

2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Malaysia

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. The government continued to maintain restrictions on religious assembly and practices by Islamic religious groups that were not Sunni. Sedition laws criminalize speech that “promotes ill will, hostility, or hatred on the grounds of religion.” 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, with state governments having responsibility for sharia. Most citizens are Muslim, with Buddhism, Christianity, and Hinduism as the other major religions practiced.

The government continued to arrest individuals during the year for blasphemy. The Royal Malaysia Police (RMP) said its 3R (race, religion, and royalty) task force, which was formed in March, opened 61 investigations, and that police had arrested at least 12 individuals as of July. The government continued to take action against some individuals who diverged from the official interpretation of Islam, including subjecting some to “rehabilitation” in centers that taught and enforced government-approved Islamic practice. Police investigations into the “enforced disappearances” in 2016 of a social activist accused of spreading Shia teachings, and in 2017 of a Christian pastor, remained ongoing. The courts ordered a limited release of a 2019 government report on the Human Rights Commission of Malaysia (SUHAKAM) investigation of the Shia Muslim social activist’s disappearance to his wife, but the government appealed the decision and obtained an order from the court to block release of the report. Authorities reportedly continued to selectively prosecute persons for allegedly “insulting” Islam while largely ignoring criticisms of other faiths.

Islamic religious groups that are not Sunni and some other religious groups continued to report problems at times in registering as nonprofit charitable organizations or in building houses of worship, although some religious groups registered as companies to conduct their activities. Some members of the monarchy promoted interpretations of Islam that emphasized respect for freedom of religion or belief. In January, the Court of Appeals reversed a 2021 High Court decision that a 37-year-old woman born to a Hindu father and Buddhist mother who converted to Islam as a child was “not a person professing the religion of Islam.” In September, the Kuala Lumpur High Court asked Member of Parliament (MP) Maria Chin Abdullah and the government’s religious authorities and sharia judiciary to settle a case filed by Chin against the Sharia High Court in response to the court’s sentencing her to seven days in jail for “insulting” the Islamic judicial system in a September 2019 press release.

The government banned several books and movies that it stated were prejudicial to public order, including some that it said promoted a lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex (LGBTQI+) lifestyle. In May, Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party president Abdul Hadi Awang said the Chinese-Malaysian-majority Democratic Action Party had a “secularist” agenda that seeks to “dilute the Malay-Muslim race” by “defending apostates” and “taking measures” against new Muslim converts. He added that non-Muslims’ wellbeing would be threatened if they “cross the line” in their behavior towards Muslims in the country. In May, the government withdrew its appeal of the High Court’s 2021 ruling permitting non-Muslims to use the word “Allah” in their reference to God.

Local human rights organizations and religious leaders continued to express concern about the increasing “Islamization” of politics, citing sophisticated social media campaigns used by

conservative Islamic organizations to encourage youths to embrace a more conservative interpretation of Islam. Religious converts from Islam sometimes faced severe stigmatization. Muslim women who did not wear headscarves or conform to religious notions of modesty were often subject to shaming in public and on social media. A November survey by Pew Research Center found that while 62 percent of adults said religious, ethnic, and cultural diversity made the country a better place to live, about half of Muslim respondents believed the growing number of Christians and Buddhists were a threat to Islam in the country.

U.S. embassy officials discussed with government officials at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Women, Family, and Community Development, Ministry of Youth and Sports, the Prime Minister's Department, and the Parliament Special Select Committee (PSSC) on Human Rights, Elections, and Institutional Reform, and the PSSC on International Relations and Trade, among others, issues including constitutional provisions on freedom of religion, the increase in religious intolerance, and respect for religious minorities. Embassy officials visited houses of worship of various faiths to underscore the importance of respecting religious pluralism. Embassy representatives met with members of religious groups, including minority groups and those whose activities were limited by the government, to discuss the restrictions they faced and strategies for engagement with the government on issues of religious freedom. The embassy facilitated and ensured the participation of religious leaders from various faiths and scholars in various exchanges and conferences that promoted religious freedom and tolerance.

Section I.

Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 34.2 million (midyear 2023). According to the most recent census by the Malaysian government in 2020, 63.5 percent of the population practices Islam; 18.7 percent, Buddhism; 9.1 percent, Christianity; 6.1 percent, Hinduism; 1.8 percent is atheist; and 0.9 percent belong to other religious groups that include animists, Confucianists, Taoists, Sikhs, and Baha'is. Almost all Muslims in the country practice Sunni Islam of the Shafi'i school. Ethnic Malays, defined in the federal constitution as Muslims from birth, account for approximately 55 percent of the population. Rural areas – especially in the peninsular east coast of the country – are predominantly Muslim, while the states of Sabah and Sarawak on the island of Borneo have relatively higher numbers of non-Muslims. Ethnic Chinese Malaysians are mainly Buddhist; some are Christian or Muslim, and live mostly in the West coast states, especially in Kedah, Penang, Perak, Selangor, Melaka, and Johor. Ethnic Indian Malaysians are predominantly Hindu, although some are Muslim, Christian, or Sikh. There is a very small Malaysian Thai Buddhist community living in the northern parts of Kedah and Kelantan States. Two-thirds of the country's Christian population live in the East Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak.

Section II.

Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

LEGAL FRAMEWORK

The federal constitution states, "Every person has the right to profess and practice his religion," but it gives federal and state governments the power to control or restrict proselytization aimed at converting Muslims to another faith. The constitution names Islam as the "religion of the Federation" and gives parliament powers to make provisions regulating Islamic religious affairs. Federal law allows citizens and organizations to sue the government for constitutional violations of

religious freedom. 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 “Heads of Islam.” Sultans are present in nine of the country’s 13 states and are the highest Islamic authority within their respective states per the constitution. In the remaining four states and the Federal Territories, the highest Islamic authority is the King, selected to serve a five-year term from among the nine sultans in an established rotation order. Islamic law is administered by each state and federal territory. The office of mufti exists in every state to advise the sultan in all matters of Islamic law. Sultans oversee sharia courts and appoint sharia court judges based on the recommendation of the respective state Islamic religious departments and councils, which manage the operations of the sharia courts. In states with no sultan and in the Federal Territories, the King oversees this process.

Federal law has constitutional precedence over state law except in matters concerning Islamic law. A constitutional amendment provides that civil courts have no jurisdiction with respect to any matter within the jurisdiction of the sharia courts. When civil and sharia jurisdictions intersect, civil courts largely defer to sharia courts, creating situations in which sharia judgments can affect non-Muslims. Since 2018, however, the Federal Court, the country’s highest judicial body, has held it has jurisdiction over the procedures of the sharia administrative authority in cases involving conversion of minors and that such jurisdiction may not be abrogated by a constitutional amendment.

The Sharia Judiciary Department is the federal agency charged with coordinating sharia courts. The federal Department of Development of Islam (JAKIM) is the permanent secretariat of the federal Fatwa Committee, which consists of 14 muftis, one from each state and one representing the Federal Territories. The Sharia and Civil Technical Committee within the Attorney General’s Chambers oversees the process of sharia lawmaking at the federal level. 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 as “apostates.” Sharia courts seldom grant such requests, especially for those born Muslim and ethnic Malays, and those who have converted to Islam. Penalties for apostasy vary by state. In the states of Perak, Melaka, Sabah, and Pahang, apostasy is a criminal offense punishable by a fine or prison term. In Pahang, courts may also impose up to six strokes of the cane for apostasy. The maximum penalty for apostasy in the states of Kelantan and Terengganu is death, but courts have never imposed this penalty, and its legality remains untested. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) report that most converts from Islam prefer to do so privately, without legal approval. Nationally, civil courts generally cede authority to sharia courts in cases concerning conversion from Islam. In some states, sharia courts allow one parent to convert children to Islam without the consent of the second parent. 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 sharia court to officially recognize the marriage.

A minor (under the age of 18, according to federal law) generally may not convert to another faith without parental consent. Some states’ laws, however, allow conversion to Islam without parental consent after age 15. The 2018 decision of the Federal Court that addressed the constitutional limits of sharia administrative authority, specifically ruled against the unilateral conversion of children by a sharia court without the consent of both parents. The decision held that civil courts had jurisdiction to exercise supervisory powers over administrative decisions of state Islamic authorities. Another opinion in 2022 by the Federal Court affirmed the substance of the 2018 decision.

