

## **Three things we learned about: the Islamisation of Malaysia**

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KUALA LUMPUR, June 20 — Malaysia professes to be a multi-racial and multi-cultural federation with Islam as its religion, but there is a mounting movement to turn it simply into an Islamic state.

While defenders of the status quo insist that it is a secular state and Islam's position is largely decorative, it appears they are fighting a losing battle against the tide of growing Islamisation in the country.

Slowly, but surely, Malaysia is headed down the path where religion permeates not just houses of worship, but all aspects of life.

Here are the three things we learned about the growing Islamisation of Malaysia.

### **1. The minister of Islamic affairs is more powerful than any other**

Datuk Seri Jamil Khir Baharom's official portfolio is minister in charge of Islamic affairs, but it appears that his purview extends far beyond religion.

On Tuesday, he declared that Malaysia was not a secular state, thereby dismantling a key obstacle towards the introduction of more Islamic laws — including the controversial hudud penal code — in the country.

Yesterday, he took it upon himself to reinterpret the parts of the Federal Constitution pertaining to the conversion of children to Islam, effectively reversing a 2009 Cabinet decision that expressly barred parents from unilaterally changing the religion of their children.

In one fell swoop, he has moved the country further down the path towards becoming a full-fledged Islamic state.

But despite the pivotal consequences of his declarations, few save the usual opposition figures have come out to dispute his assertions.

At the rate Jamil Khir is going, both *de facto* law minister Nancy Shukri and Attorney-General Tan Sri Abdul Gani Patail may soon find themselves surplus to requirements.

### **2. Even the elders are concerned**

The growing pervasiveness of religion in the administration is palpable to all, even to former prime minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who famously proclaimed Malaysia to be an Islamic country in September of 2001.

Now, he has come out to say that Malaysia is neither secular nor Islamic, but simply an “ordinary state” that recognises Islam as its religion.

“We are just an ordinary state that recognises Islam as the official religion of the country, and we practise things that are not against the religion of Islam,” Dr Mahathir told *The Star* on Wednesday.

In the same report, the country’s longest-serving prime minister said that his previous declaration did not require efforts to make the country “more Islamic”.

His stand now appears more in line with the Reid Commission report that said Islam’s position, as the religion of the federation, did not preclude the country from being a secular state.

For Dr Mahathir to come out and contradict himself on the issue suggests the dangers of allowing Malaysia to continue down this path.

### **3. Religion is a political tool**

The creeping Islamisation of the country may appear on the surface to be about religion, but the worrying truth is that it is being allowed to happen by an administration that sees it as a platform to remain in power.

In a recent index of the “Islamicity” of countries, Malaysia came in 33rd — the highest among Islamic countries, admittedly — but also behind the likes of Singapore and even perennial enemy of the Muslims, Israel.

Why did Muslim countries fare as poorly as they did in professor of International Business and International Affairs at George Washington University, Hossein Askari’s “Overall Islamicity Index”?

“If a country, society or community displays characteristics such as unelected, corrupt, oppressive and unjust rulers, inequality before the law, unequal opportunities for human development, absence of freedom of choice (including that of religion), opulence alongside poverty, force and aggression as the instruments of conflict resolution as opposed to dialogue and reconciliation, and, above all, the prevalence of injustice of any kind, it is *prima facie* evidence that it is not an Islamic community,” Askari explained.

This is readily observable in Malaysia, where the rhetoric of religion waxes and wanes in tandem with elections.

Unfortunately, since 2008, the country has been trapped seemingly in an eternal campaign ostensibly for control of Putrajaya, though increasingly it appears that what is truly at stake is the nation’s soul.

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