



## Malaysia

### International Religious Freedom Report 2008

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion. Article 11 states "Every person has the right to profess and practice his religion," but also gives state and federal governments the power to "control or restrict the propagation of any religious doctrine or belief among persons professing the religion of Islam." Article 3 of the Constitution states, "Islam is the religion of the Federation" and that "Parliament may by law make provisions for regulating Islamic religious affairs." Article 160 of the Constitution defines ethnic Malays as Muslim. Civil courts generally ceded authority to Shari'a courts on cases concerning conversion from Islam, and the latter remained reluctant to allow for such conversions. Other laws and policies placed some restrictions on religious freedom.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the period covered by this report. The Government maintains an official list of 56 sects of Islam it considers "deviant" and a threat to national security. Muslims who deviate from accepted Sunni principles may be detained and subjected to mandatory "rehabilitation" in centers that teach and enforce government-approved Islamic practices. Muslims generally may not convert to another religion, although members of other religions may convert to Islam. Officials at the federal and state government levels oversee Islamic religious activities, and they sometimes influence the content of sermons, use mosques to convey political messages, and prevent certain imams from speaking at mosques. The Government maintains a dual legal system, whereby Shari'a courts have jurisdiction over religious issues involving Muslims, and secular courts rule on other issues pertaining to the broader population. Religious minorities remained generally free to practice their beliefs; however, over the past several years, many have expressed concern that the civil court system has gradually ceded jurisdictional control to Shari'a courts, particularly in areas of family law involving disputes between Muslims and non-Muslims. Religious minorities continued to face limitations on religious expression and alleged violations of property rights. The Government restricts distribution of Malay-language Christian materials in Peninsular Malaysia and forbids the proselytizing of Muslims by non-Muslims.

There were few reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

#### **Section I. Religious Demography**

The country has an area of 127,000 square miles and a population of 26.9 million. According to 2000 census figures, 60 percent of the population practices Islam; 19 percent Buddhism; 9 percent Christianity; 6 percent Hinduism; and 3 percent Confucianism, Taoism, and other traditional Chinese religions. Other minority religious groups include animists, Sikhs, and Baha'is. Ethnic Malay Muslims account for approximately 55 percent of the population. Three of the five most prominent political parties are organized along ethnic and religious lines. The majority of Christians reside in the eastern states of Sabah and Sarawak.

#### **Section II. Status of Religious Freedom**

##### Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion. Article 11 states that "every person has the right to profess and practice his religion," but also gives state and federal governments the power to "control or restrict the propagation of any religious doctrine or belief among persons professing the religion of Islam." Article 3 states

that "Islam is the religion of the Federation" and that "Parliament may by law make provisions for regulating Islamic religious affairs." Article 160 of the Constitution defines ethnic Malays as Muslim. Civil courts generally ceded authority to Shari'a courts in cases concerning conversion from Islam, and the latter remained reluctant to allow for such conversions. The Constitution identifies the traditional rulers as the "Heads of Islam" within their respective states. Other laws and policies placed some restrictions on religious freedom.

Ambiguities concerning what Article 3 entails have been reflected in public debates on the role of Islam in a religiously diverse society. Prime Minister Abdullah continued to promote the concept of "Islam Hadhari" (literally "civilizational Islam"), which he described as an "approach" that reminds Muslims "that Islam in reality is a religion which is tolerant, progressive and peace-loving" and is compatible with a multiethnic and multireligious society. The Government promoted "Islam Hadhari" in schools by including it in the federally mandated curriculum through religious lectures in the civil service, speeches, forums, and media.

On July 17, 2007, Deputy Prime Minister Najib Razak stated the country was an Islamic and not a secular state. Leading members of the non-Muslim community and senior lawyers publicly challenged this and argued that the country was constitutionally a secular state. The Government eventually prohibited the mainstream media from addressing the debate except to report statements by the Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister. On August 4, 2007, the Prime Minister stated the country was neither secular nor theocratic, but a parliamentary democracy. Political support for "Islam Hadhari" was sometimes attenuated in some states where opposition parties hold power.

The Registrar of Societies, under the Home Ministry, determines whether a religious organization may be registered and thereby qualify for government grants and other benefits. The Registrar does not have a consistent policy on registering religious organizations or on the criteria used to make their determination. The Government refuses to recognize various religious organizations, and in order to operate legally, these groups sometimes registered themselves under the Companies Act. Examples include Jehovah's Witnesses and Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons). Registration under the Companies Act confers protections of religious freedom to the extent they are enjoyed by the country's other groups but precludes government funding.

The Government provides financial support to an Islamic religious establishment composed of a variety of governmental, quasi-governmental, and other institutions, and it indirectly provides more limited funds to non-Islamic communities.

