

Malaysia at a Crossroads

Contributed by Hannah Beech, with reporting by Baradan Kuppusamy. Time Magazine
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A HOUSE DIVIDED: The battle over the true spiritual beliefs of Kaliammal's late husband reflects Malaysia's widening religious fault lines.

- Tara Sosrowardoyo for Time

Like Indonesia, Malaysia is struggling to determine how Muslim to be. Unlike Indonesia, which is governed by a secular constitution, Malaysia already counts Islam as its official faith—although the constitution also guarantees freedom of religion. Each state has a fatwa committee that makes religious decrees applicable to Malaysian Muslims, most of whom are Sunni. In Kelantan state, Muslim women must wear headscarves in public, while several states have made forsaking Islam a crime that can result in prison time. "We should not limit Islam to a few rituals," says Sulaiman Abdullah, former president of the Malaysian Bar Council. "Malaysia would be better served if it were under Shari'a law."

{josquote}The Islamic Development Department, which governs Muslim practices on a federal level, deems Shia and Baha'i interpretations of Islam deviant faiths worthy of forced "rehabilitation."{/josquote}

But what happens when the state's definition of Islam differs from its citizens'? The Islamic Development Department, which governs Muslim practices on a federal level, deems Shia and Baha'i interpretations of Islam deviant faiths worthy of forced "rehabilitation." Controversy also surrounds Malays who wish to convert to another religion, thus defying the constitutional clause specifying that all Malays must be Muslims. That issue is being tested by the case of Lina Joy, a Malay who has been barred from converting to Christianity by Shari'a courts. Malik Imtiaz Sarwar, a lawyer who has received death threats for representing Joy, hopes the case will be heard by the Supreme Court in the next few months. "How can we say there is freedom of religion in Malaysia," says Malik, "if a person who has practiced Christianity for years is not allowed by the state to make that personal choice?"

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