



FREEDOM OF RELIGION IN MALAYSIA

The Situation and Attitudes of
“Deviant” Muslim Groups

Mohd Faizal Musa

TRENDS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

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Published by: ISEAS Publishing
30 Heng Mui Keng Terrace
Singapore 119614
publish@iseas.edu.sg
<http://bookshop.iseas.edu.sg>

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ISEAS Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Name(s): Mohd Faizal Musa, author.

Title: Freedom of religion in Malaysia: the situation and attitudes of “deviant” muslim groups / by Mohd Faizal Musa.

Description: Singapore : ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, Oct 2022. | Series: Trends in Southeast Asia, ISSN 0219-3213 ; TRS16/22 | Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: ISBN 9789815011616 (soft cover) | ISBN 9789815011630 (pdf)

Subjects: LCSH: Freedom of religion—Malaysia. | Religious minorities—Malaysia. | Malaysia—Religion.

Classification: LCC DS501 I59T no. 16(2022)

Typeset by Superskill Graphics Pte Ltd

Printed in Singapore by Mainland Press Pte Ltd

FOREWORD

The economic, political, strategic and cultural dynamism in Southeast Asia has gained added relevance in recent years with the spectacular rise of giant economies in East and South Asia. This has drawn greater attention to the region and to the enhanced role it now plays in international relations and global economics.

The sustained effort made by Southeast Asian nations since 1967 towards a peaceful and gradual integration of their economies has had indubitable success, and perhaps as a consequence of this, most of these countries are undergoing deep political and social changes domestically and are constructing innovative solutions to meet new international challenges. Big Power tensions continue to be played out in the neighbourhood despite the tradition of neutrality exercised by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

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Freedom of Religion in Malaysia: The Situation and Attitudes of “Deviant” Muslim Groups

By Mohd Faizal Musa

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), published by the United Nations in 1948, states that “everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.”
- Malaysia recently won its bid to sit on the United Nations Human Rights Council from 2022 to 2024. However, while the country’s constitution is progressive in underlining the rights of religious minorities, this is severely lacking in practice as it exercises heavy regulation on religion, combined with restrictions on the practices of certain faiths.
- Based on interviews and focus group discussions conducted in Malaysia, this paper uncovers the challenges faced by religious minorities in the country, and how treatment of them at the hands of religious authorities is illustrative of encroachments on their right to the freedom of religion. The groups that will be focused on are the Millah Ibrahim (Abrahamic Faith), the Baha’i faith, and the Ahmadiyah faith, all of which have been banned by the religious authorities.
- It was found that the three groups navigate their respective situations differently. For example, Millah Ibrahim adherents are very conscious of the repression that they face, and have resorted to propagating their teachings in secret and migrating to countries

that are more lenient towards them. On the other hand, the Baha'i community feel they have relative freedom to practise their rituals despite the *fatwa* which bans their movement, and therefore do not see the need to take legal action against the authorities. This is in contrast to the Ahmadiyah adherents who use legal means (such as court cases) to counteract the repression towards them.

- Considering the precarious position of these groups, it is recommended that religious authorities engage with these minority groups so as to deepen their understanding of these groups and to properly assess the perceived threat that they allegedly pose. Such engagement would also allow Malaysia to uphold its commitment to human rights.

Freedom of Religion in Malaysia: The Situation and Attitudes of “Deviant” Muslim Groups

By Mohd Faizal Musa¹

INTRODUCTION

In Malaysia, Islam is often regarded as the religion of the federation. However, it should be noted that the 1957 Report of the Federation of Malaya Constitutional Commission, also known as the Reid Commission Report 1957, clearly states that:

we have considered the question whether there should be any statement in the Constitution to the effect that Islam should be the State religion. There was universal agreement that if any such provision were inserted it must be made clear that it would not in any way affect the civil rights of non-Muslims. In the memorandum submitted by the Alliance it was stated the religion of Malaysia shall be Islam. The observance of this principle shall not impose any disability on non-Muslim nationals professing and practising their own religions and shall not imply that the State is not a secular State. There is nothing in the draft Constitution to affect the continuance of the present position in the States with

¹ Mohd Faizal Musa is a Visiting Fellow at the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute in Singapore and Research Fellow at the Institute of the Malay World and Civilization (ATMA), National University of Malaysia (UKM). He also contributes to the Global Shi’a Diaspora, Project on Shi’ism and Global Affairs at Harvard Divinity School.

regard to recognition of Islam or to prevent the recognition of Islam in the Federation by legislation or otherwise in any respect which does not prejudice the civil rights of individual non-Muslims (1957, p. 75).²

The White Paper of the report further emphasizes:

and we recommend that freedom of religion should be guaranteed to every person including the right to profess, practise and propagate his religion subject to the requirements of public order, health and morality, and that, subject also to these requirements, each religious group should have the right to manage its own affair, to maintain religious or charitable institutions including schools, and to hold property for these purposes. We also recommend provisions against discrimination by law on the ground of religion, race, descent, or place of birth and discrimination on those grounds by any Government or public authority in making appointments or contracts or permitting entry to any educational institutions, or granting financial aid in respect of pupils or students (ibid, p. 72).

Article 3(1) of the Federal Constitution states that “Islam is the religion of the Federation; but other religions may be practised in peace and harmony in any part of the Federation” (Laws of Malaysia Federal Constitution 1957, p. 11).³ However, over the years, the term “official religion” has been subjected to various interpretations. According to Tamir Moustafa:

² The Federal Constitution of Malaysia was drafted by a group of legal experts known as the Reid Commission. This constitution has been used till the present day, although with periodical amendments. It consists of 15 sections which list 183 items.

³ Malaysia adopted a system of parliamentary democracy based on the Westminster system, following the fact that it was a British colony prior to independence. As part of this system, there is a constitutional monarchy which serves as a symbol of unification for the Malaysian people. It is led by the Yang di-Pertuan Agong, who is chosen from the nine Sultans of the Malay states to

Over half of all Muslim-majority countries have constitutional clauses that proclaim Islam the religion of state. For Malaysia, it is Article 3. Clause 1 of Article 3 declares, ‘Islam is the religion of the Federation ...’ For decades, the clause received little attention. The federal judiciary understood the clause to carry ceremonial and symbolic meaning only. However, recent years have seen increasing litigation around the meaning and intent of the clause. Recent federal court decisions introduce a far more

serve for five years as the Head of State and Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces. Executive power is in the hands of the cabinet which is headed by the Prime Minister and a council of ministers who are accountable to Parliament. Members of the cabinet can only be selected from the Dewan Rakyat (composed of members who are selected through elections; it is the lower council of Parliament) or Dewan Negara (composed of members of the State Assembly and members appointed by the Yang di-Pertuan Agong). Usually, the Yang di-Pertuan Agong appoints all ministers on the advice of the Prime Minister, who is chosen from the Dewan Rakyat. Parliament serves as the legislative body of the federal government. It lasts for five years and is called, adjourned, and dissolved by the Yang di-Pertuan Agong. The jurisdictions and responsibilities of parliament include approving federal laws, making amendments to existing federal laws, examining government policies, approving government spending, and approving new tax revenues. Parliament also serves as a forum for criticism and a sounding board for public opinion on national matters. It is characterized by a bicameral legislature consisting of the Dewan Rakyat and Dewan Negara, alongside the Yang di-Pertuan Agong. The Dewan Rakyat is responsible for passing laws, determining the state budget, and overseeing the running of the government administration. There is also the State Legislative Assembly (DUN) which consists of the Sultan or Yang di-Pertua Negeri as the head of state, as well as state assemblymen (ADUN) who are appointed in accordance with the constitution. The Sultan presides over the assembly whenever it is convened, and he is entitled to make decisions on matters concerning religion. The list of assemblies includes Johor State Assembly, Pahang State Assembly, Perak State Assembly, Selangor State Assembly, Kedah State Assembly, Kelantan State Assembly, Melaka State Assembly, Negeri Sembilan State Assembly, Perlis State Assembly, Penang State Assembly, Terengganu State Legislative Assembly, Sarawak State Legislative Assembly, and Sabah State Legislative Assembly.

robust meaning, which practically elevates Islamic law as the new *grundnorm* in the Malaysian legal system. Jurisprudence on the matter is still unfolding, but what is clear—and what has been clear for quite some time—is that two legal camps hold radically divergent visions of the appropriate place for Islamic law and liberal rights in the legal and political order (2018, p. 138).