Muslims that seek to convert to another religion must first obtain approval from a Shari'a court to declare themselves "apostates." This effectively prohibits the conversion of Muslims, since the Shari'a courts seldom grant such requests and can impose penalties on apostates.

Muslims are identified as such on national identity cards. For members of other recognized religions, religious preference is encrypted in a smart chip within the identity cards and not printed on the surface. Unlike other groups, Muslims must also carry a special photo identification of themselves and their spouses as proof of marriage. This is often used to determine whether citizens are subject to Shari'a precepts, particularly khalwat, an act of "close proximity" between unmarried men and women. Khalwat is a criminal offence under Shari'a law and punishable with two years imprisonment, a fine of \$940 (3,000 ringgit), or both, upon conviction. Religious police can conduct raids at hotels and bars in order to catch Muslims engaged in close proximity, consuming alcohol, or indecently dressed and charge them under Shari'a law.

Shari'a laws are administered by state authorities through Islamic courts and have jurisdiction over all Muslims. Shari'a laws and the degree of their enforcement vary by state. State governments impose Islamic law on Muslims in some cultural and social matters but generally do not interfere with the religious practices of non-Muslim communities; however, debates continued regarding incorporating elements of Shari'a law, such as khalwat, into the civil law. Religious police have the authority to raid private premises as well as public establishments. The Government did not provide information on the number of raids carried out by religious police.

Amending the Penal Code is the exclusive prerogative of the Federal Government. Despite federal laws to the contrary, and the only laws which are enforceable in the country, the state governments of Kelantan and

Terengganu made apostasy, defined as the conversion from Islam to another faith, a capital offense. The Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS)-led state government in Kelantan continued its ban on traditional Malay dance theaters, prohibited advertisements depicting women not fully covered by clothing, enforced wearing of headscarves by Muslim women, and imposed fines for violators during the reporting period. Kelantan's dress code, enacted in 2006, requires Muslim women to wear headscarves and allows only their faces and hands to be exposed. The law also stipulates that non-Muslim women should avoid dressing "sexily or indecently." Women who violate the dress code can be fined up to \$146 (500 ringgit). Women's rights leaders and the Minister of Women, Family, and Community Development criticized such regulations as overly restrictive. Authorities also required men and women to form separate lines at supermarkets and imposed fines on couples that sat too closely in public areas, such as park benches. In late June 2008, in Kota Bharu, the state's capital, city authorities began issuing pamphlets and public statements encouraging Muslim women not to wear noisy high heels, bright lipstick, or transparent headscarves, so as to "preserve their dignity and avoid rape."

PAS leaders announced plans to introduce dress codes in Kedah after the party, in coalition with two secular parties, won control of the state in the March 2008 election. The state government did not introduce new dress codes during the reporting period.

Shari'a courts do not give equal weight to the testimony of women. Several nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) dedicated to the advancement of women's rights complained that women did not receive fair treatment from Shari'a courts in matters of divorce and child custody. In December 2005 Parliament passed the Islamic Family Law Act (IFLA) in an effort to harmonize Shari'a laws throughout the country. Women's rights advocates protested that provisions of the IFLA weakened women's legal standing. In response, the Attorney General's office announced it would seek to amend the IFLA in unspecified ways; however, no amendments were introduced during the reporting period.

Mosques are administered at the state level rather than by the Federal Government. State religious authorities appoint imams to mosques and provide guidance on the content of sermons.

State governments have authority over the building of non-Islamic places of worship and the allocation of land for non-Muslim cemeteries. Permission to build or renovate non-Islamic places of worship is often substantially delayed while permission to build a mosque is granted relatively quickly, according to local NGOs.

The law allows the state to demolish unregistered religious statues and houses of worship. Several NGOs complained about the demolition of unregistered Hindu temples and shrines located on state and local lands. These structures were often constructed on privately owned plantations prior to the country's independence in 1957. Subsequently, plantation lands containing many Hindu shrines and temples were transferred to government ownership.

The Government continued to require all Muslim civil servants to attend government-approved religion classes. Government agencies pressured non-Muslim women to wear headscarves while attending official functions.

Public schools generally offered Islamic religious instruction, which is compulsory for Muslim children, and non-Muslim students are required to take nonreligious morals/ethics courses. At primary and secondary public schools, student assemblies frequently commence with recitation of a Muslim prayer by a teacher or school leader. Private schools are free to offer a non-Islamic religious curriculum as an option for non-Muslims. There are no restrictions on home instruction. The Government offered grants only to privately run Muslim religious schools that agreed to allow government supervision and adopted a government-approved curriculum.

The Government prohibits publications and public debates that it alleges might incite racial or religious disharmony. Proselytizing of Muslims by members of other religious groups is strictly prohibited, although proselytizing of non-Muslims faces no similar obstacles.

The Government does not recognize marriages between Muslims and non-Muslims.

