

MALAYSIA 2012 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution protects religious freedom with some exceptions. Portions of the constitution, as well as other laws and policies, place some restrictions on religious freedom and in practice the government generally enforced those restrictions. The trend in the government's respect for religious freedom did not change significantly during the year. The constitution gives federal and state governments the power to "control or restrict the propagation of any religious doctrine or belief among persons professing the religion of Islam." The government maintains a dual legal system, under which Sharia courts rule on religious, family, and some criminal issues involving Muslims and secular courts rule on other issues pertaining to both Muslims and the broader population. Government policies promote Sunni Islam above other religions. Other teachings and forms of Islam are illegal, and the government maintains an official but secret list of banned sects of Islam. The constitution defines ethnic Malays as Muslim from birth. Muslims may not legally convert to another religion except in extremely rare circumstances, although members of other religions may convert to Islam. Minority religious groups remained generally free to practice their beliefs.

There were reports of societal abuse and discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, including reports of child marriages as an approved practice of Islam. Civil society organizations continued to criticize this practice.

Embassy representatives maintained an active dialogue with the government and with leaders and representatives of various religious groups, including those not officially recognized by the government. The ambassador visited and met with religious leaders across the country to emphasize the importance of religious freedom and tolerance among religions.

Section I. Religious Demography

The population is approximately 29.6 million, according to 2010 census data from the Malaysian Department of Statistics. Census figures indicate that 61.3 percent of the population practices Islam; 19.8 percent Buddhism; 9.2 percent Christianity; 6.3 percent Hinduism; and 1.3 percent Confucianism, Taoism, and other traditional Chinese philosophies and religions. Other minority religious groups include animists, Sikhs, and Bahais. Ethnic Malay Muslims account for approximately 55 percent of the population. Several of the most prominent political parties are

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organized along ethnic and/or religious lines. The majority of Christians reside in the eastern states of Sabah and Sarawak.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

Freedom of religion is written into the constitution as a protected right; however, portions of the constitution, as well as other laws and policies, place restrictions on religious freedom. Article 11 states that “every person has the right to profess and practice his religion,” but gives state and federal governments the power to “control or restrict the propagation of any religious doctrine or belief among persons professing the religion of Islam.” Article 3 states that “Islam is the religion of the Federation” and “Parliament may by law make provisions for regulating Islamic religious affairs.” Article 160 defines ethnic Malays as Muslim from birth. The constitution identifies the traditional rulers, also known as sultans, as the “Heads of Islam” within their respective states. Sultans are present in nine of the country’s 13 states; in the remaining four states and the federal territories, the highest Islamic authority is the king. The law allows citizens and organizations to sue the government for constitutional violations of religious freedom. Federal law has constitutional precedence over state law, but the constitution provides that issues of Islamic law are state, rather than federal, matters.

The constitution establishes the power of the federal judiciary by creating two high courts of equal and independent authority, one in Peninsular Malaysia and one in Eastern Malaysia. However, a 1988 constitutional amendment provides that these courts have no jurisdiction in respect to any matter within the jurisdiction of the Sharia courts. This ambiguity regarding Sharia versus secular law remains unresolved. Civil courts generally rule in favor of the government in matters concerning Islam. However, civil courts generally cede authority to Sharia courts in cases concerning conversion from Islam, and Sharia courts remain reluctant to allow such conversions.

The Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM) within the prime minister’s office establishes federal guidelines concerning what constitutes “deviant” behavior or belief. The government forbids religious assembly and worship for what the government deems as “deviant” sects such as Shia, Ahmadiyyah, and Al-Arqam. Members of banned sects may not speak freely about their religious beliefs. The government may detain Muslims who deviate from accepted Sunni principles and subject them to mandatory “rehabilitation” in

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centers that teach and enforce government-approved Islamic practices. State-level Sharia courts also have the authority to order individuals who seek to convert from Islam or who profess belief in a “deviant” Islamic sect to enter religious rehabilitation centers. The government forbids individuals to leave such centers until they complete the program, which varies in length, but can often last approximately six months.

The law strictly forbids proselytizing of Muslims by non-Muslims, but allows and supports Muslims proselytizing others. Muslims who wish to convert from Islam face tremendous obstacles because neither the right to leave Islam nor the legal process of conversion is clearly defined in law.