As an official religion, Islam plays a central role in daily life in Malaysia, and this includes political and legal matters. For instance, Islamic affairs are administered at the federal level by the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM), which was established by the government on 1 January 1997. It is also important to note that Islam falls under the administration of individual states, and not under the federal government. The Malay Rulers (also known as Sultans) and muftis hold much power when it comes to Islam (Nelson and Dian A.H. Shah 2019, pp. 1300–1). For example, in June 2022, the Sultan of Selangor demonstrated his authority when he rebuked an attempt by JAKIM to spread misinformation about the Bon Odori festival which was to be held in the state.⁴

However, despite the constitutional provisions for the freedom of religion, it is still impeded by several restrictions. For example, Shi'ism is regarded as a deviation from “true Islam”, and Shi'a Muslims are prevented from freely practising their faith and engaging in their rituals. It is the Shafi'i school of thought within Sunni Islam which is regarded as “proper” Islam. While the practice of Shi'ism was allowed in the past,

⁴ Bon Odori is a Japanese summer dance festival which has been held annually in Malaysia to promote cultural exchange between Malaysians and the Japanese living in the country. While it has reportedly been held for at least thirty years, in 2022 JAKIM urged Muslims to stay away from the festival as it allegedly contains elements of other religions. In response to this, the Sultan of Selangor, Sultan Sharafuddin Shah, reaffirmed that the event would proceed, and ensured Muslims that it is merely a cultural event and not a religious one. He even encouraged JAKIM and the religious authorities in Selangor to attend the event.

it was banned in 1984, and in 1996 a *fatwa* declared Shi'ism a deviant teaching (Mohd Faizal Musa and Tan Beng Hui 2017).⁵ While a *fatwa* is only a legal opinion and is non-binding, disobeying a gazetted *fatwa* in Malaysia can result in a penalty of RM5,000 or three years in prison, or both.⁶

These restrictions are not limited to Muslim minorities. For example, the most iconic case which illustrates Malaysia's struggle with the freedom of religion is the case of Lina Joy whose attempt to exercise her

⁵ During a conference (*muzakarah*) held by the National Fatwa Council in 1996, it was decided that the 1984 *fatwa* which recognized the Zaidiyah and Jaafariyah sects within Shi'ism would no longer be acceptable. It was also decided that Muslims in Malaysia would only be allowed to follow the teachings of Sunni Islam, also commonly referred to as Ahli Sunnah wal Jamaah. While no amendments were made to the Federal Constitution, the 1996 *fatwa* paved the way for individual states to make amendments to existing enactments, or to enact new ones so as to determine the legitimate forms of Islam to be adhered to. For example, in Kedah, the Kedah Control and Restriction of Propagation (Non-Muslim Religions) Enactment which was passed in 1988 (Enactment No. 11/1988) restricts the propagation of any religion other than Islam. In 2013 they also announced that they would gazette a *fatwa* against Shi'ism. In fact, all states in Malaysia have gazetted a ban on Shi'a sects, and the ban includes the prohibition of publishing, broadcasting or distributing materials such as films, videos and books.

⁶ There are three main institutions that deal with *fatwa* in Malaysia. These are (a) the Fatwa Committee of the National Council for Islamic Religious Affairs Malaysia (Muzakarah Jawatankuasa Fatwa Majlis Kebangsaan Bagi Hal Ehwal Ugama Islam Malaysia) under the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM); (b) the Muzakarah Committee of the National Council for Islamic Religious Affairs (MKI) which is under the direction of the Malay Rulers and is chaired by Sultan Sharafuddin Shah, the Sultan of Selangor; and (c) *fatwa* institutions in individual states throughout Malaysia. The existence of these various institutions occasionally leads to confusion as a result of differences between the various *fatwa* published by them. This was most recently evident in the case of the Tarekat Naqsyabandiyah al-Aliyyah Syeikh Nazim al-Haqqani which the 117th meeting of the MKI Muzakarah Committee in 2020 ruled was allowed to be practised, while JAKIM had banned the order in 2000 and 2009.

freedom of belief was rejected by the Federal Court in 2007. She was a Muslim-born woman⁷ who had converted to Christianity; however, the civil court decided that Lina Joy was not allowed to remove Islam as her official religion on her identification card, as the matter was within the jurisdiction of the Syariah court, and not the civil court. Her case caused much controversy as it exposed the tensions between civil and Syariah laws, and the difficulties which citizens could face if they were to leave Islam.

This article examines how encroachments on the freedom of religion by Malaysian religious authorities have affected three religious minorities. These are the Baha'is, the Ahmadis, and the Millah Ibrahim. These groups have been chosen for three reasons: (1) they are to a certain extent related to Islam in that they either claim to be Muslim, or have been referred to as Muslim;⁸ (2) Muslim religious authorities perceive them to be deviating from Islam; (3) they emerged only in recent years, and have not received recognition from any international bodies or initiatives.⁹ In highlighting how the authorities' encroachments on these groups have affected their religious lives, I will also illustrate how these groups feel

⁷ She was born in 1964 as Azlina Jailani.

⁸ For example, the Baha'is are often associated with the Shaykhi school of Shi'a Islam. On their website, the Ahmadis refer to themselves as a "Muslim community", and in their textbook *Tafakkur Spiritual*, the Millah Ibrahim also refer to themselves as Muslim. For further reading, see Lawson (2012); Council of the International Islamic Fiqh Academy of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (1988); Al Islam (2022); and Nathabuana (2017).

⁹ For example, as part of the Amman Message, the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) summit in Mecca in December 2005 recognized the validity of the eight legal schools of Sunni, Shi'a, and Ibadhi Islam, as well as Ash'arism or traditional Islamic theology, Sufism, or Islamic mysticism, and true Salafi thought. Adherents of these schools of thought are recognized as Muslim. Over 500 leading Muslim scholars from across the world endorsed this declaration, and it is still cited internationally as a historical document of religious and political consensus among the Muslim ummah (nation), and is recognized as "religiously legally binding" (Amman Message 2004).

about these encroachments. I also analyse whether these groups are indeed a threat to Muslims and Islam in Malaysia, and what religious authorities can do to change the nature of their engagement with them.

FACTORS SHAPING THE TREATMENT OF RELIGIOUS MINORITIES

Before a discussion on the abovementioned groups, it is first necessary to understand Malaysia's political, economic and cultural landscapes. Malaysia is a country with a plural society that consists of various ethnicities and beliefs. Among the main ethnic groups are the Malays, Chinese and Indians. These groups mainly inhabit the Malay Peninsula. The Orang Asli, who consist of the Senoi, Negrito, and the Proto-Malays, also reside on the peninsula.