Sedition laws regulate and punish, among other acts, speech considered hostile to ethnic groups, which includes speech insulting a religion, enforced most often for such speech regarding Islam. The penal code punishes “offenses relating to religion” including “injuring or defiling a place of worship,” “disturbing a religious assembly,” “trespassing on burial places,” or “uttering words with deliberate intent to wound the religious dealings of any person.” Convictions for these offenses under sedition laws within the penal code may result in prison sentences of up to two years or a

fine, the amount of which is not defined in the penal code, or imprisonment of up to 20 years if there is physical harm or damage to property. The penal code also bars speech that “promotes ill will, hostility, or hatred on the grounds of religion,” with offenders facing imprisonment between two to five years. NGOs report that prosecutions for blasphemy usually involve those who offend Islam, but an insult to any religion may be subject to prosecution.

Under sharia, which differs by state, individuals convicted of “deviant” religious activity face up to three years in prison, caning, or a 5,000 ringgit (\$1,100) fine for “insulting” Islam. According to some state laws, Muslims may be fined 1,000 ringgit (\$218) if they do not attend “counseling” after being found guilty of wearing what authorities deem immodest clothing. According to sharia in some states, individuals who sell food to fasting Muslims or Muslims who do not fast are also subject to a fine, imprisonment, or both.

JAKIM and state Islamic authorities prepare all Friday sermons for congregations as well as oversee and approve the appointment of imams at all mosques. JAKIM and state Islamic officials must formally approve all teachers of Islam before they may preach or lecture on Islam in public.

There is no legal requirement for non-Muslim religious groups to register, but 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 by paying a small fee. These organizations are legally required to submit annual reports to the ROS to remain registered. The ROS may inspect registered organizations and investigate those suspected of being used for purposes “prejudicial to public peace, welfare, good order, or morality.”

Tax laws allow an exemption for registered religious groups for donations received and a tax deduction for individual donors. Donors giving *zakat* (Islamic 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.

Under sharia, caning is permitted in every state. Offenses subject to caning, sometimes in conjunction with imprisonment, include consensual same-sex sexual relations and prostitution. Caning is also permitted for a wider variety of offenses under provisions in the federal penal code, such as for rape, drug trafficking, illegal migration, bribery, and criminal breach of trust.

The law forbids proselytizing of Muslims by non-Muslims, with punishments varying from state to state, including imprisonment and caning. The law allows Muslims to proselytize without restriction.

State governments have exclusive authority over allocation of land for, and the construction of, all places of worship as well as land allocation for all cemeteries.

All Islamic houses of worship – including mosques and prayer rooms – fall under the authority of JAKIM and corresponding state Islamic departments; officials at these departments must first authorize the construction of any mosque or prayer room.

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. Non-Muslims have no standing in sharia proceedings, leading to some cases where sharia court rulings have negatively affected non-Muslims who are unable to defend their position or appeal the court’s decision. Such rulings typically occurred in cases related to custody, divorce, inheritance, burial, and conversion in interfaith families. The relationship between sharia and civil law remains largely unresolved in the legal system.

The states of Kelantan and Terengganu have enacted *hudud* penalties (those mandated by sharia) for Muslims, although the federal government has never allowed the implementation of hudud penalties. The states may not implement these punishments without amendments to federal legislation and the agreement of the sultan.

The legal age of marriage is 16 for Muslim women and 18 for Muslim men, except in Selangor and Kedah States, where Muslim and non-Muslim women must be 18. Sharia courts may make exceptions for marriage before those ages with the consent of parents. Non-Muslims must be 18 to marry but may marry as young as 16 with the approval of their state's chief minister, the highest executive branch authority in the state.

National identity cards specify religious affiliation, and the government uses them 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 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.

Foreign missionaries and international students enrolling in religious courses must apply for entry with the Department of Immigration. These classes of visas are valid for one year, and a national body representing the respective faiths must endorse the applicant's qualifications.

JAKIM coordinates the Hajj, endowment (*waqf*), tithes, and other Islamic activities.

The Film Censorship Guidelines published by the Ministry of Home Affairs (MOHA) identifies several criteria that "warrant attention" by the ministry, including scenes that depict lifestyles that are outside of "cultural norms and religious standards."

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

GOVERNMENT PRACTICES

Abuses Involving Violence, Detention, or Mass Resettlement

The government did not release results from a government-appointed panel formed in 2019 to investigate SUHAKAM's assessment that the RMP intelligence unit, Special Branch (RMPSB), was responsible for the 2016-17 "enforced disappearances" of Shia Muslim social activist Amri Che Mat and Christian pastor Raymond Koh. It also failed to make progress in its investigation of those cases, according to SUHAKAM. In May, the Kuala Lumpur High Court ordered a limited release of the panel's report to Amri's wife, Norhayati Mohd Ariffin, and her lawyer after Norhayati filed for a judicial review to declassify the report. Authorities appealed the decision and in June obtained a temporary stay order from the court to avoid releasing the report.

