

**Valentine's Day causes split in Malaysian society**  
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Valentine's Day in Malaysia does not only make lovers' hearts flutter but triggers acrimonious debates on whether the celebration should be stopped in the predominantly Muslim South-East Asian country.

Days before the annual celebration, an Islamic group allied with the opposition urged the government to spearhead a campaign aimed at discouraging all Malaysians from celebrating the event, which it said promotes immoral activities, such as premarital sex and promiscuity.

"We are not trying to assume the role of moral police here," Parti Islam Semalaysia (PAS) Youth chief Nasrudin Hassan Tantawi said, "but we want to help save youngsters from falling into the Valentine's Day trap that promotes immoral activities."

The celebration of Valentine's Day has been banned for Muslims in Malaysia since 2005, but the PAS Youth wing wanted to put a stop to the widespread promotion of the day among non-Muslims, who make up about 40 per cent of the country's more than 28 million people.

"PAS Youth is not calling for a ban on Valentine's or against those of other religions wishing to celebrate," said Federal Territory PAS Youth chief Kamaruzaman Mohamad. "We are merely against its widespread coverage in the media that could influence Muslim youths."

Information, Communications and Culture Minister Rais Yatim said Malaysia is a multiracial country and that all parties should respect the cultural practices of one another.

Another Muslim youth group, the National Youth Council, also disagreed with PAS initiative.

"Immoral activities over Valentine's Day have not reached a critical level where an anti-Valentine's Day advertisement is required," said council president Mohamed Maliki Mohamed Rapiee.

"It should be the responsibility of non-governmental organisations and religious institutions to create awareness of immoral activities," he said.

In 2005, Islamic officials ruled that Valentine's Day celebrations were incompatible with Islam because of their Christian elements and what they considered immoral behaviour connected with the tradition.

While Malaysia prides itself on being a diverse and tolerant nation, Islamic authorities can make and enforce regulations over Muslims.

Last year, religious authorities arrested more than 100 Muslims for celebrating Valentine's Day.

'Don't pre-judge morality of non-Muslims'

Tan Keng Liang, leader of the youth wing of Kedah Gerakan, said that although he respects the ban on the celebration of Valentine's Day among Muslims, it is wrong to say that the annual date promotes immoral activities.

"This would imply that non-Muslim Malaysians who celebrate Valentine's Day would be involved in immoral activities," he said.

"It's wrong for PAS Youth to prejudge the morality of non-Muslim Malaysians who wish to celebrate Valentine's Day."

For Chew Hoong Ling, president of the women's advocacy group Voice of Women and a Christian of Chinese descent, Valentine's Day is not a day for delinquents but a day to express love for friends, parents and spouses.

"PAS Youth should not be paranoid about Valentine's Day," she said.

Adnan, a 19-year-old Muslim student at a college on the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur, said the ban on celebrating Valentine's Day showed the narrow-mindedness of people who interpret the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad.

"It is sad that Islam is being used to suppress freedom," he said.

"We are not children any more. We should be responsible for our actions. Celebrating Valentine's Day does not mean that we are promiscuous or immoral."

Adnan said he and his girlfriend would continue to have fun on Valentine's Day.

"But we have to watch our backs," he said. "The ban is a reality we have to live with."

The ban has young Muslim supporters. Aisyah Abdullah, 21, said she believes in the collective wisdom of the elders who decided in banning the celebrations among Muslims.

"There has to be a good reason for the fatwa," she said. "I believe that our elders are just concerned for our welfare."

Not all support from Muslims was religiously motivated. Nadzmie Hashim, 19, also expressed support for the ban, adding that the wisdom behind the move was very obvious: "To spare the people from unnecessary expense".

"During Valentine's Day, prices from flowers to food increase exorbitantly, all in the name of love," he said. "So I don't mind celebrating Valentine's Day a day or a week after Feb 14."

- dpa