In the state of Sabah in East Malaysia, the majority of the population are the Kadazan and Bajau. Other ethnic groups include the Murut, Suluk and Brunei. Meanwhile, in Sarawak, the indigenous population consists of the highland groups, the lowland groups, and the coastal groups. Among the people of the highlands are the Orang Kelabit and Penan. The lowlanders consist of Orang Iban (Sea Dayaks), Bidayuh (Land Dayaks), Kayan, Bisaya, Kenyah, Punan and Berawan. The coastal population consists of Orang Melayu, Melanau, and Kedayan.

The 2021 census estimates Malaysia's population at 32.7 million. The bumiputera (sons of the soil),¹⁰ make up 69.8 per cent of the total population, and they consist of Malays and other indigenous communities (including Orang Asli and other native peoples). They enjoy certain privileges as enshrined in Article 153 of the Federal Constitution.¹¹ The rest of the population includes the Chinese at 22.4 per cent, Indians at

¹⁰ While "putera" literally refers to males, the term bumiputera refers to any Malay or indigenous person regardless of their gender.

¹¹ Article 153 states that it is the responsibility of the Yang di-Pertuan Agong to safeguard the special position and provision of the Malays and indigenous people, and these provisions include educational, training, and business privileges.

6.8 per cent, and other ethnic minorities who constitute the remaining 1 per cent (Department of Statistics Malaysia 2021).

However, religious and linguistic differences do not just occur between ethnic groups, but also within them. None of these groups is homogeneous, in that each group is further distinguished by their subethnic identity based on different languages and religions. In general, many Malays are Muslims who speak Malay, while other bumiputera communities, especially in Sabah and Sarawak, practise different religions and have their own languages. Indians are mostly Tamil-speaking Hindus, while the religious and linguistic backgrounds within the Chinese community are also varied. However, despite their internal differences, religious and ethnic identity in Malaysia is strongly intertwined; Malays are considered Muslims, Indians are considered Hindus, Chinese and Siamese are considered Buddhists, while the Orang Asli and bumiputera communities in the interior of Sabah and Sarawak are considered Animists. Those who convert may sometimes be considered to have left their ethnic group.

The initial process of nation-building in Malaysia was more focused on political expediency. Intensive efforts to achieve this goal began to be implemented through the New Economic Policy (NEP) specifically. The NEP was introduced after the tragedy of the 13 May 1969 race riots which the government at the time said was caused by socio-economic imbalances that existed between the various ethnic groups and even between geographical areas within the country.¹² This policy was a drastic

¹² Malaysian race relations have been peppered with challenges, and tensions reached a peak when clashes occurred on 13 May 1969 in Kuala Lumpur and the surrounding areas. The police reported that the tragedy caused 196 deaths, with 149 injured. A state of Emergency was declared, and the House of Parliament as well as the State Legislative Assembly were suspended. Consequently, Tun Abdul Razak established and led the National Operations Council (MAGERAN) to control the state of Emergency, restore stability to the country, and ensure that similar clashes would not recur (Al-Amril Othman and Mohd Nor Shahizan Ali 2018). In terms of socio-economic imbalances, urban growth in Malaysia has shown a steady increase since the implementation of the NEP. Urbanization has mainly benefited the bumiputeras and the Malays, as small towns in agricultural regions were developed into industrial zones.

move by the government to address inequality over a period of twenty years, starting in 1970 and ending in 1990. The NEP had a two-pronged objective of eradicating poverty regardless of ethnicity and changing the identity of race based on economic activity. It also aimed to provide more educational and training opportunities as well as health services to all levels of society, but especially the bumiputera whom the government argued were greatly disadvantaged by socio-economic inequalities. The NEP gave various privileges to the bumiputera, especially to the Malays, who are Muslims (Lee Hwok Aun 2021). This later became a bone of contention, especially in relation to the freedom of religion, and was perceived as a biased policy.

Article 3(1) of the Federal Constitution states that while Islam is the religion of the federation, other religious communities are free to practise their own religion. However, while this may be the case in theory, it is not always the case in practice. In 1981, Dr Mahathir Mohamad took over the leadership of the country as leader of the Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition. One of the policies that he introduced was Dasar Penerapan Nilai-Nilai Islam (Policy for the Inculcation of Islamic Values). The policy was an effort to inculcate in Malaysians—specifically civil servants—the noble values espoused by Islam. However, the policy became a catalyst for greater Islamization at all levels of society, and this came to pose a threat to the freedom of religion of Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

At the administrative level, the greater consolidation of resources to manage Islam, combined with an expanded budget for matters relating to Islam, meant that the administration of religion became too controlled, even for the Muslims themselves. Other ways in which the religious landscape changed included increasing numbers of women who used the headscarf, the setting up of prayer rooms on government premises, and gender segregation at official events. Major Islamic programmes and policies were also introduced in the 1980s. For example, Malaysia's economic system was remodelled into an Islamic one through the establishment of Islamic banks, Islamic pawnshops, Islamic insurance, and an Islamic Economic Foundation in 1981. In the educational realm, the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) was founded in 1983. Finally, in the judicial realm, it was declared in 1988 that the status of Islamic judges and courts was to be

on par with their counterparts in the civil judiciary in 1988 (Arfah Ab. Majid 2013, p. 5).

While many scholars have attributed the infringements on the freedom of religion to Mahathir's Islamization policy, there are also external factors which have hitherto been largely ignored. For example, while many argue that the local religious landscape in the 1980s was influenced by the Iranian Revolution, the steady growth of Salafization among Malaysia's religious elites from the 1970s and the consequent increase in conservatism among Muslims have often been ignored. This, combined with the Policy for the Inculcation of Islamic Values, has shaped the establishment's attitude towards religious policies and the treatment of religious minorities.¹³ This is evident from how they persecute Shi'a Muslims, for example (Mohd Faizal Musa and Siti Syazwani Zainal Abidin 2021).

The change in the religious landscape as a result of the Policy on the Inculcation of Islamic Values and growing Salafization may have been favourably received by many Muslims, but the situation raised concerns among non-Muslims. Several organizations such as the Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Sikhism & Taoism (MCCBCHST), International Movement for a Just World (JUST), and Christian Federation of Malaysia (CFM)—all of which later came under the auspices of the Malaysian Interfaith Network (MIN)—were established as platforms to express non-Muslim grievances. They first held a conference in 1984 titled “The Role of Religion in Nation Building,” during which they expressed their concerns about what was happening. They also invited government representatives to provide clarification on the Policy for the Inculcation of Islamic Values to alleviate their concerns (Ahmad Faizuddin Ramli and Jaffary Awang 2018, pp. 178–79). One example which illustrated how the situation affected non-Muslims was the case of the *fatwa* which banned the use of the word *Allah* by non-Muslims.¹⁴

¹³ For further discussion on this issue, see Mohd Faizal Musa (2018).