The wife of Pastor Koh, Susanna Liew, continued her legal action against the federal government and several senior officials for what she stated was failure to properly investigate her husband's kidnapping in 2017, accusing them of negligence, misfeasance, and conspiracy to injure. In June, the Kuala Lumpur High Court heard oral arguments in Liew's lawsuit to compel the RMP to disclose information regarding Pastor Koh's whereabouts. The case remained ongoing as of year's end. Legal proceedings continued against Lam Chang Nam, accused of extorting funds from the Koh family, by claiming to have had information on Koh's whereabouts. In April, Minister of Home Affairs Saifuddin Nasution told parliament police investigations into the disappearances of Raymond Koh and Amri Che Mat remained ongoing. In February, Liew held a vigil on the sixth anniversary of her husband's disappearance. Liew told attendees that her family had still not received any updates on her husband's whereabouts from authorities, but that she hoped to reunite with her husband "in this world or the next."

Despite calls from the Kuala Lumpur High Court for police to locate Riduan Abdullah, the former husband of school teacher Indira Gandhi, and their youngest child, whom Abdullah abducted in 2009, both remained missing as of year's end. Gandhi, a Hindu, had successfully sued to deny her former husband's unilateral conversion of their three minor children to Islam. In 2022, the Court of Appeal rejected the government's appeal to reject Gandhi's suit against the government, police, and MOHA for inaction in executing the warrant against her former husband. The Kuala Lumpur High Court scheduled a hearing on the lawsuit for January 2024. At year's end, there was no indication police had made progress in locating the daughter or had other leads in the case.

Abuses Limiting Religious Belief and Expression

During the year, authorities continued to arrest individuals for blasphemy.

The RMP said its 3R (race, religion, and royalty) task force, which was formed in March, opened 61 investigations, and that police had arrested at least 12 individuals as of July.

In May, police arrested a man in Kuala Lumpur, over a viral video clip he posted that was allegedly insulting to Islam. Police investigated him under the penal code for "causing disharmony or enmity on grounds of religion" and the Communications and Multimedia Act for improper use of network facilities. There were no updates to the case as of the end of the year.

In June, the Johor Bahru Sessions Court charged Alimuddin Mohd Hayat with 10 counts of making and initiating transmission of offensive communication mixed with insults against Islam, Allah, and the Prophet on social media in April. According to the charges, Alimuddin sent a text that was insulting in nature against the Islamic faith. The text was uploaded on a social media account belonging to "Ali Tikos." with the case including charges of intent to hurt the religious feelings of other persons. The case was ongoing at year's end.

In April, the Kuala Lumpur Sessions Court fined Siti Nuramira Abdullah 8,000 ringgit (\$1,700) in lieu of four months in jail for "wounding the religious feelings of any person" after her June 2022 open microphone comedy appearance at the Crackhouse Comedy Club in Kuala Lumpur. During the appearance, she identified herself as a Muslim and stated that she had memorized 15 chapters of the Quran. Following the statement, she removed her *tudong* (headscarf) and *baju kurung* (traditional Malay dress) to reveal a short dress underneath. In June, a court also convicted Nuramira's husband Alexander Navin Vijayachandran, who posted the video of her performance online, and fined him 16,000 ringgit (\$3,500) in lieu of eight months in jail for improper use of network facilities.

In July, the Kuala Lumpur Sessions Court fined the cofounder of Crackhouse Comedy Club, comedian Rizal van Geyzel, 8,000 ringgit (\$1,700) for posting three videos of Siti Nuramira Abdullah's performance online. RMP accused him of violating racial and religious sensitivities and stated that the club "promotes liberalism" and insults Islam and Malays in its performances. Police also charged him with misuse of communication network facilities and services.

It is illegal under federal law for one parent to convert a child's religion without the consent of the other parent, although legal under some state laws, and courts continued to rule against unilateral conversion attempts in most cases.

In January, the Court of Appeals reversed a 2021 High Court ruling that a 37-year-old woman born to a Hindu father and Buddhist mother who converted to Islam was "not a person professing the religion of Islam" and the woman's unilateral conversion to Islam by her mother at four years old was invalid. The Court of Appeals held that case was a sharia court matter over which the High Court had no jurisdiction.