The Government observes Hari Raya Puasa, Hari Raya Qurban, the Birth of the Prophet Muhammad, Awal

Muharram, Wesak Day, Deepavali, Thaipusam, and Christmas as national holidays. Good Friday is officially observed in East Malaysia.

#### *Restrictions on Religious Freedom*

The Government banned what it considered "deviant" interpretations of Islam, maintaining that "deviant" groups' views endanger national security and could divide the Muslim community. The Government's Islamic Development Department (JAKIM) website identified 56 deviant religious teachings it prohibited during the reporting period. They included Ahmadiyya, Islamailiah, Shi'a, and Baha'i teachings, among others. JAKIM established federal guidelines concerning what constitutes "deviationist" behavior or belief. State religious authorities, in making their determinations on these matters, generally followed these guidelines. Members of groups deemed "deviationist" may be arrested and detained, with the consent of a Shari'a court, in order to be "rehabilitated" and returned to the "true path of Islam."

According to religious groups and local NGOs, approval processes for building permits concerning places of worship were sometimes restrictively slow. On May 20, 2008, after a 19-year wait, the Holy Light Church in Johor Baru received approval from the Johor state government to convert its land from agricultural use to religious use.

Minority religious groups reported that state governments sometimes used restrictive zoning and construction codes to block construction or renovation of non-Muslim places of worship.

The demolition of places of worship, some more than 100 years old, located on government land or plantations converted for development was another problem faced by minority religious groups. Local authorities sometimes demolished small, unregistered shrines and temples built on government land without permission. However, there have been cases where state governments allocated land elsewhere and covered the cost to construct new places of worship.

A group of seven indigenous persons sued the Kelantan state government after state authorities on January 15, 2008, demolished a church located on land occupied by the indigenous people. The case remained pending at the end of the reporting period.

On November 6, 2007, on the eve of the Hindu festival of Deepavali, a disturbance erupted between Hindus and local authorities over the demolition of a 100-year-old temple in Selangor. Local NGOs condemned the demolition and urged the authorities to be sensitive when dealing with places of worship. On March 13, 2008, the newly elected Selangor state government provided compensation by allocating new land and money to rebuild the demolished temple.

In May 2006 a temple committee in Negeri Sembilan sought a court injunction against the demolition of a 150-year-old temple located on state-owned land. Approximately 300 worshippers regularly used the temple. On April 15, 2008, the High Court ruled that the Municipal Council had the right to demolish the temple because the temple was recently reconstructed and therefore not actually 150 years old. The court also pointed out that the temple committee did not register the temple with the Registrar of Societies and therefore lacked any legal standing to impede the temple's destruction. The temple was not demolished as of the end of the reporting period.

According to the Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, Sikhs, and Taoists (MCCBCHST), the Government restricted visas for foreign Muslim and non-Muslim clergy under the age of 40, as a means of preventing "militant clergy" from entering the country. While representatives of non-Muslim groups did not sit on the immigration committee that approved visa requests, the MCCBCHST was asked for its recommendations.

In previous reporting periods, the Government reduced the permitted length of stays for foreign Hindu priests, temple musicians, and sculptors. The Government also called local non-Islamic clergy to train local religious leaders and reduce their dependence on foreigners. However, following protests from the Hindu Malaysia Sangam group and other NGOs, the Cabinet decided on April 14, 2008, to issue more permits to foreign priests. The Government also proposed extending the length of stay to five years. In May 2008 the Hindu

Endowment Board claimed the Government refused to approve the extension of permits and rejected new applications for priests and temple musicians, making it necessary to extend existing visas on a month-to-month basis.

The Constitution legally categorizes all ethnic Malays as Muslims. In practice, Muslims are generally not permitted to convert to another religion. In several rulings during the reporting period, secular courts ceded jurisdiction to Shari'a courts on matters involving conversion to or from Islam and in family law cases involving Muslims versus non-Muslims. Some of these cases remained under appeal at the Federal Court.

In April 2008 the Federal Government announced plans to require non-Muslims converting to Islam to declare their new religious status to their family members. Under these plans, converts to Islam would be required to certify they informed their family members of their conversion. On May 14, 2008, the Government announced that the Islamic Affairs Religious Department would issue a card to converts in order to verify conversions to Islam and avoid future issues regarding converts' deaths, divorces, or management of their wills; however, no cards were issued by the end of the reporting period. There was no discussion about protecting individuals wishing to convert from Islam. Non-Muslim family members, including spouses and children, continue to lose all rights to inheritances in such cases. Courts review on a case-by-case basis the religious status of minors in cases where one parent converts to Islam and the other does not, although they tended to rule in favor of the Muslim parent.