¹⁴ The 82nd Conference of the Fatwa Committee of the National Council for Islamic Religious Affairs Malaysia (Muzakarah Jawatankuasa Fatwa Majlis

However, despite the discrimination they face, mainstream religious minorities such as Christians, Hindus, Taoists and Sikhs are still able to express their grievances about the treatment and repression which they are subject to, and this is done through various legal and public channels, including their own organizations.¹⁵ However, this is not the case for Muslim minorities such as the Shi'as or Bohras who are fearful of engaging with religious authorities as a result of the Syariah laws which disadvantage them. More poignantly, this fear and lack of platforms for the expression of grievances is an even greater issue for the minorities within the minorities. It is, therefore, my aim to uncover the challenges that the Millah Ibrahim, Baha'i and Ahmadi adherents face, the attitudes they have towards Muslim religious authorities and figures, and whether or not they have responded to the authorities' actions. More specifically, I will examine whether or not these groups

Kebangsaan Bagi Hal Ehwal Ugama Islam Malaysia) held on 5–7 May 2008 decided that the word *Allah* was sacred and specific to Islam, and therefore should not be used by non-Muslims. Following that, in 2010, the Mufti of Penang (which is one of the more cosmopolitan states in the country) issued a *fatwa* titled “Fatwa on Sacred Words that are Specific to Islam and Cannot Be Used by Non-Islamic Religions”. The *fatwa* listed a total of forty words which were not to be used by non-Muslims, and this included words such as *Allah*, *Hadith*, *Kaaba*, *Al-Quran*, and *Solat*. In early 2011, Malay-language bibles were even stamped with the words “for the use of Christians only, by order of the Home Ministry”, which was regarded by the Christian community as an infringement on their religious freedom, and desecration of their holy book. The situation became more complicated in 2013 when the Court of Appeal ruled that a Catholic publication, *The Herald*, could not use *Allah* in its publications. The case garnered international attention as Malaysia became the first country to ban Christians from using *Allah*. To understand how Malaysia arrived at this deadlock, one needs to look at the role that Syed Naquib Al-Attas and Anwar Ibrahim played during the period of Islamic revivalism in the 1980s. For further discussion on this, see Mohd Faizal Musa (2021).

¹⁵ In addition to the MCCBCHST and CFM, there are also the Malaysia Hindu Sangam (MHS) and the Malaysian Sikh Union.

have responded violently towards the efforts of religious authorities to restrict their practices.¹⁶

THE IMPLICATIONS OF REGULATIONS ON RELIGION FOR RELIGIOUS MINORITIES

Based on the standard human rights framework which upholds the freedom of religion regardless of one's beliefs, it can be argued that Malaysia practises limited freedom of religion. This has to do with strong state control over various religious groups, and the violation of the right to the freedom of religion through complex legal methods. These violations mainly occur in the name of Islam's constitutional position as the religion of the federation.

Article 11(1) of the Federal Constitution provides that "Every person has the right to profess and practice his religion and, subject to Clause (4), to develop his religion." In turn, Article 11(4) reads that "State law and with respect to the Federal Territories of Kuala Lumpur and Labuan, federal law may control or restrict the spread of any religious belief or conviction among persons professing the religion of Islam." Furthermore, religious activities which are perceived to be a threat to public health and the morality of society are also disallowed. Based on this clause, various state governments have passed laws to control the spread of non-Muslim religions to Muslims.¹⁷ These laws address various criminal

¹⁶ This is of special interest because there have been cults in Malaysia, such as Tuhan Harun, who have reacted aggressively against the authorities. In fact, followers of Tuhan Harun assassinated the enforcement director of the Pahang Islamic Religious Department (JAIP) in 2013 and had further plans to assassinate other authority figures. See Farik Zolkepli (2013).

¹⁷ These include Control and Restriction (Propagation of Non-Muslim Religions) Enactment Terengganu, 1980 (Enactment No. 1/1980); Control and Restriction (Propagation of Non-Muslim Religions) Enactment Kelantan, 1981 (Enactment No. 11/1981); Control and Restriction (Propagation of Non-Muslim Religions) Enactment Kedah, 1988 (Enactment No. 11/1988); Control and Restriction

offences which are categorized as seizable offences under the Criminal Procedure Code, which means that an authorized officer may investigate offences under this law and may arrest without warrant any person who is suspected of having committed such offences. The cases would be heard by a Magistrate.¹⁸

(Propagation of Non-Muslim Religions) Enactment Melaka, 1988 (Enactment No. 1/1988); Control and Restriction (Propagation of Non-Muslim Religions) Enactment Perak, 1988 (Enactment No. 10/1988); Control and Restriction ((Propagation of Non-Muslim Religions) Enactment Selangor, 1988 (Enactment No. 1/1988); Control and Restriction (Propagation of Non-Muslim Religions) Enactment Pahang, 1989 (Enactment No. 5/1989); Control and Restriction (Propagation of Non-Muslim Religions) Enactment Negeri Sembilan, 1991 (Enactment No. 9/1991); Control and Restriction (Propagation of Non-Muslim Religions) Enactment Johor, 1991 (Enactment No. 12/1991). It should be noted here that “non-Muslim religions” refers to religions such as Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Judaism, or any branch of these religions. It also includes the practice of worshipping the spirits of ancestors, animism, and any other belief that does not fall within the ambit of Islam.

¹⁸ These offences include: “A person who instructs, causes, persuades, influences, incites, encourages or permits a Muslim under the age of 18 to accept the teachings of a non-Muslim religion, or for him to participate in any non-Muslim religious ceremonies, acts of worship, or religious activities or activities organized for the benefit of a non-Muslim religion, then it is an offense punishable by a fine of RM10,000 or imprisonment for a term of one year or both” (section 5); “A person who approaches a Muslim for the purpose of exposing him to any speech, show, visiting, arranging, attempting to hold a meeting with him, or contracting him by telephone, for the purpose of exposing that person to any speech or show about a non-Muslim religion, is also an offense punishable by a fine of RM5,000 or imprisonment for a term of six months or both” (section 6); “A person who sends, delivers, causes to be sent, delivered to another Muslim in or outside the country, or from abroad, sends or delivers to a Muslim in the country, any publication about a non-Muslim religion, or advertising material for the publication, which is not requested by the person, is also guilty of an offense punishable by a fine of RM3,000 or imprisonment for a term of three months or both” (section 7); “A person who distributes in a public place, any publication on a non-Muslim religion, submits a copy of the issue to a Muslim, is also an offense punishable by a fine of RM1,000” (section 8); “A person who makes any writing published in any speech or public statement, or in a planned assembly, or in a statement or broadcast, using any words specific to Muslims as listed in Part I (Schedule) of

Such laws which control the propagation of religions other than Islam to Muslims can also be imposed on Muslims who conspire with non-Muslims to spread their religion. Thus, Muslims can also be prosecuted under section 10 of the state Syariah Criminal Enactment, for the offence of insulting or causing contempt to Islam. A conviction will result in a fine not exceeding RM5,000, or imprisonment for a term not exceeding three years, or both (Faizal Ghazali 2021).

The practice of freedom of religion in Malaysia is also limited as religious minorities live in fear and are constantly vigilant of the possibility of enforced disappearances or being kidnapped. This has happened to activists of minority faith groups such as Christians and Shi'as (Lim 2022). For example, Amri Che Mat, a Shi'a community activist from Perlis, forcibly disappeared on 24 November 2016. Raymond Koh, a Christian pastor who was often accused of leading Muslims to apostasy, also forcibly disappeared in February 2017.¹⁹ Considering all these factors, it is understandable why religious minorities feel safer in hiding.