The government places some restrictions on religious assembly and denies legal status to certain religious groups. The Registrar of Societies, under the Home Ministry, determines whether a religious group may be registered and thereby qualify for government grants and other benefits. The registrar has no consistent policy or transparent criteria for determining whether to register religious groups. In cases where the government refuses to register a religious group, the group may pursue registration under the Companies Act. Examples included Jehovah’s Witnesses and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons). Registration under the Companies Act confers some protection of religious freedom, but precludes government funding.

Officials at the federal and state government levels oversee Islamic religious activities, and sometimes influence the content of sermons, use mosques to convey political messages, limit public expression, and prevent certain imams from speaking at mosques. State governments are legally responsible for the administration of mosques in the thirteen states, including appointing imams and providing guidance on the content of sermons. In the three federal territories, the Federal Territories Islamic Department (JAWI) carries out these responsibilities.

Conflicts and inconsistencies among the constitution, the penal code, and Sharia law continue unresolved. Although federal law exempts women from caning, Sharia law does not. Caning under Malaysian criminal law is carried out with a half-inch-thick wooden cane that could cause welts and scarring; under Sharia law, a smaller cane is used, the subject is fully covered with a robe, and the caning official cannot lift the cane above his shoulder, thus reducing the impact.

Authorities at the state level administer Sharia laws through Islamic courts and have jurisdiction over all Muslims. Sharia laws and the degree of their

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enforcement vary by state and can be influenced by respective religious departments of the state. State governments impose Sharia law on Muslims in some cultural and social matters, but generally do not interfere with the religious practices of non-Muslim communities; however, debates continue regarding states incorporating elements of Sharia law, such as khalwat (being in close physical proximity with an unrelated member of the opposite sex), into secular civil and criminal law. Although specific punishments for violation of khalwat vary from state to state, it is typically punishable by some combination of imprisonment up to two years, a fine of RM 3,000 (\$940), or several strokes of the cane.

Laws and government policies do not restrict the rights of non-Muslims to change their religious beliefs and affiliation. Conversion to Islam, however, raises several issues. A non-Muslim wishing to marry a Muslim must convert to Islam before the marriage can be recognized as valid. A minor (under the age of 18, according to federal law) may not convert to another faith without explicit permission of his or her guardian; however, some states have laws allowing conversion to Islam without permission after age 15. Although the constitution provides that federal law takes precedence over state law, in practice many issues of legal conflict among federal, state, and Sharia law have not been clearly resolved.

Only the federal government may amend the penal code. Despite this, a 1993 state law in Kelantan and a 2003 state law in Terengganu make apostasy, defined as conversion from Islam to another faith, a capital offense. There have been no convictions under these laws, which cannot be enforced without a constitutional amendment, according to a 1993 statement by the attorney general. Nationally, Muslims who seek to convert to another religion must first obtain approval from a Sharia court to declare themselves “apostates.” This effectively prohibits the conversion of Muslims, because Sharia courts seldom grant such requests and can impose penalties such as enforced “rehabilitation” on apostates. In the states of Perak, Malacca, Sabah, and Pahang, conversion from Islam to another religion is a criminal offense, punishable by a fine or a jail term. In Pahang, up to six strokes of the cane may also be imposed.

The National Fatwa Council, an organization within the prime minister’s office whose membership is comprised of state muftis (jurists of Islamic law) and other Islamic scholars, issue fatwas (religious edicts) on a variety of subjects. A fatwa issued by the National Fatwa Council is legally binding for Muslims in the country’s federal territories, but because Islam is a state matter, the decision to comply with or enforce edicts of the National Fatwa Council rests with each state’s religious authorities.

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The government provides financial support to Islamic religious institutions, and more limited funding to non-Islamic groups.

Islamic religious instruction is compulsory for Muslim children in public schools; non-Muslim students are required to take nonreligious morals and ethics courses. Local churches and temple groups unsuccessfully urged the government to include the option for non-Muslim religion classes to be held during the school day. At primary and secondary public schools, student assemblies frequently commence with recitation of a Muslim prayer by a teacher or school leader. Private schools are free to offer a non-Islamic religious curriculum as an option for non-Muslims. There are no restrictions on homeschooling. The government offers grants only to private Islamic schools agreeing to allow government supervision and adopt a government-approved curriculum. Religious teachers in many national schools, particularly in peninsular Malaysia, ensured that Muslim girls wore the tudung (Muslim head covering) at school.

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.