On March 3, 14 plaintiffs filed a petition with the Kuala Lumpur High Court seeking a declaration invalidating all state laws that permit unilateral religious conversion of a child. The plaintiffs considered such laws to be unconstitutional and to contradict the 2018 Federal Court ruling that

both parents need to consent to the religious conversion of their children. The petition identified seven states, Perlis, Kedah, Melaka, Negeri Sembilan, Pahang, Perak, and Johor, and three Federal Territories – Kuala Lumpur, Putrajaya, and Labuan – that allow unilateral religious conversion of children by their mother or father without the consent of the other parent. In April, one of the plaintiffs filed claims against several religious officers in Johor state, alleging they threatened and harassed her over filing the March petition. Both court cases remained pending as of year's end.

In March, media outlets reported that 137 individuals from the Bateq Mayah Indigenous tribe in Pahang State sought a court order in September 2022 to nullify their status as Muslims. The individuals alleged that the Orang Asli Development Department and Pahang Islamic Religious Council “coerced, forced, and threatened” them into converting to Islam in 1993 or they would risk losing their houses and crops. The case remained pending at year's end.

In March, the Kuala Lumpur High Court ruled that the three children of Loh Siew Hong had lawfully converted to Islam from Hinduism. She had accused her former husband of unilaterally converting their children to Islam over her objections. The judge ruled there was no evidence the children had stopped professing Islam since they returned to Loh Siew Hong's custody in February 2022, and ruled that the children would remain under her custody to protect their welfare.

In September, the Kuala Lumpur High Court asked MP Maria Chin Abdullah and the government's religious authorities and sharia judiciary to settle an August 2022 petition she filed appealing a decision of the Sharia High Court. The Sharia High Court sentenced her in April 2022 to seven days in jail for contempt of court for “insulting” the Islamic judicial system in her September 2019 press release stating that the sharia court discriminated against Muslim women. More than 70 politicians and MPs from various opposition parties expressed “concern” in an April 2022 joint statement, saying the judiciary must not be immune from criticism or accountability. The Kuala Lumpur High Court scheduled a hearing on the settlement for March 2024.

Civil society activists said the government selectively prosecuted speech denigrating Islam and largely ignored criticisms of other faiths.

As of year's end, the High Court had not issued an opinion in its judicial review of Buddhist Ong Seng Teng's 2020 complaint over the National Registration Department's (NRD) refusal to issue a birth certificate for his son, born in 2019, listing the boy's religion as Buddhism. The NRD cited the refusal as a religious issue, stating that Ong's wife (the boy's mother) was born Muslim and that sharia courts had never approved her 2016 application to convert to Buddhism. The NRD denied the family's request to list the boy's religion as “Buddhist” on his birth certificate, stating sharia mandated that the child must be registered with the same religion as the mother. NGO activists said that the NRD's decision was based on “implied law,” on the assumption that the children of Muslim parents are automatically Muslim.

Abuses Involving the Ability of Individuals to Engage in Religious Activities Alone or In Community with Others

State religious authorities generally followed guidelines on what constituted deviant Islamic behavior or belief, implemented through the national-level Steering Committee on Addressing Deviationist Teachings. Those differing from the official interpretation of Islam continued to face adverse government action, including assignment to “rehabilitation” in centers that taught and enforced 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 detainees adopted the government's official interpretation of Islam.

In June and July, religious authorities from Melaka and Perak States declared the Si Hulk religious group as deviant for “misinterpreting” the Quran by stating it bought its “Si Hulk Water” from the Prophet Muhammad. In August, the Domestic Trade and Cost of Living Ministry began investigations into Si Hulk Water for false and misleading advertising of health products. Media

outlets reported that 150 families who were Si Hulk followers arrived in New Zealand in July and sought asylum on religious grounds. There were no updates on their asylum application as of year's end.

NGOs reported it remained difficult for Muslims attempting to convert and for non-Muslims mistakenly registered as Muslims to change the religious designation on their identification cards. To mitigate this, a Christian organization in the country created a website that provided resources for citizens who want to change their religion on their national identity card.

In cases in which the government refused to register a religious group, the group could pursue registration as a private company. Some religious groups reported that registering as a company was generally relatively quick and provided a legal basis for conducting business, did not create limitations on the group's religious activities, and allowed the organization to then conduct certain activities such as holding a bank account and owning property. However, registering as a company did not entitle the organization to tax-exempt status or government funding. Examples of religious groups that continued to be registered as companies included Jehovah's Witnesses and The Church of Jesus Christ.