As a Principal Researcher representing the American Bar Association and IMAN Research Centre between 2019 and 2022, I led a project to shed light on the thoughts and grievances of religious minorities in Malaysia, and to have a deeper insight into their daily lived experiences. Fieldwork for this study involved interviews with twenty-five key religious leaders across Malaysia, including Sabah and Sarawak, which were all conducted in person. These religious leaders referred to themselves as authorities, representatives, icons, seniors, guardians, or the sole voices of their community, and represented the following beliefs: Sunni Islam, Ahmadi Islam, Shi'a Islam (Twelver and Bohra), Sufi Islam,

the Enactment, or its derivative or version, stating or describing a fact, belief, idea, concept, act, activity, matter, or matter concerning or relating to a non-Muslim religion is an offense punishable by a fine of RM1,000” (section 9).

¹⁹ For further information on this matter, see Azril Annuar (2017) and Mah Weng Kai et al. (2019).

Liberal Islam, Sikhism, Catholicism, Protestant Christianity, Anglican Christianity, Evangelical Christianity, Millah Ibrahim (Abrahamic Faith), Paganism (ancestral religion), Baha'i faith, Hinduism, Taoism, and Atheism. Through these interviews, I sought to uncover their views on the following broad topics: their depth of understanding of the freedom of religion from the perspectives of human rights, jurisprudence, and the law; their knowledge of various religions and cultures; their attitudes towards religion and religious practices within their own communities; their attitudes towards diversity and pluralism; measurements on social trust and relationships; their attitudes towards authority figures from other religious groups and; how their socio-economic backgrounds influence their political worldview. As stated earlier, this paper will focus on the Millah Ibrahim, Baha'i and Ahmadiyah faiths.

In addition to the interviews with religious leaders, I also led six focus group discussions (FGDs) with a total of thirty-five individuals who comprised both ordinary Malaysian citizens and thought leaders. Participants of the FGDs included Shi'a Muslims, Buddhists, Taoists, Christians, Hindus, Sikhs, and those associated with other minority faiths living in the Klang Valley or Greater Kuala Lumpur. These FGDs were conducted to have first-hand accounts of issues concerning the freedom of religion in Malaysia.

MILLAH IBRAHIM

Millah Ibrahim is a religious movement which claims itself to be a new form of the Abrahamic faith. The teachings of Millah Ibrahim originate from Bogor, Indonesia. The movement's founder, Ahmad Musadeq, claimed that he was the new messiah and was assigned to teach and form a new Islamic government (Marina Munira Abd Mutalib et al. 2016). In 2013, the Research and Development Planning Division of the Selangor Islamic Religious Department (JAIS) received a complaint from an individual who said that his wife who was a clerk in a Tamil school had been involved with the teachings of Millah Ibrahim (Umar Mukhtar Mohd Noor 2016). Subsequently, at the 88th Federal Territory Islamic Law Consultative Committee Meeting on 19 November 2014, religious authorities declared that the teachings of Millah Ibrahim were

heretical and deviated from Islam.²⁰ After several other states followed suit, in 2019, the Negeri Sembilan religious authorities (JHEAINS) raided a house in Jalan Bunga Mawar, Kampung Sri Repah, Tampin, and confiscated thirty-seven pamphlets and books related to the teachings of Millah Ibrahim. They also detained four men and an uncertified religious teacher. The Tampin Syariah Court charged the teacher for teaching without a licence, while the four men were charged with abetting him. Judge Mohamad Yusir Kasim sentenced the teacher to three months in jail and a fine of RM2,900, while the four men were fined RM2,800 each (Sarinah Mat Kasim 2019).²¹

During the course of my fieldwork, I met with two representatives from the Millah Ibrahim community. During my interviews with them, they expressed that they were weary of government repression and were willing to follow in the footsteps of the Shi'as and Ahmadis to challenge the authorities. They were considering the possibility of combining the Shi'a approach of expressing their grievances at the international level, while challenging the religious authorities in the local courts, the way the Ahmadis had done.

They also opined that the religious authorities in Malaysia were exclusivist and unwilling to accept diversity. In their words: "Whoever are not comply to accept Sunni, all got the issue." They also said that one's faith or religion should only be subject to a person's individual choice and should be free from government interference:

Belief is very personal. Belief is your connection to your God.

No one can disturb whatever you want to believe. You can choose

²⁰ This was followed by *fatwas* from the states of Kedah (2014), Selangor (2015), Melaka (2015), Sarawak (2016), Pahang (2016), Sabah (2016), and Negeri Sembilan (2017), all of which declared that the teachings of Millah Ibrahim were deviant. All these *fatwas* are available online. See the list of references for the links.

²¹ For further reading on the Millah Ibrahim and the government's perception of them, see *Utusan Malaysia* (3 February 2016); *Bernama* (2016); and *Malay Mail* (2 March 2016).

whatever you want to believe. You want to believe that the frog is your God, you can. Then no one should stop you. If you want to submit the frog as your God (Millah Ibrahim representative #1, personal communication, 9 April 2021).

Nevertheless, if one looks at their teachings, one would have a clearer understanding as to why the religious authorities have declared them as deviant. As stated earlier, adherents of Millah Ibrahim believe that their founder, Ahmad Musadeq, is a messiah or messenger. Albeit that this differs from the concept of a prophet. They also reject the understanding of religion as a set of rituals, and only look at it as the state of devoting oneself to God (Millah Ibrahim representative #2, personal communication, 22 April 2021).²² Their teachings are also exclusivist and secretive in nature, and aim to establish a “utopian ideal society”, although not necessarily under the name of Islam (Millah Ibrahim representative #2, personal communication, 22 April 2021). Their devotion to God in the form of upholding the religion occurs in six phases: (1) *Sirron* (to propagate in secret); (2) *Jahron* (to propagate in public); (3) *Hijrah* (to migrate); (4) *Qatlon* (to defend their religion in the form of war); (5) *Fathul* (expansion of the faith); and (6) *Khalifah fil ard*, which is to establish this system of devotion based on Millah Ibrahim in the form of a *daulah* or state. According to one of the respondents, all these phases are based on the life of Prophet Muhammad. However, to them, even if these phases are based on the life of the Prophet, they believe that these are universal values and are not necessarily indicative of their adoption of Islam (Millah Ibrahim representative #2, personal communication, 22 April 2021).²³

²² They refer to it as *pengabdian*, which also comes in the form of *tegakkan deen* or the act of upholding the religion.

²³ In my opinion, these phases are simply a rebranding or repackaging of a sense of longing for a Prophetic political entity.

As a result of the repression that they face in the form of raids and arrests by the government, they currently operate in the phases of *Sirron* and *Hijrah*, and prefer to “migrate to other states that [are] lenient to them”. However, seeing that they are unhappy with the government’s treatment towards them, one should not dismiss the possibility that they may turn to (violent or non-violent) extremism and move towards the phases of *Fathul*, *Qatlon* and *Khalifah fil ard*.

BAHA’I

The Baha’i faith has also faced difficulties in exercising its freedom of religion. The faith was established in 1844 by Siyyid ‘Ali Muhammad Shirazi, also known as Bab, in Shiraz, Iran. It has been reported that he first introduced himself as the door to the Promised Mahdi, after which he claimed to be the Mahdi himself, and even a Prophet. In fact, Baha’is claim that their founder is the “latest Messenger from God in the line of Messengers including Abraham, Krishna, Moses, Buddha, Jesus, and Muhammad” (Baha’i Web, n.d.). As a result, Iranian authorities are extremely cautious and critical of them, especially given their claims about prophethood and their founder being the Mahdi. Some scholars have made the effort to refute their beliefs. In a 600-page book titled *Twelve Principles: A Comprehensive Investigation on the Baha’i Teachings* (2014), Masoud Basiti, Zahra Moradi and Hossein Akhoondali analysed the faith using original Baha’i sources and contested all the key principles of the faith from a historiographical perspective.²⁴ While such an act can be viewed as “creative scapegoating” which allows for religious discrimination, it is also proof of the fact that the Iranian establishment can opt to dispute the Baha’i faith without violating their human rights.²⁵

The Baha’is’ twelve principles are as follows: (1) the independent investigation of truth, unfettered by superstition or tradition; (2) the

²⁴ The book was originally written in Farsi and translated into English.