The government prohibits publications, public events, and public debates that it alleges might incite racial or religious disharmony. The government strictly prohibits religious groups from directing proselytizing efforts at Muslims, although proselytizing directed at non-Muslims is allowed.

Tax laws allow a tax exemption for registered religious groups for donations received and a tax deduction for the individual donors. The tax relief for donations by individuals to religious organizations differs for Muslims and non-Muslims. For both, the amount of the deduction is determined by the gross salary; for Muslims, the deduction is taken from net taxable salary and for non-Muslims, the deduction is taken from gross salary, making the proportionate deduction greater for Muslims.

National identity cards specify religious affiliation, and are used by the government to determine which citizens are subject to Sharia law. The cards identify Muslims as such on the card's surface; for members of other recognized religions, religious affiliation is not printed, but 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.

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The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: for Islam, Hari Raya Puasa, Hari Raya Qurban, the Birth of the Prophet Muhammad, and Awal Muharram; for Buddhism, Wesak Day; for Hinduism, Deepavali and Thaipusam; and for Christianity, Christmas. Good Friday is officially observed only in East Malaysia.

Government Practices

There were reports of abuses of religious freedom, including reports of detentions. The government promoted Sunni Islam above other religions, including other forms of Islam. Members of minority religious groups sometimes faced limits on religious expression and demolition of nonregistered non-Muslim shrines. The government exerted influence over the content of sermons and used mosques to convey political messages. Controversy continued over the use of the term “Allah” for God by non-Muslims. Observers continued to express concern that the secular civil and criminal court system had ceded jurisdictional control to Sharia courts, particularly in areas of family law involving disputes between Muslims and non-Muslims. Government and social pressure operated to encourage Muslims to dress and act in prescribed ways. On occasion, government officials used anti-Semitic language.

In November, it was reported that the municipal council in Sepang, in the state of Selangor, demolished a Hindu shrine within a gated compound on private property. The council alleged that the shrine was in violation of council bylaws. The owners of the house where the shrine was located stated that they were given no notice of the impending demolition.

In October an estimated 3,500 people gathered to celebrate the birthday of the late founder of Al-Arqam, a banned sect of Islam. The Selangor Islamic Religious Department (JAIS) raided the gathering and arrested 20 individuals. On November 6, 17 of the 20, including a member of the opposition party People’s Justice Party (PKR) Central Leadership Council, were formally charged with trying to revive the banned movement.

The federal and state budgets continued to fund Muslim places of worship. Government funding for non-Muslim places of worship came from a special allocation within the prime minister’s department or from state governments. Minority religious groups continued to assert that non-Muslim places of worship were poorly funded and that the government made funding decisions on an arbitrary basis. Local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) reported that both

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federal and state governments continued to delay, sometimes for years, permission to build or renovate non-Islamic places of worship, although they granted approvals to build mosques relatively quickly.

The government's secret list of sects banned as "deviant" interpretations of Islam reportedly included over 50 groups. The ban on assembly and worship was not uniformly enforced, especially against small assemblies in private residences. State religious authorities generally followed JAKIM guidelines regarding "deviant" behavior. With the consent of a Sharia court, the government arrested and detained members of "deviant" groups for "rehabilitation" to the "true path of Islam." The government continued to monitor the activities of the Shia population.

The government maintained bans on and confiscated religious materials it found to be "deviant," although it did not initiate any new bans on religious books. The Publications and Quranic Text Control Division of the Ministry of Home Affairs supervised the publication of religious texts, and restricted the use of the words Allah (God), Baitullah (House of God), Kaabah (location towards which Muslims pray) and Solat (prayer) to Muslim groups only, asserting that these words were the sole jurisdiction of the Muslim community.

The government did not release statistics on the number of persons sentenced to religious rehabilitation centers during the year for attempts to convert from Islam, and maintained that historically there were very few apostasy cases. In 2011, Islamic Affairs Minister Jamil Khir Baharom stated that the total number of applications by Muslims to change their religious status in Sharia court from 2000 to 2010 was 863, of which 168 were approved. Generally, the only conversions recognized were for non-ethnic-Malay individuals who had previously converted to Islam for marriage, but were seeking to reconvert to their previous religious affiliation after their marriages dissolved.