The government continued to maintain restrictions on religious assembly and practices by Islamic religious groups that were not Sunni. The government limited the ability of some religious groups, such as The Church of Jesus Christ, to register as charitable organizations. Some religious organizations and non-Islamic NGOs continued to find registration difficult, with ROS denying or delaying action on some applications without explanation or for technical reasons. Representatives of religious groups continued to say ROS had no consistent policy or transparent criteria for determining whether to register religious groups.

State-level Islamic religious enforcement officers continued to have the authority to accompany police on raids of private premises and public establishments and to enforce sharia on Muslims, including for violations such as indecent dress, distribution of banned publications, alcohol consumption, or *khalwat* (close proximity to a non-family member of the opposite sex).

All foreign missionaries – Muslim and non-Muslim – coming to the country to conduct religious seminars were subjected to mandatory background checks for “national security reasons” by authorities to ensure they were free from “deviant” teachings.

Officials at the federal and state levels continued to oversee Islamic religious activities, distribute all sermon texts for mosques to follow, use mosques to convey political messages, and limit public expressions deemed contrary to Sunni Islam.

Federal and state governments continued to forbid religious assembly and worship for groups considered to be “deviant” Muslim groups, including Shia, Ahmadiyya, and al-Arqam. While Ahmadi Muslims in the country reported 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 response to an event staged by the Ministry of Youth and Sports for citizens to learn more about other religions, Selangor State executive counselor for religious affairs Zawawi Ahmad Mughni said in a March 14 media statement that the state's Islamic law prohibits Muslims from entering churches and other non-Muslim places of worship. The international Christian NGO Open Doors expressed concern about the law, saying it restricted the rights of minorities.

In August, religious authorities investigated a groundbreaking ceremony for the Malaysian Indian Congress Party headquarters in Kuala Lumpur that involved the recitation of Muslim, Christian, and Hindu prayers to ensure this event did not involve elements that “contravene any Islamic rules or fatwa.” Authorities had not charged any individuals as of year's end.

In September, MOHA banned the film *Mentega Terbang* under the Film Censorship Act for being “contrary to public interest.” The film depicted a 15-year-old girl who becomes curious about faith

and the afterlife because of her mother's declining health.

In September, the Court of Appeal reinstated MOHA's ban on the book, *Gay is OK! A Christian Perspective*. The ruling reversed a February 2022 High Court decision that the ministry's ban on the book "had no legal and factual basis." The ministry banned the book in 2020, seven years after its publication, under the Printing Presses and Publications Act 1984 for being "prejudicial to public order." The Appeals Court ruled that the then Minister of Home Affairs "correctly abided" by the law after he was satisfied there was a "likelihood" of prejudice to public order.

In February, MOHA banned three books – *Steven Universe: The Tale of Steven*, *Jacob's Room to Choose*, and *Aku* – deemed to be harmful to Malaysian morals. Two of them were alleged to contain LGBTQI+ elements. A statement by the ministry said: "All three publications have content that may harm morals. The book *Aku* was found to have obscene and immoral content that could influence personal behavior and is against the values of decency in Malaysian society. *The Tale of Steven* and *Jacob's Room to Choose* were deemed to promote an LGBTQI+ lifestyle, which is seen as a threat to the noble values taught by religion and Eastern society all this time."

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. Sources reported that Shia Muslims used local community centers "sympathetic to their situation" for their services. Ahmadi Muslims continued their long-time use of a facility in Kuala Lumpur registered as a commercial building.

At public primary and secondary schools, student assemblies frequently started with the recitation of an Islamic prayer by a teacher or school leader. Critics expressed concern over the religious overtones and symbols in schools. Community leaders and civil liberties groups said religion teachers in public schools pressured Muslim girls to wear the tudong at school, especially in peninsular Malaysia. Some private schools required Muslim girls to wear veils covering their faces except for their eyes.

Homeschooling remained legal, but some families continued to report difficulty in obtaining approval from the Ministry of Education.

Abuses Involving Discrimination or Unequal Treatment

The government continued its policy of not recognizing marriages between Muslims and non-Muslims, and it considered children born of such unions to be illegitimate.