²⁵ For further reading see Ghanea (2015).

oneness of humanity; (3) religion must be the source of unity and fellowship in the world; (4) religion must be in conformity with science and reason; (5) the removal of all prejudice; (6) equalization of the means of livelihood for all humanity; (7) establishment of a Universal House of Justice and Supreme Tribunal; (8) universal compulsory education; (9) universal auxiliary language; (10) the equality of men and women; (11) establishment of universal peace and; (12) the World of Humanity is in Need of the Breath of the Holy Spirit.

It is believed that its teachings first entered peninsular Malaysia when Shirin Fozdar gave public talks in several states across the country in 1953. Yan Kee Leong is believed to be the first to have accepted the faith; this was on 19 December 1953. In the case of East Malaysia, Sarawak was exposed to Baha'i teachings by 1951, while the first proclamation of the Baha'i faith in Sabah was made in 1953 and was published in the *North Borneo News* (Komuniti Baha'i Malaysia 2020).²⁶

Following the sowing of its seeds in Malaysia, on 29 December 1957, members of the Baha'i community made their first contact with the aboriginal people in Kampung Jus in the state of Melaka. This effort was led by an individual by the name of Saurajen. Baha'i Publishing Trust of Malaysia was established in 1974, after which the Association for Baha'i Studies of Malaysia was founded in April 1989. However, their activities were not restricted to Malaysia, and they also made regional and international contacts. For example, in 1978, more than 560 Baha'is from 14 countries travelled to Malaysia for the South East Asia Baha'i Regional Conference. In 1985, an International Youth Conference was held in Port Dickson to support the United Nations International Youth Year. It was attended by 1,300 youth from 15 countries and was considered the largest gathering of Baha'is ever held in Malaysia. At least two more international meetings were organized in 2008, during which regional conferences were held in Kuala Lumpur and Kuching, Sarawak. These conferences were among a series of 41 conferences held between 1 November 2008 and 1 March 2009 (Baha'i Library Online n.d.).

²⁶ There are now nearly 50,000 followers of the faith in Sarawak.

However, despite their apparent freedom to organize events, a conference held by the National Fatwa Committee for Islamic Religious Affairs in 1985 declared that Baha'i teachings were un-Islamic, and that such a declaration was deemed necessary as the faith was being associated with Islam. Furthermore, the Muslims who were involved in their events were considered apostates, and Muslims were forbidden from any engagement with the faith. The committee further stated that any Muslim involved with the faith should immediately leave it and repent (JAKIM 1985).

Subsequently, in 1988, Malaysia's Parliamentary Hansard of the Seventh Parliament in the Second Term stated that Othman bin Abdul, acting in his capacity as the figure responsible for religious issues provided clarification on the groups that practised "heresy". Othman listed the groups and stated the actions that had been taken by the government to restrict their expansion. He further stated that the government had identified fifty groups preaching heretical teachings, with twenty-eight of them confirmed as deviating from Islam, and this included Baha'i teachings.²⁷ The Baha'i faith was again discussed in 1992, as evident in the Parliamentary Hansard of the House of Representatives of the Eighth Parliament in the Second Term. In the document, the issue of the Baha'i faith was placed under the heading of "Perversion of Faith – Action to Abolish". According to Abdul Hamid bin Haji Othman, the Deputy Minister in the Prime Minister's Department at the time, forty-seven movements claimed to practise Islam, but which had in fact distorted the teachings of the religion. The Baha'i faith was one of them (Mohamad Sabu 1992).

However, despite these allegations of deviancy, I found that only two states have taken an official stand on the Baha'is.²⁸ In the Johor

²⁷ Others included the teachings of Taslim, crypto, Qadiani, Subud, Ilmu Laduni 1976, and Tariqat Naqsyabandiah Prof Kadirun Yahya.

²⁸ It is not known why other states have not taken serious steps to officially address the matter. One possible reason is that the number of Baha'i followers in those states is insignificant. Another is that most Baha'is are not Malay, and therefore are not regarded as a threat to the Malay-Muslim establishment. However, this should not be treated as a sign of tolerance of the Baha'is.

State Fatwa Committee Meeting in 2000, the Baha'i Organization Body was declared un-Islamic and Muslims who were involved in their activities were considered "outside of Islam". However, the statement issued by the Johor State Fatwa Council was not gazetted (Mesyuarat Jawatankuasa Fatwa Negeri Johor 2000). The same was decided by the Mufti of Sabah in 2003 under section 35 of the Administration of Islamic Law Enactment 1992, who stated in a *fatwa* that Baha'i teachings were heretical and could lead to expulsion from Islam, and that Muslims were forbidden from engaging with it. The *fatwa* was gazetted by the Mufti on 11 December 2003 (Mufti of Sabah State Government 2003).²⁹

My interview with a representative from the Baha'i community revealed that they are not seeking legal recognition as part of Islam or the Muslim community. Furthermore, he stated that "So far, we don't really have many Muslims who became Baha'i." Furthermore, they are willing to follow Malaysia's legal system and will not challenge the *fatwa* that bans the faith. Ultimately, they argue that the faith emphasizes unity and nation-building:

I think Baha'i generally are very conscious [of] their roles to bring about unity which is another central principle and conflict of any kind is an affront. I think that is kind of the goal and in that process, you know making sure that people you know in order to reach the unity you have to build unity. So that kind ... I think in that sense they're quite sensitive (Baha'i representative, personal communication, 6 April 2021).

In my opinion, this sets a different tone for the status of the Baha'i community in Malaysia as compared to Shi'as, Ahmadis, followers of Millah Ibrahim and other "deviant" sects who either are Muslim or claim to be following Islam. Theoretically speaking, in the case of the Baha'is, they should pose no threat from the authorities' point of view since they

²⁹ The *fatwa* has since been revoked and subsequently renewed, with a new date of 7 September 2017. The revocation and renewal of the *fatwa* serves to strengthen its legitimacy.

do not claim to be Muslim. Yet, the reality is otherwise. It is also worth mentioning that Malaysia may be taking its cue from other members of the OIC who have expressed their concern about Baha'i presence in their respective countries.³⁰ In my opinion, although the conflict between the Iranian authorities and the Baha'is does not have a direct impact on Malaysia, there is growing concern that the faith is gaining traction in Indonesia.³¹ This could explain why they are being monitored, despite their small numbers. Nevertheless, in contrast to their fate in Iran, the Baha'is in Malaysia have observed that despite being banned, they are not harassed like other minority faith groups, and are allowed to freely conduct their rituals. The same respondent said this:

I think in general Malaysia there is not much fear and prejudice as much as there is misinformation. I think a lot of people don't know about Baha'i faith or miss some information about the Baha'i faith as set of Islam or deviant group. So, this is all misinformation that we do see quite a bit in the country. But we don't see in terms of our practice. I think the government has been, we are able to practise our belief quite free (Baha'i representative, personal communication, 6 April 2021).

