

Malaysia 8th worst in government curbs on religion, says study
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Malaysia has been ranked among the top 10 countries with very high government restrictions on religion, according to the latest findings of US-based think tank Pew Research Center.

The findings, which cover 2013, put Malaysia at the eighth spot in the "very high" category among countries known for state interference or curbs on religion.

Topping the list was China, followed by Indonesia, Uzbekistan, Iran, Egypt and Afghanistan.

Malaysia was ranked just a spot lower than Saudi Arabia, while neighbouring Brunei and Singapore were placed at the 15th and 18th spots, respectively.

Malaysia increased its score on restrictions imposed by the state, climbing to 7.9 out of 10 in 2013, from 7.6 the year before.

Compared with six years ago, in June 2007, which was used as a baseline, Malaysia scored 6.4 in terms of government restrictions.

These restrictions were defined as laws, policies and actions restricting religions, as well as measures such as bans on changing one's religion and preferential treatment accorded to a particular religious group in that country.

The Pew study also measured religious oppression in terms of social hostilities, which covered a range of actions against believers of another religion including vandalism of religious property, desecration of sacred books and violence.

Malaysia scored a decrease in this index, at 2.9 in 2013, down from 3.9 in 2012.

This was in line with an overall downward trend worldwide in social hostilities involving religion, Pew said.

However, Malaysia only scored 1.0 in the June 2007 baseline.

The increase in government restrictions on religion reflect the ongoing tensions in Malaysia over the last few years, involving several issues but notably the use of the word "Allah" by Bahasa Malaysia-speaking Christians as well as Sikhs, and accusations between Muslims and Christians of attempts to convert one another.

Propagation of non-Muslim religions is prohibited in Malaysia.

There are also concerns over issues arising from the conversion of minors to Islam by one parent without the other's consent, and heightened intolerance of the practices and cultural aspects of non-Muslims.

Worldwide, while social hostilities declined for 2013, a quarter of the world's countries still struggled with inter- or intra-religious hostility, the centre said.

Worldwide also, Christians and Muslims were the groups that faced the most harassment in the largest number of countries. – March 1, 2015.

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