There were reports of minors converting to Islam in cases where one parent voluntarily converted to Islam and converted the children without the consent of the non-Muslim parent. Sharia courts usually upheld the conversions of minors despite the opposition of a non-Muslim parent, and the government in most cases did not act to prevent such conversions. Religious leaders continued to urge the government to move forward with a proposal to encourage Muslim converts to publicly announce their religious status. Under the proposal, upon a conversion, JAKIM and the National Registration Department (NRD) would automatically document the conversion so that the information would be made available to

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interested parties in an effort to avoid disputes over the status of Muslim converts upon their death.

The high-profile child custody and religious conversion case of M. Indira Gandhi continued without resolution at year's end. In 2009, M. Indira Gandhi reported that her estranged husband, K. Patmanathan, had converted to Islam, changed his name to Mohd Ridzuan Abdullah, and converted their three minor children to Islam without her knowledge by presenting their birth certificates to the state religious department in Ipoh, Perak. Gandhi learned of the conversions only after the Sharia court in Ipoh notified her of its decision to recognize the conversions and grant her husband custody of the children. She appealed the decision in civil court. Following intense public criticism, the federal government announced in April 2009 that if a spouse converted to Islam, the children would follow the faith that both parents agreed to at the time of marriage. The government specified civil courts as the proper locations for dissolving marriages in the event of a spouse converting to Islam, and directed the attorney general to review and propose changes to the existing law to prevent future complications under those circumstances. In March 2010, the High Court rejected Patmanathan's application and granted Gandhi custody of her children. Patmanathan appealed the decision and retained custody of the youngest child, despite a court order to surrender the child to Gandhi. In July 2010, the High Court allowed Gandhi's application for judicial review to nullify the children's conversion to Islam. The High Court heard the case in September 2011. On November 27, the Federal Court ruled that Patmanathan had failed to present the appropriate papers to appeal the 2010 custody decision by the High Court in a timely manner and had therefore lost the right to appeal. The decision regarding the conversion of the children was still pending at the end of the year.

After the Internal Security Ministry (which later merged with the Home Ministry) banned the use of the word "Allah" by non-Muslims in Malay-language Bibles and other Christian publications in 2008, the Roman Catholic Church filed a lawsuit against the ban. While the case was pending, the Home Ministry renewed the Catholic Church's permit to publish the *Catholic Herald* (published in Malay, Tamil, and English) conditionally, and directed the church to cease publishing its Malay-language section, to restrict sales to Catholic Church property, and to print a disclaimer on the front page saying the paper was meant only for Christians. The *Catholic Herald* continued to publish its Malay-language version using the word "Allah," arguing the Catholic Church had used the word in the country for more than 400 years. In 2009, the High Court of Kuala Lumpur ruled in the church's favor, holding that the government's prohibition on the *Catholic Herald's* use of

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the word “Allah” was unconstitutional. The government appealed and in January 2010 the trial court issued a stay pending a review of the Court of Appeals decision. The case remained pending at year’s end.

In February the Court of Appeal upheld the 2010 arson conviction of two brothers for setting fire to the Metro Tabernacle church in Kuala Lumpur, and reduced their sentence from five to two years in prison.

In January the appellate court ordered the Penang High Court to hear an application brought by Siti Hasnah Vangarama Abdullah questioning the validity of her conversion to Islam when she was seven years old. Ms. Vangarama stated she was an orphan when a Muslim Welfare Organization officer took her to the State Religious Department to renounce Hinduism and embrace Islam. As a Muslim, Ms. Vangarama was unable to register her marriage to a Hindu man because the law does not permit Muslims and non-Muslims to marry legally unless the spouse converts to Islam. The case was pending at year’s end.

The government occasionally suppressed public discussions of controversial religious issues such as religious freedom, apostasy, and conversion of minors. At a November 3 forum on Islam and the state, the vice-president of the opposition People’s Justice Party (PKR) stated that any aspect of compulsion, persecution or discrimination on the basis of religion was prohibited. The pro-government mainstream press subsequently criticized her for allegedly condoning apostasy among Muslims.

In 2011, a Shia Muslim sued the Selangor Islamic Department (JAIS) and an official at the newspaper *Utusan Malaysia* for defaming him as a “dangerous person” for his involvement in activities that were the subject of a December 2010 JAIS raid on a Shia group meeting in Gombak, Selangor. During the raid, 128 Shias were arrested, including an Iranian who was giving a sermon, and charged with insulting, questioning, violating, and disobeying a religious decree issued by the state mufti. Two of those arrested also faced charges for unlawful “teaching, ‘clarification,’ or performance of any rites or actions relating to Islam,” as well as “relating, propagating, or spreading views on any issue, teaching or Sharia judgment that goes against fatwas already in force in Selangor.” The Sharia and civil court cases remained pending at year’s end.