AHMADIYAH

The Ahmadi community in Malaysia also faces various curbs on their freedom of religion. The Ahmadiyah movement was founded in 1889 by Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, who was from Qadian in the Gurdaspur district in India. The movement is also known as Qadiani Ahmadiyah, in reference to their founder and his place of birth. Their teachings spread to most parts of the world during the twentieth century, and continue to spread today. Similar to the Millah Ibrahim and Baha'i faiths, Ahmadiyah teachings

³⁰ See *The Council of the International Islamic Fiqh Academy of the Organization of the Islamic Conference* (1988).

³¹ See Nur Kholis (2018) and Amanah Nurish (2012).

centre around Messianism and the claim to prophethood. Its teachings state that the Ahmadiyah is “a sect in Islam which vigorously organizes its proselytization activities (*da'wa*) in order to submit the Muslim umma (community) under the leadership of a Caliph who is based in Qadian, India. It also believes that the fourth caliph Hazrat Tahir Ahmad is the highest leader in the Muslim world” (Fitri Ani and Arifinsyah 2021, p. 73). However, while the missionaries and followers of the movement have preached in the name of Islam, it has never been recognized as an Islamic movement (Azharudin Mohamed Dali 2010, pp. 34–41). In fact, it is these core teachings that have resulted in the movement being banned in countries such as Malaysia, Indonesia, and Singapore.³²

During my meetings with members of the Ahmadi community in Malaysia, I learnt that they believe in Mirza Ghulam Ahmad as the appointed Messiah, and that their understanding of prophethood differs from that of most Muslims. According to them, Prophet Muhammad’s position as the last messenger does not necessarily mean that he was “the last” but simply means that he was the perfect one. Thus, according to the Ahmadis, there can be a prophecy after Prophet Muhammad, albeit a lesser one.³³ This is very different from Sunni and Shi’a teachings which

³² In Singapore, the Fatwa Committee of the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura, MUIS) decided on 23 June 1969 that “the Qadiyan (Ahmadiyah) and those who are similar to them are not Muslims and are deviant”. The *fatwa* was published together with *Kumpulan Fatwa 1* in 1987. See Office of the Mufti (2020). In Indonesia, the Council of Indonesian Ulama (Majelis Ulama Indonesia, MUI) declared the Ahmadiyah as deviant as they allegedly claim that apart from the Qur’an, the *tadzkirah* (collection of dreams of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad) is their holy book, and that Mirza Ghulam Ahmad is the last prophet after the Prophet Muhammad. See Fitri Ani and Arifinsyah (2021).

³³ See Al Islam (2022). The Ahmadis understand the term “Seal of the Prophets” differently from traditional Islam. While the term is used to refer to Prophet Muhammad as the final prophet and messenger, the Ahmadis believe that the term means Prophet Muhammad was the last prophet to reach perfection, and not necessarily the last prophet in time. They, therefore, believe Mirza Ghulam Ahmad is a prophet, but he was not perfect the way Prophet Muhammad was, as he did not reveal or preach any laws (*shari’ah*).

believe that Prophet Muhammad is the only and last messenger. This is a core pillar of their faith.³⁴

Additionally, before his death, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad wrote in his work *Al-Wasiyyat (The Will)* his desire for the Ahmadis to elect “the second manifestation of God’s Power”, or in their words, the *khilafat* or caliphate. According to him, the caliphate is responsible for carrying out five tasks while waiting for the “victory of Islam”. These tasks include (a) the publication of books; (b) the publication of announcements to call the masses towards Islam; (c) providing hospitality to guests who come to learn about the community; (d) writing letters in response to members of the community or opponents of the faith; and (e) providing leadership for members of the community who pledge their allegiance or *bai’at* to the caliphate (Nauman Hadi 2022).

Ahmadiyah teachings first entered Malaysia in 1906 (Azharudin Mohamed Dali 2010, p. 42). Compared to the Baha’i faith, Ahmadiyah teachings are more targeted towards the Malays, making the movement more vulnerable to scrutiny from religious authorities. In 1975, the Selangor Fatwa Council issued a *fatwa* declaring the followers of the Ahmadiyah movement as non-Muslims, and called on them to repent (Shanon Shah 2009). More than two decades later, the Melaka State Fatwa Council issued a *fatwa* on 25 May 2000 stating that Ahmadiyah teachings deviate from Islam, and that it is forbidden to practise it. The *fatwa* further stated that the Ahmadis are regarded to have left the fold of Islam and therefore are not entitled to the same rights as Muslims, such as burial spaces in Muslim cemeteries (Jawatankuasa Fatwa Negeri Melaka 2005).

In 1998, the Selangor State Fatwa Council issued another *fatwa* stating that Muslims who adhere to Ahmadi teachings are risking apostasy (Warta Kerajaan Negeri Selangor 1998), and in 2000, that marriage

³⁴ In terms of rituals and legalistic issues, I have observed that the Ahmadis pray in a similar manner to the Hanafis, a school of thought within Sunni Islam.

between Muslims and Ahmadi followers is illegal.³⁵ The extension of the *fatwa* in 2000 also stated that Malay Ahmadis would lose the special privileges accorded to Malays as enshrined in the Federal Constitution (Majlis Agama Islam Selangor 2021). Following these *fatwas*, there were several other developments concerning the Ahmadis in Selangor, including restrictions on them conducting Friday prayers.³⁶

Following these incidents, in 2015, adherents of the Ahmadiyah faith filed a case against JAIS and attempted to get a declaration from the court that the religious authorities had no jurisdiction over them as they were declared to be outside the fold of Islam according to several *fatwas* issued in the preceding years. They also requested a declaration regarding JAIS's pending investigation and prosecution against them in the Selangor Syariah Court. Additionally, they asked for a mandamus order to force the religious authorities to acknowledge the effect of the *fatwas* they issued, and to cancel any legal action against them (Sipalan 2015).

³⁵ Additionally, men who adhere to Ahmadi teachings are not allowed to be their daughters' guardian on the day of their marriage. There have also been cases in which a marriage between a Muslim and an Ahmadi was dissolved in the presence of the Syariah Court, in accordance with section 1985 of the Islamic Family Law in the state of Selangor. Apart from matters of marriage, Ahmadis are also not allowed to inherit any property left by their Muslim relatives.

³⁶ For example, in 2008, the Gombak District Office and the Selayang Municipal Hall conducted inspections on illegal land use and the construction of a mosque by the Ahmadi community (*Star Online*, 23 December 2008). The Chairman of the Selangor State Committee on Islamic Affairs, Malay Customs, Infrastructure and Basic Facilities at the time, Hasan Ali, claimed that the mosque was built on residential land, and was therefore a clear violation of the law (Azharudin Mohamed Dali 2020). Subsequently, in 2009, the Selangor Islamic Religious Council issued a ban with immediate effect on Ahmadi followers who performed Friday prayers at their own mosque. Later on, in 2014, the Selangor Islamic Religious Department detained a total of thirty-eight Ahmadi followers during a raid conducted while they were gathering at their own premises for Friday prayers (Lee 2011).