A Perlis State fatwa from 2021 that "men who appear like women," such as transgender individuals, could not enter mosques or perform the Hajj or Umrah remained in effect. Representatives of the NGO Sisters in Islam continued to express the view that the fatwa contradicted the inclusive Islamic traditions in the federal constitution.

During the year, JAKIM conducted several sharia enforcement-related activities. In February, 70 officers from JAKIM and religious authorities in Negeri Sembilan state conducted a Valentine's Day Crime Prevention Operation to prevent "immoral activities" by Muslims and detained several couples for further investigation. In July, JAKIM held a National Convention on Sharia Law Enforcement and Prosecution where speakers from government agencies presented on ways of strengthening Sunni Islam and preventing the proselytization of Muslims.

The government budget did not specifically allocate funds to non-Muslim religious groups, although some religious groups reported continuing to receive sporadic government funding for operating temples and church buildings and related activities. In October, Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim announced that 50 million ringgit (\$10.8 million) under the next federal budget for 2024 would be allocated to renovate and maintain registered non-Islamic places of worship.

In April, the Federal Court dismissed a libel and sedition lawsuit filed by Christians Maklin Masiau and Lawrence Jomiji Kinsil Maximilhan against Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) President Abdul Hadi Awang, who published an article in 2016 accusing Christian missionaries of preying on poor and uneducated persons in impoverished communities in states such as Sabah by paying them to convert to Christianity. In dismissing the libel and sedition lawsuit, the three-judge panel said the plaintiffs' appeal was "not competent" based on a technical finding that the plaintiffs did not affirm their affidavit before a commissioner for oaths.

According to LGBTQI+ activists, authorities decided not to prosecute 19 individuals whom police arrested at a private Halloween party in 2022 on charges of being a "male person who, in any public place, wears a woman's attire and poses as a woman for immoral purposes," after the individuals attended counselling in 2023. Another individual remained under investigation as of year's end.

The government continued to prohibit Israeli citizens from entering the country without approval from MOHA and limited the ability of Malaysian citizens to travel to Israel.

Throughout the year, Selangor State Sultan Sharafuddin Idris Shah, who is also the National Council of Islamic Religious Affairs chair, spoke frequently on issues of freedom of religion and belief. In June, he urged the public to not politicize debates relating to the right of non-Muslims to use the word "Allah" when referring to God and stated that the government should resolve the issue without "prejudicing the rights of others" to practice their faiths peacefully. In May, the government withdrew its appeal of the High Court's 2021 ruling permitting non-Muslims to use the word "Allah" when referring to God, due to contradictions in two government directives from 1986 relating to the use of "Allah." The High Court ruled that a 1986 regulation by MOHA banning the use of the word "Allah" by non-Muslims was unconstitutional, stating that Christians in East Malaysia had used the term "Allah" in their religious practice for generations. The case that was under appeal concerned a Sarawak Christian's importation of CDs from Indonesia with "Allah" printed on them which were seized by the country's customs officials.

In March, Sultan Sharafuddin said there is "nothing wrong" with a Muslim visiting other places of worship but added that to prevent proselytization, the law does not allow Muslims to learn about other faiths.

In a June royal address, King Abdullah urged the public to not turn religious issues into political disputes and said, while Islam is the country's official religion, other religions can be practiced peacefully.

In May, PAS President Abdul Hadi Awang told media the Chinese-Malaysian majority Democratic Action Party (DAP) had a "secularist" agenda that sought to "dilute the Malay-Muslim race" by "defending apostates" and "taking measures" against new Muslim converts. He added that non-Muslims' well-being would be threatened if they "cross the line" in their behavior towards Muslims in the country. Hadi Awang also said that the events of May 1969 (when sectarian violence resulted in hundreds of dead) should "serve as a lesson."

Other Developments Affecting Religious Freedom

Media outlets reported that police in Kajang, Selangor State, prevented a woman involved in a car accident from filing a report at a police station because at the time she wore shorts which did not cover her knees. Inspector General of Police Acryl Sani Abdullah Sani said the public must adhere to the dress code at police stations. "Those [situations] that involve life or death, we can give a little leeway," Acryl told reporters. Media outlets reported in February that a woman said she was denied medical treatment at a government hospital in Kampar, Perak, because she was in shorts.

The government supported Hajj and Umrah travel for Muslims through its statutory body Tabung Haji. In 2022, Tabung Haji reported spending 186 million ringgit (\$40.5 million) to support Hajj travel for pilgrims. There were no restrictions regarding age or perceived political affiliation,

although there were restrictions on the number of participants due to annual quotas allowed by Saudi Arabia.