The trial of a Shia religious leader and three Shia group members, arrested by religious authorities and police in 2011, was pending at year’s end. The four were

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arrested at a Shia gathering being held to celebrate the birthday of Fatimah az-Zahra, a daughter of the Prophet Muhammad, and were later released on bail.

Strict enforcement of Sharia law in some states placed additional restrictions on Muslims, who were affected by Sharia court sentences such as caning for violations including alcohol consumption and khalwat. Islamic officials stated that the intent was not to injure, but to make offenders ashamed of their sins so that they would repent and not repeat the offense.

Non-Muslim family members, including spouses and children, continued to lose all rights to inheritances in Sharia court in cases of conversion by one spouse to Islam.

Religious NGOs contended that Sharia courts did not give equal weight to the testimony of women. Several NGOs dedicated to the advancement of women's rights complained that women did not receive fair treatment from Sharia courts, primarily in matters of divorce, child custody, and enforcement of alimony payments.

State Islamic religious enforcement officers continued to have the authority to accompany police on raids of private premises and public establishments, to enforce Sharia law, including violations such as indecent dress, distribution of banned publications, alcohol consumption, or khalwat. On May 23, the Federal Territories Religious Department (JAWI) raided a bookstore in Kuala Lumpur and arrested Muslim employee Nik Raina under Sharia law for distribution of the book, *Allah, Liberty and Love*, a book which had not yet been banned. The Home Ministry reviewed the book on May 29 and banned it on June 14, weeks after the arrest. Reportedly, Ms. Raina was arrested because she was the highest ranking Muslim working in the store at the time. The minister of home affairs declared that JAWI was empowered to arrest Ms. Raina, although there was no prohibition order in place on the day the book was confiscated. Ms. Raina was released within hours. On June 19, she was officially charged in Sharia court. The case was pending at the end of the year.

The Selangor Islamic Affairs Council (MAIS) continued to prohibit all non-Muslims from entering mosques and suraus (a small mosque or prayer room) in Selangor without MAIS permission, as a result of a 2010 controversy that occurred when a non-Muslim female opposition parliamentarian entered a mosque without proper head covering. According to a 2010 National Fatwa Council ruling, non-Muslims could enter mosques as long as they were properly attired and did not violate the sanctity of the mosque.

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According to the Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, Sikhs, and Taoists (MCCBCHST), the government continued its practice of restricting visas for foreign Muslim and non-Muslim clergy under the age of 40 as a means of preventing “militant clergy” from entering the country. While representatives of non-Muslim groups did not sit on the immigration committee that approved visa requests, the committee sought MCCBCHST recommendations in most non-Muslim cases.

The government placed or maintained restrictions on some religious customs and sought to enforce certain religious precepts. Observers reported increased quantity and volume of broadcasts from mosques and other Muslim places of worship or learning over public address systems. The government continued to place some restrictions on religious expression, including with respect to religious teaching, use of religious clothing and symbols, proselytism, and religious publishing.

The National Fatwa Council issued a fatwa banning foreign exchange trading by individuals or unregistered moneychangers using an electronic platform, to ensure that financial transactions adhered to Islamic law.

The government continued to require all Muslim civil servants to attend approved religion classes, and several government agencies pressured non-Muslim women to wear headscarves while attending official functions. However, this was not strictly enforced.

The government of Kelantan, considered the country’s most religiously conservative state, maintained its ban on Mak Yong, a traditional Malay dance drama performed for 800 years, due to its animist elements, and on Wayang Kulit, a form of shadow puppetry, because of its Hindu influences and its focus on folklore and mythical characters considered un-Islamic. The state also prohibited the sale of lottery tickets and advertisements showing what it considered to be inappropriately dressed women. Kelantan’s dress code prohibited Muslim women from wearing clothes exposing more than their faces and hands. The law also stipulated that non-Muslim women should avoid dressing “sexily or indecently.” Violators of the dress code faced fines up to RM 500 (\$156). Kelantan also enforced headscarf requirements for Muslim women, imposing fines for violations. Kelantan regulations required men and women to form separate lines at supermarkets, although the rule reportedly was not enforced. Kelantan courts also fined couples who sat too closely in public areas, such as on park benches.