The judicial reviews were accepted, and the case was taken to the High Court. In 2018, Judge Vazeer Alam Mydin ruled in favour of the Ahmadis and stated that they may continue their activities in Selangor without being harassed by religious authorities, and should not be subject to the jurisdiction of the state religious authorities given that they have been declared as deviant.³⁷

Although keen to use a human rights framework to demand their freedom of religion and belief, I learnt that the Malaysian Ahmadis can be exclusivist when it comes to other matters. For example, they disallow their followers from leaving the faith. During an FGD with them, an Ahmadi respondent said that “It is not just about choosing other religions. In fact, denouncing the Ahmadiyah faith is disliked” (Ahmadi respondent #1, focus group discussion, 5 September 2021). The participants in the FGD also used terms such as “*murtad*” (apostate) and “*kafir*” (non-believer) to refer to Muslims who choose to denounce Islam. I was also unable to have a conversation with the female adherents, and it appeared that the overall attitude towards topics such as gender and sexual orientation was patriarchal and exclusivist.

Another respondent revealed their thoughts on minority groups within Islam, criticizing Shi’ism for allegedly allowing innovation in religious practices.³⁸ However, after being informed that the Shi’a respondents I interviewed had positive views of them and praised them for their courage to initiate a legal challenge in court, the respondent’s tone changed. Instead, he began to talk about how communities who are oppressed, including Shi’as, should stand in solidarity with one

³⁷ He declared that JAIS cannot investigate or prosecute any Ahmadis under Syariah offences since they are not recognized as Muslim. The judge also ordered the defendants, namely the chief religious enforcement officer, the investigating officer, JAIS, the state Syariah chief prosecutor, and the Selangor state government, to pay the applicant’s cost of RM25,000 (Alhadiri 2008). However, at the time of writing, the case has not been resolved and has been taken to the Court of Appeal as a result of JAIS’s dissatisfaction with the outcome.

³⁸ The term often used is *bid’ah*.

another. Another respondent expressed that he disagrees with the Shi'a act of self-flagellation³⁹ (Ahmadi respondent #3, focus group discussion, 5 September 2021).

The Ahmadis are also critical of other faiths. For example, given that their headquarters are located in the Batu Caves area, which is the main location for Thaipusam festivities, they are often frustrated with Hindus for their perceived lack of discipline, hygiene and sense of organization during the festival (Ahmadi respondent #2, focus group discussion, 5 September 2021).⁴⁰ It also appeared that they are not particularly understanding of Christianity, citing theological differences on aspects of messianism.

In some cases, they are even critical of Muslims. For example, one respondent expressed his discomfort with the fact that there are graveyards in front of some mosques, and that mosque-goers would end up praying in the direction of those graves even when they are praying in the direction of Mecca. Emphasizing that “we are not allowed to pray facing the graves”, he stated twice that he was uncomfortable with the knowledge that this occurs (Ahmadi respondent #2, focus group discussion, 5 September 2021).

They also prohibit certain activities. For example, the official representative told me that they are not permitted to celebrate birthdays: “birthday celebrations like they (other religious communities) have, we actually do not allow those, blowing out candles etc” (Official Ahmadiyah

³⁹ Self-flagellation is still practised by a small number of Shi'as, specifically in Iraq and Pakistan. They do so as part of their remembrance of the tragic fate that befell Imam Hussein (the grandson of Prophet Muhammad), who was martyred at Karbala. Most Shi'a clerics warned against such harmful self-flagellation, and have even labelled it as extreme. For example, in 1927, Sayyid Muhsin al-Amin al-Amili, a Shi'a cleric from Lebanon residing in Najaf at the time, wrote a pamphlet titled “Al-Tanzih li-a'mal al'shabih” condemning the ritual. For further reading, see Nakash (1993).

⁴⁰ Thaipusam is an annual Hindu festival during which devotees perform rituals dedicated to Lord Murugan.

representative, personal communication, 9 April 2021). Other prohibited activities include the commemoration of Prophet Muhammad's birthday (*maulid*), the reading of prayers for the deceased (*tahlil*), and prayers for thanksgiving (*doa selamat*) (Official Ahmadiyah representative, personal communication, 9 April 2021).

Thus, from the discussions I had with them, it seems that although the Ahmadis use the language of human rights to defend themselves, they are not progressive in that they have a low level of tolerance or openness towards other faith communities. Nevertheless, with about 5,000 followers scattered around the Gombak district in Selangor, as well as some in Sabah, they pose little threat to Islam and/or Muslims. Having said that, it is recommended that the religious establishment engages in dialogue with them so as to improve mutual understanding between the two parties.

CONCLUSION

This paper has briefly explored the core teachings of the Millah Ibrahim, Ahmadiyah, and Baha'i faiths, and situated them within the context of human rights and the treatment of religious minorities in Malaysia. In doing so, I explained that one probable reason for the denouncement of these groups is their claim that their founders are either a messiah or a prophet, and that such claims go against the core teachings of Islam.

Traditional Islam, whether it is the Sunni or Shi'a beliefs, teaches that Prophet Muhammad was the final messenger. From the Sunni perspective, it was the caliphs who were the legitimate successors of Prophet Muhammad, and they were the ones who took over the political leadership. From the Shi'a perspective (specifically the Twelvers), it was the descendants of Prophet Muhammad who were his legitimate successors in the areas of political, spiritual, and religious matters.

As for the concept of the messianic deliverer, both Sunnis and Shi'as believe in the concept of a Mahdi, also known as Imam Mahdi or al-Mahdi.⁴¹ While both sects believe he is the saviour at the end of time,

⁴¹ Muslims believe in the reappearance of Jesus as well as the Mahdi as the saviour or messiah who will bring justice to humankind.

there are slight differences in their conception of the Mahdi. For example, while the Sunnis believe that he is still unborn but has certain known characteristics, Shi'as believe that he was born in 869 AD, and is waiting to emerge from hiding.⁴² They, therefore, refer to him as *al-Muntazar*, or “the awaited one”.⁴³ It is therefore evident that the teachings of the Millah Ibrahim, Ahmadiyah and Baha'i faiths clearly contradict the teachings of traditional Islam, especially in terms of prophethood and their understanding of Mahdiism.

Nevertheless, this does not justify Malaysian authorities' human rights violations. Malaysia now has a seat on the United Nations Human Rights Council from 2022 to 2024. To be fair, the Malaysian Constitution is quite progressive in underlining the rights of minorities, but the religious authorities have not respected these rights in practice. With this in mind, it is a shame that there are restrictions on the freedom of religion and that there is heavy regulation by religious authorities. Consequently, these restrictions make it difficult for religious minorities, including minorities within minorities, to voice their grievances. This is due to the constant pressure, intimidation, and harassment that they face. These issues are systemic and can only be resolved with strong political will and mass movements that would effectively illustrate frustrations within society.

As discussed above, religious minorities have various grievances in relation to the religious authorities, and it is therefore crucial that both parties engage with one another. This would be especially beneficial for the authorities who would then gain a better understanding of the thoughts and practices of the minority groups, and at the same time, this would allow them to identify any groups that could pose a serious threat to society. Most importantly, such engagement would facilitate the authorities' move towards upholding human rights, and at the same time, preventing the further development of extremism, whether non-violent or violent.

⁴² The specific date in the Islamic calendar is 15 Sha'ban, 255 AH.

⁴³ For further reading, see Madelung (1986) and Abdul Aziz Abdul Hussein (1981).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I am thankful to the American Bar Association and IMAN Research Centre for funding most of the fieldwork, focus group discussions and interviews conducted as part of this study. I also benefited from my stay as Visiting Fellow at the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore. Miss Suhaini Md Nor from the Institute of the Malay World and Civilization (ATMA), National University of Malaysia (UKM) helped me develop the questionnaires.

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ISSN 0219-3213

TRS16/22s

ISBN 978-981-5011-61-6



9 789815 011616