Section III.

Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Local human rights organizations and religious leaders continued to express concern about the increasing “Islamization” of politics, citing sophisticated social media campaigns used by conservative Islamic organizations to encourage youths to embrace a more conservative interpretation of Islam.

As in years past, local human rights organizations and religious leaders said society reflected a wide range of views on religious freedom, but independent studies showed that some parts of society were less accepting of religious diversity. A November survey by Pew Research Center found that while 62 percent of adults said religious, ethnic, and cultural diversity made the country a better place to live, approximately half of Muslim respondents believed the growing number of Christians and Buddhists were a threat to Islam in the country.

In June, politicians from Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim’s People’s Justice Party (PKR) asked police to investigate allegations that a Christian organization was proselytizing to children while their parents were at work. According to media reports, police did not investigate the complaint.

In August, a resort in Perak State changed the name of its Songkran festival to the Sahom Water Festival after public outcry from members, of the Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) who said the name implied the resort would observe Hindu events or customs.

Religious converts, particularly those converting from Islam, sometimes faced severe stigmatization. In many cases, converts reportedly concealed their newly adopted beliefs and practices from Muslims, including friends and relatives.

Religious identities continued to affect secular aspects of life. Muslim women who did not wear headscarves or conform to religious notions of modesty were often subject to shaming in public and on social media. Mainstream media organizations published articles on Muslim female celebrities who no longer wore a tudong and described the celebrities’ decisions as “unreasonable.” In the articles, the celebrities stated they had to accept criticism, including on social media, with “an open mind.”

Section IV.

U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Throughout the year, U.S. embassy officials engaged a wide variety of federal and state government officials at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs; the Ministry of Women, Family, and Community Development; the Ministry of Youth and Sports; the Prime Minister’s Department; the PSSC on Human Rights, Elections, and Institutional Reform; and the PSSC on International Relations and Trade, as well as other agencies, on religious freedom and tolerance issues, including constitutional provisions on religious freedom and concerns about the denigration of religious minorities. Embassy officials also discussed the unilateral conversion of children by one parent without the permission of the other and the continued disappearances of Amri Che Mat, Pastor Raymond Koh, and others from prior years including Pastor Joshua Hilmy, and Ruth Sitepu, with SUHAKAM commissioners and the Malaysian Bar Council.

Embassy officials visited houses of worship of various faiths to underscore the importance of respecting religious pluralism. Embassy representatives met with members of religious groups, including minority groups and those whose activities were limited by the government, to discuss the restrictions they faced and strategies for engagement with the government on issues of religious freedom. The embassy facilitated and ensured the participation of religious leaders from various faiths and scholars in various exchanges and conferences that promoted religious freedom and tolerance.

The embassy amplified messages promoting religious freedom on its social media platforms on International Religious Freedom Day and throughout the year. Social media posts stressed the importance of respect for freedom of religion and religious diversity.

The embassy funded a program called “Sekolah Diversiti” to cultivate cross-cultural understanding among youth from different ethnicities and religious background to become equipped as leaders who will foster inclusivity in their communities.

Embassy officials routinely met with Uyghur activists, including some holding asylum status in Malaysia based on religious persecution in China, and expressed support for NGOs working to raise awareness of concerns and treatment of Uyghurs.

In March, embassy officials attended the “Majlis Grand Iftar for Humanity,” an interfaith iftar hosted by the Malaysian Islamic Youth Movement (ABIM) with a keynote by Mohd Na'im Mokhtar, a minister in the Prime Minister's Department (Religious Affairs). They had discussions with leaders from several faiths about the importance of promoting interreligious dialogue in the country. The embassy also hosted an iftar with civil society and religious leaders, highlighting religious plurality and freedom in the United States. In collaboration with partner media outlets, the Ambassador attended an iftar with Rohingya refugee families where he visited their homes, and they shared stories about their problems and triumphs.

In April, embassy officials met with the Zomi Association of Malaysia and several Zomi diaspora organizations to discuss rights for minority Zomi Christians in the country and in the United States.

In October, embassy officials met with members of the Burma Advocacy Group, a coalition of U.S. Baptist churches with Burma diaspora Baptist groups in the United States, to discuss the importance of U.S. support for ethnic and religious minorities in Burma and refugees from Burma.