

Letter from Malaysia

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# Nation's secular vision vs. 'writing on the wall'

## KUALA LUMPUR

**T**he idea of a secular state is dead in Malaysia," says Farish Noor, a Malaysian scholar who specializes in politics and Islam. "An Islamic society is already on the cards. The question is what kind of Islamic society this will be."

It is hard to square this view with a drive through modern Kuala Lumpur, its downtown bars and nightclubs not exactly the symbols of a budding theocracy. Yet as Malaysia marks 49 years of independence from Britain on Thursday, lurking behind a cosmopolitan facade is a tense and divisive battle over the country's future.

Those who want to maintain the country's secular roots are fighting what they call creeping Islamicization. Muslim women who at the time of independence often wore silky, tight-fitting outfits today do not leave the house without a head scarf, which is now also required for female police officers of all religions during official functions.

Muslim prayers are piped into the loudspeakers of government offices in the new administrative capital, Putrajaya. And Islamic police officers routinely arrest unmarried couples for "close proximity."

"I see the writing on the wall," said Ivy Josiah, the director of the Women's Aid Organization, a group that lobbies the government on women's issues. "It's only a matter of time before Malaysia becomes another Taliban state."

Malaysia, a multiracial country where just over half the population of 26 million is Muslim, is testing the limits of compatibility between traditional Muslim beliefs and Western-style democracy.

In Europe, the threat of terrorism posed by disaffected Muslims has spurred religious leaders and politicians to wonder whether there is a better way to assimilate Muslim and Western traditions. The experience of Malaysia appears to show that there is no easy solution, even after five decades of trying.

In recent years, a number of high-profile court cases have highlighted the clash between Muslim and secular laws, but none so much as the lawsuit brought by Lina Joy, a computer saleswoman, who is challenging the Malaysian government over its refusal to officially acknowledge her conversion from Islam to Christianity. After two lower courts ruled for the government, Joy awaits a judgment from the country's highest court.

The case has aggravated already mistrustful relations between Muslim, Christian and Hindu communities. It has led to death threats against one prominent lawyer, large protest gatherings and a ban by the government on any further public debate. At the heart of the case is the fundamental question of which is supreme in Malaysia: Muslim law or the country's secular Constitution.

Malaysia has a hybrid legal system that incorporates both Islamic and civil laws for personal and family matters: Muslims are governed by religious laws against drinking, eating during the daylight hours of Ramadan and having close proximity between unmarried women and men. Marriages, divorces, funerals, and inheritance are governed by Islamic laws.

For non-Muslims — Christians, Buddhists, Hindus and Sikhs — civil laws apply. But the hybrid system is now in crisis and the multiracial fabric could fray.

Critics complain of Islamic influence in day-to-day governance. When the government recently debated

whether free needles should be distributed to drug addicts, Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi said he would first check with the Muslim authorities for guidance on whether this followed Islamic principles.

"You are seeing worldwide a common thing happening," said Malik Intiaz Sarwar, a Muslim lawyer. "Muslims are defining themselves by their religion instead of their country." Malik recently asked for police protection after receiving death threats for his role in the Lina Joy case: he submitted a brief in defense of Joy's right to convert.

"Lina Joy is important because it's finally brought to light the tensions that exist between those who favor an Islamic state and those who believe in the universal values entrenched in the Constitution," Malik said in an interview.

Lawyers who back the government's position in the case say Muslims in Malaysia are subject to Islamic law. "We are not saying you do not have any choice of religion. But if you want to convert out you must do so in the Islamic court," said Zulkifli Noordin, a lawyer who submitted a brief in support of the government's position.

In reality, converting out of Islam is frowned upon if not actively discouraged in Malaysia. Only one state, Negri Sembilan, allows apostasy and usually after ordering the person through a lengthy rehabilitation program — an attempt to keep them from converting.

Zulkifli says 18 people have successfully left the faith, although many others are thought to have done so unofficially. In the country's most conservative state, Kelantan, local laws call for the death penalty for apostates. The law has not yet been applied.

The context of the tensions in the Lina Joy case is a Muslim community that says it feels under siege and threatened by a thriving evangelical Christian movement. Newspapers cite wild estimates of mass conversions if Lina Joy wins her case and call for a strengthening of religious law.

Over the past 30 years, the percentage of people who call themselves Christians has doubled to 10 percent, according to Wong Kim Kong, secretary general of the National Evangelic-

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al Christian Fellowship. Wong says the growth in the church has come from Christians "sharing their faith in a very natural way."

"People experience God and naturally tell people about God," Wong said. "We don't have missionaries coming from overseas and doing that kind of work. No more." Josiah, the director of the Women's Aid Organization, says the most regrettable consequence of the Lina Joy case and other inter-religious disputes that preceded it is the strain it is placing on personal interaction between people of different ethnic groups.

"The whole thing about being multicultural, multiethnic is not just a tourist attraction," Josiah said. "We live it and breathe it."

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