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In October a public school teacher reportedly slapped four non-Muslim Orang Asli (indigenous) students for not reciting an Islamic prayer. The Education Department, the Orang Asli Development Department (JAKOA) and the teacher involved apologized for the incident; however, one week later the Rural and Regional Development Minister denied the incident. The parents of the students filed a police report and stated that they were unaware that their children, who were attending an exclusively Orang Asli school, were being taught Islamic studies. There was no further action on the case by year's end.

Some indigenous people in Sabah and Sarawak complained of errors in the names printed on their national identity cards, misleading the reader to believe that the card holder was Muslim.

Government representatives or individuals acting on behalf of the government made anti-Semitic statements. JAKIM posted weekly sermons on its website as a guideline for government-employed Muslim clerics during Friday prayers at mosques in the Federal Territories and the states of Sabah, Sarawak, Malacca, and Penang. In March the Federal Territory Islamic Affairs Department (JAWI) issued an official sermon stating, "Muslims must understand Jews are the main enemy to Muslims." In November a sermon published by JAKIM discussed the "despicable nature" of the Jewish race and stated that "Israel is a nation of ruthless criminals."

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

On February 21, Deputy Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin participated in World Interfaith Harmony Week. Activities held during the week included community activities and religious forums.

On December 26, church leaders announced the government had rescinded quotas, age limits and other travel restrictions previously imposed on Christian Malaysians who wished to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

On November 3, the Perlis Al Islah Association in collaboration with the Islamic Council of Perlis, a government entity, and the Perlis Malay Customs Council (an NGO) organized an interfaith forum "Gateway to Interfaith Goodwill (Gema) 2012." The crown prince of Perlis chaired the forum, which was designed as a platform for interaction among different religions with the hope of creating a better understanding between them. Seventeen religious groups, including representatives of Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, Sikhism, and Taoism, attended the forum.

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In a statement to Christian leaders in January, the prime minister promised full consultation when assigning mission school heads. He also agreed to after-school Bible classes, as well as implementation of a regulation that allowed non-Muslim places of worship to apply for tax exempt status for donations received from individuals. This was the first time the prime minister had addressed these issues in a public statement. The tax regulation went into effect shortly thereafter.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

Religious converts, particularly those converting from Islam, sometimes faced severe stigmatization. In many cases converts concealed their newly adopted beliefs and practices from their former coreligionists, including friends and relatives. Women and girls faced social pressure to wear the tudung.

There were reports of child marriages, including the marriage of a 12 year-old girl to a 19 year-old man in November. The legal age of marriage is 16 for Muslim girls and 18 for Muslim males, although they may marry before those ages with the permission of their parents and the Sharia courts. Civil society activists continued to criticize the practice, as well as statements by government officials supporting child marriages as an approved Islamic practice.

A vigorous public discussion of the use of the word “Allah” by non-Muslims continued throughout the year.

In September while criticizing an Israeli court decision declaring the state blameless in the death of American activist Rachel Corrie, former Prime Minister Mahathir wrote in his blog, “I am glad to be labeled anti-Semitic. How can I be otherwise, when the Jews who so often talk of the horrors they suffered during the Holocaust show the same Nazi cruelty and hard-heartedness towards not just their enemies but even towards their allies should any try to stop the senseless killing of their Palestinian enemies.” Mahathir served as prime minister for 22 years and remained an influential figure.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

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Embassy representatives maintained an active dialogue on religious freedom with government officials and leaders and representatives of religious groups, including those not officially recognized by the government. The ambassador met with royal rulers at different times during the year and, in those conversations, underscored the importance of tolerance and mutual understanding. The ambassador hosted a roundtable conversation with leaders of Muslim NGOs to discuss religious tolerance. In September the ambassador visited the Sarawak Islamic Information Center to highlight U.S. support for the center's efforts to promote mutual understanding and respect among members of religious groups. Embassy programs also included lecture tours around Malaysia by American Muslim community leaders and imams, roundtables with think tanks and religious and civil society leaders to promote interfaith dialogue, and television and other media interviews highlighting religious tolerance. The embassy arranged visits to the United States for Islamic educators and hosted several iftar dinners during Ramadan. The U.S. government also funded civil society grants and exchange grants for representatives of NGOs working to promote religious tolerance, respect for diversity, human rights, and openness.