

Law minister rejects calls to end child marriages
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Malaysia's law minister on Wednesday shot down calls to ban underage marriage, despite an uproar over the recent wedding of a 14-year-old Muslim school girl.

Siti Maryam Mahmud wed 23-year-old teacher Abdul Manan Othman last weekend in a mass wedding at a major mosque, after being given permission in an Islamic syariah court.

Malaysian Muslims below the age of 16 are allowed to marry as long as they obtain the permission of the religious courts. Sharia law runs in parallel with civil law in the multi-ethnic country.

NONENazri Abdul Aziz, a minister in the premier's department in charge of legal affairs, said the government has no plan to review laws allowing for underage marriages because the practice is permitted under Islam.

"If the religion allows it, then we can't legislate against it," he told a press conference.

"Islam allows it as long as the girl is considered to have reached her pubescent stage, once she has her menstruation," he added.

However, Siti Maryam's marriage has sparked criticism including from Women, Family and Community Development Minister Shahrizat Abdul Jalil, who insisted the government did not condone the practice.

Activist groups have also called for the laws that allow underage marriage to be repealed, saying that the practice is widespread with some 16,000 Malaysian girls aged below 15 already married.

"The onset of puberty is no indication of sufficient maturity for marriage," pressure group Sisters in Islam said this week, citing a passage in the Koran which also requires "maturity of mind".

"No marriage of a minor child can be deemed acceptable," said the group's spokeswoman Yasmin Masidi.

Muslim Malays make up about 60 percent of the country's 28 million population and on certain issues, including family law, they are subject to Islamic justice.

- AFP

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