

## **It Was Malaysian Women Vs. the King—And the Women Won**

**The New York Times**

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**By SYDNEY H. SCHANBERG**

KUALA LUMPUR, Malaysia—If Malaysian women are not downtrodden, neither are, they elevated, for the state religion is Islam, Which among other things allows each man to have four wives and to divorce any one of them whenever he wants simply by saying “I divorce thee” three times (in Malay, it's “Talag, Talag, Talag.”

But something happened recently in which the women of this heavily Moslem country of 12 million people gained more leverage and political muscle than in all their previous campaigns for greater recognition. The King of Malaysia tried to take a second wife, a teen-aged beauty queen and the women stopped him.

### **Feared Embarrassment**

About 300 leading members of women's groups, including some non-Moslem women, descended on the office of Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak one day in late August to demand that the marriage be halted.

Mr. Razak, who had heard they were coming, had already persuaded the King, over a round of golf earlier in the day, to give up the idea because of the international embarrassment it could cause the nation, which has been trying to project an image of modeirriity and progress.

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The 46-year-old King, Abdul Halim Shah, told associates privately that his main reason for seeking a second wife was his wish for a male heir. His wife, Tengku Bahiyah, 44, to whom he has been married for 18 years, is reportedly unable to bear more children. They have one child, a 7-year-old daughter.

### Said to Be Morose

Friends say that, Queen Bahiyah, attractive and accomplished, had been morose over the King's move, but had to agree to it because of his legal right to have multiple wives and his traditional right to have a male heir.

Succumbing to the protests, the King reportedly agreed to postpone, the marriage at least until after his five-year reign as monarch ends late next year and he returns to being the Sultan of Kedah, one of Malaysia's 13 states.

What is not clear is whether the particular girl he had picked out for his second wife, Zubaidah Bunyamin, a 19-year-old model and beauty titlist from a working-class family, will wait for him. Her parents are said to have insisted that the marriage take place while he was still King, in order to gain them the privileges that would go with royal in-law status.

It would appear the King is no longer counting on Miss Bunyamin, for reportedly he has now assigned a committee of matchmakers to find him a second wife—this time a “proper” of royal blood.

His present wife, Queen Bahiyah, is the daughter of Malaysia's first King, the late Sultan of Negry Sembilan. Regardless of how many additional wives her husband might take, she would retain her privileged status as first wife, and would remain his royal consort as Queen of Sultana.

### Victim of Spell

Several of Malaysia's current sultans, who are titular rulers in nine of the thirteen states in this tropical Southeast Asian country, already have more than one wife. Malaysian lore is full of stories about their marital habits, although the papers print none of it. For example: when the sultan of a state near Kuala Lumpur took a second wife some years ago, his enraged first wife announced that she was putting a spell on him. He then, it is said, became impotent, so he quickly divorced the second wife. She was thereupon immediately snapped up by the sultan of a neighboring state who had admired her.

Yet, despite the harem activities of the sultans, this would have been the first time that a sultan took another wife during his reign as king.

The Malaysian monarchy is elective, with the King, largely a figurehead, being chosen on a rotating basis, for five-year terms, from among the nine hereditary sultans. The choice is made by the Conference of Rulers, composed of the sultans plus the governors of the four other states.

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The idea of having a king, established in the Malaysian Constitution in 1957 at the time of independence from Britain, was to provide some link with the Malay past, when sultans ruled as feudal lords, and to create a guiding father image—a symbol of unpolitical, incorrupt national leadership.

Nevertheless, the concept of the monarchy had been gathering acceptance among the Malaysian populace. Of the five royal families who have presided since independence, this king and queen—she perhaps even more than he—have presented the best image.

Suitable Hosts

They are widely respected and admired as educated, polished, good-looking, progressive figures—in other words, fit persons to entertain visiting foreign leaders, dignitaries and otherwise represent Malaysia.

Now, however, the King's attempt to take a second wife has badly and perhaps irreparably marred the monarch's image.

Although not a single word about the episode has appeared in the controlled Malaysian press, his wedding plans were widely known throughout the country and equally widely criticized as an insult to the Popular Queen and a throwback to feudal arrogance. Undergraduates at the University of Malaya, which the Queen oversees, protested to the King that his action “has disgraced our Chancellor.”

The educated class was especially affronted. “It's simply crude,” said a leading woman in business here. “If he wanted to fool around, he didn't have to do it this way. How do you think the Queen feels?”

Gossip in the capital had it that the King had been looking around for a second wife for a year or so. Some sources say he first spotted his teen-age intended, Zubaidah Bunyamin, on the Government's official Foreign Ministry calendar for 1974. She was Miss December.

Her latest beauty title was Miss Ampang Shopping Complex, a crown she won four months ago. Her measurements were given as 34-23- 35, In addition to her beauty contests and modeling, she has also worked with a dance group; appeared in a drama series on Malaysian television, and is attending a post-high school secretarial academy.

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The wedding was called off only a week before it was to take place—invitations had already been mailed.

## Dodge Polygamy Issue

Not surprisingly, the protesting women who stormed the Prime Minister's office were careful not to make a direct attack on the concept of polygamy itself — this would have been an attack on both the Malaysian Constitution and the Koran, which are intertwined.

They opposed the marriage instead on three, oblique grounds: that the King should wait until he steps down from the monarchy, that the girl is a commoner, and that she was not a virgin. They backed up that last charge with evidence that the palace had prepared, a special Islamic purification rite for the bride, which is done only for nonvirgins.

The Prime Minister quickly assured the women that he had talked to the King and that the wedding was off, at least until his reign is over. They pressed for an official statement, arguing that the King might get married in secret.

Mr. Razak, according to people who were there, fumed at this, and briskly told the women that there would be no announcements, saying: “You have my word and that's enough.”

So, in the end, though it was the most visible victory to date of the Malaysian women's movement, it was inevitably but a partial achievement—limited by the strictures of Malaysian society. Nevertheless it will probably encourage the women here, who do not play a significant leadership role in the country, to press their campaign for greater equality more openly.

# It Was Malaysian Women Vs. the King—And the Women Won

**BY JAMES H. MORROW**

Malaya, under the leadership of an American, was the first to give women the right to vote, when the British gave it to the Malay States in 1947. The women of the Malay States were the first to be given the right to vote in a general election in 1955. The women of the Malay States were the first to be given the right to vote in a general election in 1955.



Women's liberation may not be going full blast in Malaysia, but the women of the country have put their foot down about one thing: they possessed in force when King Abdul Halim Shah, at right with his wife, Queen Rukyah, announced plans to take a second wife, Zohaida Baryamin, left, a two-age beauty queen.



The women of Malaysia have been fighting for their rights for a long time. They have won the right to vote, the right to work, and the right to be treated as equals. They have won the right to be treated as equals.

The 40-year-old King Abdul Halim Shah, who has been married to Queen Rukyah since 1960, announced plans to take a second wife, Zohaida Baryamin, a 22-year-old beauty queen.

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## WINE TALK

### Generally, the Choice Is Uninspiring

By FRANK BRILL

There is nothing more to be said about wine in this country than that it is a very important part of the diet. It is a very important part of the diet.

## Must the Toddler Period Be So Terrible?

By ROBERT M. HAYES

The toddler period is a time of great struggle for both the child and the parent. It is a time of great struggle for both the child and the parent.

## How Working Women Can Help Themselves

By JANE M. GARLAND

Working women can help themselves by organizing and fighting for their rights. They can help themselves by organizing and fighting for their rights.