceled because of security concerns and said they had arrested three militants who planned to attack the festival.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

In response to the PAS president's Muslim-only cabinet statement in December, the country's main nongovernmental interreligious body – The Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Sikhism, and Taoism – said "The race and religion card has been overplayed. This must end immediately. The energy of all Malaysians especially politicians should be channeled towards further developing a society filled with mutual understanding and respect."

Local human rights organizations and religious leaders again stated that society continued to become increasingly intolerant of religious diversity. They cited some Muslim groups' continuing public condemnation of events and activities they

said were “un-Islamic,” as well as heavily publicized statements targeting non-Sunni Muslims and non-Muslim groups.

In response to a ban on non-Muslims at a launderette in the state of Johor, the NGO Sisters in Islam said in a statement, “It is becoming very alarming that week upon week we witness a growing number of incidences where there is discrimination premised on the Islamic faith... This type of simplistic interpretation of ‘what Islam requires of its *Ummah*’ is a danger to the racial diversity that we as Malaysians (including Malaysian Muslims) have always cherished. This is causing such great disunity in our beautiful nation.”

Religious converts, particularly those converting from Islam, sometimes faced severe stigmatization. Citing 400 conversion cases pending before sharia courts, the CEO of a government-linked human rights group called for a ban on Christian evangelism, a move he implied was necessary for “national security.” In many cases, converts reportedly concealed newly adopted beliefs and practices from their former coreligionists, including friends and relatives.

Religious identities continued to affect secular aspects of life. Muslim women who did not wear the head scarf or conform to religious notions of modesty were often subject to shaming on social media. In February a beauty pageant was forced to cancel a component of the event featuring contestants in swimwear, none of whom were Muslims, after Islamist groups protested.

#### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement**

U.S. embassy officials engaged with a wide variety of federal and state government officials at the Ministry of Home Affairs, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Prime Minister’s Department, among others, on religious freedom issues throughout the year. The Ambassador raised concerns about the disappearance of Pastor Raymond Koh and three other individuals and urged government officials to speak out against religious intolerance, particularly in the wake of high profile incidents such as the “Muslim-only” launderettes in two states.

Embassy officials held meetings with members of Shia and Ahmadiyya Muslim groups; the groups detailed the heavy government restrictions on their religious activities. Embassy officials also met with a variety of non-Muslim groups who reported continued difficulties registering churches and building houses of worship, and facing societal discrimination. The embassy engaged with groups of

Sunni Muslims whose activities were limited by the government, such as SIS, G25, Islamic Renaissance Front, and Komuniti Muslim Universal.

The embassy broadcast messages related to religious freedom on its social media platforms on International Religious Freedom Day and throughout the year.

In March the embassy organized a visit by a leader of a U.S. Muslim community network to several states to engage with youth and promote civic consciousness, volunteerism, and religious tolerance.

In October the embassy hosted the U.S.-based director of a large religious NGO for meetings with local religious leaders and students on how interfaith groups can mitigate conflict and build community resilience.

In conjunction with the United Nations' International Day for Tolerance, the Ambassador led a "Harmony Walk" with faith leaders to several houses of worship in Kuala Lumpur. The embassy disseminated a video of the event, which had been viewed at least 74,000 times in addition to being featured in the nation's largest newspapers. The event emphasized the centrality of freedom of religion and interfaith dialogue in reducing intolerance, discrimination, and persecution and underscored the U.S. commitment to ensuring all individuals be able to exercise their human rights, including freedom of belief or nonbelief.