

USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR SPECIAL WATCH LIST

KEY FINDINGS

In 2024, religious freedom conditions in Malaysia remained poor. The dominance of Sunni Islam according to the Shafi'i school of jurisprudence prohibited the practice of other religious interpretations. Theocratic influence and stricter morality policing in public life continued to increase following that favored interpretation of Islam, which state and federal legislation enhanced and reinforced. For example, religious authorities increased morality policing operations during Ramadan to identify and punish Muslims found eating or drinking during fasting hours. Violators faced fines and imprisonment, while the crackdown broadly targeted both Muslims breaking the fast and non-Muslims selling food during those hours. In August, two female divers from Terengganu, one of Malaysia's more religiously restrictive states, sparked a controversy over their donning swimsuits to participate in the 21st Malaysian Games—resulting in the Terengganu Sports Council banning them and other women from representing the state in diving competitions.

While Sections 298 and 298A of the Penal Code directly [criminalize](#) blasphemy, government authorities also use Section 233 of the Communications and Multimedia Act of 1998 (CMA) to prosecute related offenses. In January, prosecutors charged two filmmakers under blasphemy provisions of Section 298 for the contents of a banned film they had produced. In March, prosecutors charged the owners of a convenience store chain and one of its suppliers for selling socks bearing the name “Allah,” alleging that the writing wounded “the religious feelings of others.” This case sparked outrage among some Muslims and prompted unidentified assailants to attack three of the defendants’ stores with Molotov cocktails.

The National Council for Islamic Religious Affairs (MKI) declared the controversial Muslim conglomerate Global Ikhwan

Services and Business Holdings as religiously “deviant,” in part for its ties to the Al-Arqam sect. Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim’s emphasis on eradicating religious trends that diverge from officially accepted interpretations of Sunni Islam enjoys backing from several Malaysian states—such as Selangor and Johor—whose local governments monitored citizens and referred them to Shari’a courts for following religious groups that authorities deemed “deviant.”

These restrictive conditions continued to present serious challenges to Malaysia’s diverse religious minorities. Members of the Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light (AROPL), whom the government deemed as “heretical,” faced ongoing persecution. In October, the Shari’a High Court in Negeri Sembilan sentenced Zolekafeli Bin Abd Ghani to six months in prison for allegedly teaching “false religious doctrines,” while the Department of Islamic Religious Affairs and local police also detained his wife and daughter for their involvement in the group. Moreover, MKI issued a religious decree condemning the AROPL’s teachings as “deviant” and incompatible with Sunni Islam.

In October, the government released a classified and long-awaited Special Task Force report on the abductions of activist [Amri Che Mat](#) and [Pastor Raymond Koh](#) in 2016 and 2017, respectively. The report claimed that neither individual had been a victim of an officially sanctioned, forced disappearance, but rather blamed their abductions on rogue police officers—despite earlier findings from the Human Rights Commission of Malaysia (SUHAKAM) that called out government complicity in both incidents. The report’s controversial findings prompted Koh’s wife, Susanna Liew, to call for an independent investigation into the pastor’s disappearance.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Include Malaysia on the Special Watch List for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Urge the Malaysian government to ratify core international human rights treaties that impact religious freedom of all Malaysians as well as refugees and asylum seekers, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol;
- Engage with the Malaysian government on religious freedom issues, particularly in its role as the 2025 Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Chair, including encouraging its repeal of laws that curtail religious expression, such as the Sedition Act, Section 233 of the Communications and Multimedia Act, and the Printing Presses and Publications Act; and
- Work with the Malaysian government to encourage abolishment of blasphemy provisions that are inconsistent with international human rights law, including the right to freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) and the right to freedom of expression.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Raise Malaysia’s ongoing religious freedom concerns through hearings, meetings, letters, congressional delegation visits and advocacy for FoRB prisoners; and
- Encourage counterparts in the Malaysian Parliament, through the U.S. House Subcommittee on the Indo-Pacific, to amend the SUHAKAM Act of 1999 to bolster SUHAKAM’s functions and authority—including its work on religious freedom—to maintain its independence as well as to bring greater transparency and impartiality to the selection and appointment of its commissioners.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Hearing:** [Religious Freedom in Southeast Asia: Techno-Authoritarianism and Transnational Influences](#)
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief** [Victims List](#) and [Appendix 2](#)

Background

Although Malaysia is a religiously and ethnically diverse country, the federal constitution explicitly defines majority ethnic Malays as Muslims from birth. Chinese Malaysians, who constitute roughly one-fourth of the population, generally follow Confucianism, Taoism, and Christianity. Malaysians with South Asian roots commonly practice Hinduism, Islam, and Sikhism. Over [63 percent](#) of Malaysia's population identify or are classified as Muslim, the vast majority of whom adhere to state-sponsored Sunni Islam according to the Shafi'i school of jurisprudence. Buddhists comprise around 19 percent; Christians nine percent; Hindus six percent; Confucianists, Taoists, or followers of traditional Chinese religions one percent; and around two percent identify with no religion.

