

**Body blow to claim of tolerance**  
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Malaysia's 11th hour cancellation of an international interfaith conference between Islam and Christianity is a major blow to the country's image as a tolerant multi-ethnic nation, opposition political leaders and civil society critics said.

Even government officials expressed shock at the sudden cancellation of the 'Building Bridges' seminar which was set up in the wake of the Sept 11, 2001 aerial attacks on US cities.

Founded, supported and organised by the Anglican Church, the seminar, sixth in an annual series under the theme, 'Humanity in Context: Christian and Muslim Perspectives', brings together the finest minds in the Christian and Islamic worlds.

The seminar has come to be seen as an opportunity to discuss issues of mutual interest like the spiralling hate among communities, the damage wreaked by the US-led 'War on Terror' and ways to promote inter-religious understanding and peace. Each year, it brings together senior scholars from both major faiths in either a Christian or a Muslim host country.

Qatar and Bosnia Herzegovina have hosted this prestigious event. Distinguished Muslim scholars and academicians such as the late Zaki Badawi, Mustafa Ceric, Ishtiyahq Ahmad Zilli, Mustansir Mir, Azyumardi Azra and Tariq Ramadan have all participated in previous dialogues.

This year's event was to have been held between May 7 and 11 in Kuala Lumpur but, one week before it was to begin, the government told the organisers that it "cannot support the conference because it was not opportune" to hold the seminar (in Malaysia) this year.

The conference was to coincide with the visit to Malaysia of the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, to consecrate a new bishop.

"The last minute cancellation makes a mockery of the government's claims of being a moderate Muslim administration. As a Muslim, I am embarrassed by the action of the Malaysian government," opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim told IPS.

"There are many common issues and values that Muslims and Christians share. A dialogue can enable us to quell the tensions that arise from our differences. Islam has always enjoined Muslims to engage in dialogue with other religions, from the Abbasids in Baghdad to the Andalucians in Cordoba."

### **Families torn apart**

The Council of Churches of Malaysia also expressed shock at the decision which comes in the wake of rising tension between Muslims and non-Muslims over intrusion of Islamic Syariah law into secular areas.

Families have been torn apart, children taken away from parents and wives virtually abducted on the ground that one party is a Muslim and therefore not permitted to marry, live with or cohabit with persons of other religions.

In March Islamic officials forcibly separated a Hindu from his Muslim wife of 21 years, and their

six children. He won custody of his children, but the couple was barred from living together because he is a Hindu and she a Muslim. The court however gave her "full visiting rights".

In January, a Muslim woman living with a Hindu as his wife, was arrested and sent for rehabilitation, separating her from her Hindu husband. Her baby daughter was also seized, and handed over to her Muslim mother.

This month, a Hindu truck driver Magendran Sababathy, 25, filed a suit alleging that Islamic authorities had illegally detained his Muslim wife. He said Islamic officials raided the couple's home on April 28 and took away his three-year old daughter telling him that his marriage under Hindu rites is illegal.

"All these cases are disturbing and reflect the rising Islamisation in the country, regardless of the price to national unity and interracial harmony," said Parliamentary Opposition Leader Lim Kit Siang.

"The secular basis of the constitution is being eroded relentlessly. Many people beginning to feel helpless."

Under Syariah law anyone marrying a Muslim must convert to Islam and anyone born into a Muslim family cannot legally convert to another faith.

Rights activists say that interfaith dialogue is all the more urgent because of the frequency of such cases. However, the government of Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi, stampeded by strong opposition from conservative Muslims, has stopped a series of dialogues initiated last year by human rights activists grouped under a coalition called Article 11.

Civil society leaders now fear that opposition from conservative Muslims could be behind the reason why a government that initially supported the conference later pulled out.

The Times of London on May 11 quoted Canon Guy Wilkinson, the Archbishop's secretary for interfaith relations, as saying that some nine months had gone into organising the Malaysia conference.

"The situation (in Malaysia) is delicate. A whole series of inter-religious cases are in front of the constitutional court and awaiting judgment. The view was that it would be better not to have an international gathering of Muslims and Christians at the moment in that context," he said.

One potentially explosive case is that of a Muslim woman Azalina Jailani, who converted to Christianity. Renamed Lina Joy, she has filed an appeal to have the word 'Islam' removed from her identity card. She wants a declaration that Article 11 of the Federal Constitution gives the right to convert to another religion.

However Malays, invariably all Muslims, consider apostasy as a cardinal sin that merits the death sentence. Islamic clerics say if Malays are allowed to leave Islam it would open the floodgates.

"That would be the end of the Malay race," a prominent cleric said over national television recently.

Islam is the official state religion and Muslims are subject to a mix of Syariah and civil laws. Non-Muslims who make up about 40 percent of the population of 26 million are governed solely by civil law on all matters.

## **Blow to moderate Islam**

In was under this complex background and rising inter-ethnic tensions that the conference was cancelled. Instead of lowering tension, a furious round of criticism has begun against Malaysia in the local and international media and on the Internet.

Under intense pressure, Abdullah backtracked but rejected speculation that the government had opposed the meeting because of religious sensitivities. He said the conference was only "postponed not cancelled".

While he suggested holding the conference in Malaysia at a later date, organisers are already looking for an alternative host.

The cancellation is a blow to Abdullah's own moderate brand of Islamic thought called Islam Hadhari or 'civilisational Islam' that he proclaimed in 2003 to keep the lid on rising orthodoxy which is feared is gaining ground within the Muslim majority.

Initially, a year ago, when organisers approached him, he was enthusiastic and saw it as the perfect platform to promote his Islam Hadhari, officials said. But events over the year have changed the Malay-Muslim perception of Christianity, of interfaith dialogue and of religious tolerance.

Civil society leaders, including moderate Muslims who had looked to Abdullah to show the way, now worry whether the divided between Muslim and others is now beyond repair.

Prominent Malaysian Christian pastor Hermen Shastri said: "We need to pursue interfaith dialogue to foster and build mutual respect and understanding between the world's religions."

Sisters in Islam, a Muslim feminist group, said it was time the government showed political will and uphold and safeguard the fundamental liberties of its citizens, including the freedom of religion as envisaged by the Quran, and as reflected in the Federal Constitution and Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

"The search for solutions to these challenges (religious divide) cannot be conducted in ways that violate the legitimate rights of all Malaysians," said Sisters in Islam.

"We also call on fellow Muslims to display the beauty, compassion, peace and wisdom of God's message for it is a disservice to Islam that we merely stand by and watch the agony of families torn apart."- IPS

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