

05 NOV 2000

Women-Muslim

MALAYSIAN WOMEN PUSH FOR ISLAMIC REFORM, SAYS RESEARCHER

By: Neville D'Cruz

MELBOURNE, Nov 5 (Bernama) -- Malaysian women activists are continuing their campaign for more Islamic reform after early successes, a Monash University researcher here says.

Rebecca Foley, a doctoral candidate in the School of Political and Social Inquiry at Monash, said Islamic reform was an important issue in Malaysia, where about 60 per cent of the population was Muslim with the Shariah existing alongside civil law.

She told "Monash News" that Malaysia's Muslim women activists were drawn from the urban middle class, had received their instruction in Islam and were wary of appearing radical or disrespectful towards their religion.

However, that did not weaken their determination, with activists arguing that Islam had been misunderstood and distorted over the centuries to the point where it could be improperly used to deny their rights.

"They also argue that their successes -- such as Malaysia's domestic violence laws, which are unique in Asia, and its amended rape and child custody laws -- are evidence that Islam and women's rights need not be mutually exclusive," Foley is quoted as saying.

Foley identified two main reformist groups, which she calls "Islamic equity activists" and "Islamic equality activists".

"Equity activists," she said, "work very much within the system. They agree to wear the veil, and accept the traditional role of women as wives and mothers, or as workers in 'appropriate' female professions.

"However, they seek more rights for women in areas such as family law, including better maintenance provisions for divorced or deserted wives."

Foley said equality activists "believe there should be more restrictions on women's roles in society, and seek a modern reinterpretation of Islam which, they claim, is really an egalitarian religion.

"They're working, for example, towards ending polygamy and increasing the jurisdiction of civil, as opposed to Islamic courts."

She said Malaysian women activists were cautiously optimistic about further reform but feared that when Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad stepped down as leader, there could be an increase in religious conservatism.

Foley said she became interested in women's rights in Malaysia while spending a year there after finishing school and encountering the plight of a female relative of her Muslim host family who was unhappily trapped in a polygamous marriage.

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