Following Malaysia's [2022 General Election](#), the growing influence of the Islamist Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) has contributed to an increase in hardline approaches in state and society toward the implementation of Shari'a-based laws and education policies as well as toward a variety of social issues. PAS often regards non-Muslims as a threat to the dominant role of Sunni Islam in Malaysian society and exerts pressure on the administration of Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim to adopt stricter, religiously based policies.

Policing Religion Through Identity Cards

By law, Malaysia's national identity card (MyKad) specifies an individual's religious affiliation in such a way as to assist the enforcement of Shari'a law and to quickly distinguish Muslims from non-Muslims. The law requires visibly singling out those whom the government assumes to identify as Muslims—including all ethnic Malays—by printing "Islam" on their MyKad cards while including other religious affiliations only within the cards' encrypted data. As such, the MyKad system continued to present institutional obstacles to those who sought to change their religious identity as printed on or embedded in their card's data, forcing them into costly and laborious legal proceedings. In January, two Selangor-born sisters won a court declaration that they are Hindus, succeeding in their lawsuit against the National Registration Department (NRD), which had long insisted they were Muslims and required marking them as such on their MyKAD cards. In August, the High Court in Sabah declared that a Christian man was not a Muslim after the plaintiff sought a declaration that he was not a professing Muslim and requested the NRD to remove the word "Islam" from his MyKad card.

Treatment of Refugees Fleeing Religious Persecution

As of November, Malaysia [hosted](#) more than 190,000 refugees and asylum seekers, including over 110,000 predominantly Muslim Rohingya and nearly 28,000 Chin people—most of whom are Christians—from Burma who are registered with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) without legal status. Rohingya refugees continued to struggle to access education, healthcare, and jobs amid widespread negative sentiment across Malaysian society and a broad lack of rights that left them exposed to extortion, exploitation, arrests, and detention. Human rights [groups](#) criticized the government for [holding](#) 12,000 refugees, asylum seekers, and

migrants in overcrowded and "degrading" immigration detention centers. In February, 115 Rohingya and 16 other refugees from Burma [escaped](#) from the Bidor immigration detention center after a protest, resulting in a road accident that killed one refugee. The government has not allowed the UNHCR to visit immigration centers since August 2019, while authorities increased raids on refugees.

Use of Legal Mechanisms to Restrict FoRB for Muslims

Malaysia's dual legal system allows both civil and Shari'a courts to coexist, although in practice it often serves to control the country's official interpretation of Islam and prevent the enactment of any independent variations. In February, Malaysia's top court declared unconstitutional more than a dozen Shari'a-based laws that authorities in Kelantan State had enacted—a landmark decision that could affect similar laws in other parts of the country. Following the ruling, the government set a deadline of December 31 for individual states to harmonize Shari'a law with the country's constitutional framework, with experts expressing skepticism given the short timeframe and the ambitious undertaking.

In July, the Malaysian Parliament introduced a controversial [Federal Territories Mufti Bill](#), which would expand the powers of muftis—Islamic legal experts with the authority to issue religious rulings, or fatwas—in federal territories. Critics fear that the passage of the bill could lead to the official enforcement of fatwas as law and infringe on the rights of non-Muslims without any recourse. If passed, the bill would also grant unelected officials the power to legislate without transparency or due process while giving additional, exclusive authority to the Shafi'i school of Islamic jurisprudence, further marginalizing religious minorities and Muslims who follow other interpretations of Islam.

Other legal statutes regulating the practice of Islam also continued to place undue restrictions on other facets of religious freedom. For example, Muslims seeking to convert to another religion were required to receive permission from a Shari'a court—along with a declaration of apostasy and accompanying [penalties](#)—which such courts rarely granted.

Key U.S. Policy

In 2024, the United States and Malaysia continued to [collaborate](#) closely on security issues such as counterterrorism and regional stability while regularly engaging in bilateral and multilateral training, exercises, visits, and economic partnership. The two countries also continued to [deepen](#) military [cooperation](#) and to [tackle](#) shared maritime security challenges across the Indo-Pacific through [military exercises](#), military [exchange](#), and high-level naval [visits](#).

In May, then U.S. Under Secretary of the Treasury for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence Brian Nelson and then Treasury General Counsel Neil MacBride [traveled](#) to Malaysia to discuss U.S. efforts to disrupt terrorist financing and other topics. In October, the United States and Malaysia [held](#) the Sixth Senior Officials' Dialogue in Putrajaya to commemorate the 10th anniversary of the Malaysia-United States Comprehensive Partnership and to reaffirm the two countries' partnership across trade and investment, peace and security, people-to-people ties, and a variety of regional and global issues.