On January 18, 2008, the High Court granted permission to Ngiam Tee Kong, an ethnic Chinese Christian, to bury his dead wife, Wong Sau Lan, who was alleged to have converted to Islam, according to Christian rites. The court ruled in Ngiam's favor after the Federal Territory Religious Council dropped its claim to the body because her alleged conversion was not in accordance with Shari'a law.

In January 2008 Gan Eng Gor, an ethnic Chinese man, was buried according to Islamic rites after a Shari'a court ruled that he was a Muslim. Police seized the deceased's body after his son, a Muslim convert, claimed that his father changed his religion from Buddhism to Islam in July 2007. The rest of the family, all Buddhists, filed a petition in the High Court, insisting that Gan never converted because he previously suffered two strokes and could not speak at the time of the alleged conversion. The High Court rejected the petition on January 29, 2008. In its ruling, the High Court declared it had no jurisdiction on the matter since a Shari'a court already declared Gan a Muslim.

In May 2006 Siti Fatimah Tan Abdullah, a Muslim convert, applied to the Penang Shari'a Court to renounce Islam after her Iranian husband left her. She had converted to Islam as a condition for marriage. She claimed that she had never practiced Islam since the 1998 conversion and continued to eat pork and practice her Buddhist faith. On May 8, 2008, the Penang State Shari'a Court decided to allow Siti Fatimah to return to Buddhism. In its decision, the court blamed the state's religious council for not ensuring that Siti Fatimah practiced Islam. Despite pressure from certain hard-line societal elements, the Government did not overturn or review the ruling at the end of the reporting period.

Court decisions tended to favor the parent converting to Islam over the non-Muslim parent and allowed the conversion of children to Islam against the wishes of the non-Muslim parent.

In December 2007 the Federal Court ruled civil courts have exclusive jurisdiction in any case involving the dissolution of a civil marriage. Subashini Rajasingam, a Hindu, filed for divorce after her husband converted to Islam. She sought to prevent her husband from unilaterally converting their second son, age two, after her husband converted their eldest son, age four. However, the Federal Court did not clarify the issue concerning the custody of the two children, as it ruled that both the husband and wife could initiate custody proceedings in their respective jurisdictions. The Federal Court also held that Subashini's husband did not abuse the law by converting his eldest son to Islam without the knowledge of the mother. The Court ruled that according to Article 12(4) of the Federal Constitution, the consent of only one parent is sufficient for the religious conversion of a child.

The Federal Court made no decision in the appeal of Kalammal Sinnasamy, a non-Muslim woman, involving the disposition of the remains of her spouse, M. Moorthy, who allegedly converted from Hinduism to Islam before his death. She claimed there was no clear evidence of this conversion and disputed with Islamic

authorities over which religion's rites should govern his burial. Kaliammal appealed after a secular High Court ruled it had no jurisdiction to hear the case because it involved a Muslim, even though she was a non-Muslim. A Shari'a court had earlier ruled that the Hindu man was a Muslim and Islamic authorities buried the man according to Islamic rites. On December 27, 2007, the High Court released Moorthy's body for burial under Islamic rites and ruled that the court had no jurisdiction to decide whether Moorthy had converted to Islam before his death, as the Shari'a High Court had already decided on this matter.

On May 30, 2007, the Federal Court upheld the 2005 Court of Appeal ruling that Muslim individuals must obtain an order from a Shari'a court stating they have become an "apostate" before they can change their national identity card. In its 2005 judgment, the Court of Appeal had denied the request of Lina Joy, a Muslim who converted to Christianity, to change the religion designated on her national identity card and to marry her Catholic fiancé in accordance to civil law and not Islamic law. Following the decision by the Federal Court in May 2007, Lina Joy reportedly left the country rather than pursue the matter in a Shari'a court.

The Government banned and in some cases seized religious materials. During the reporting period, the Government banned 62 books with religious themes, including *Islamic Politics Brings About Love*, by Al Arqam leader Ash'ari Muhamad; *The Life and Times of Muhammad*, by John Glubb; *Now You Can Know What Muslims Believe*, by Ministries to Muslims; *What Is Ahmadiyah Movement*, by Mirza Bahiruddin Mahmud; and *Tasawuf in the Quran*, by Mir Aliudin; *Secrets of the Koran: Revealing Insights Into Islam's Holy Book*, by Don Richardson; and *Women in Islam*, by Margaret Speaker Yuan. Customs authorities seized six titles of Christian children's books for containing words deemed exclusive to Islam. The usage of words "Allah" (God), "Baitullah" (House of God), and "Solat" (prayer), are restricted for use by Muslim groups by the Publications and Al-Quran Texts Control Department under the Home Ministry as the Government claimed these words are the sole jurisdiction of the Muslim community.

The Government restricts the distribution in peninsular Malaysia of Malay-language translations of the Bible and other printed materials, as well as Christian tapes. Since 2005 a policy initiated by the Prime Minister requires that Malay-language Bibles must have the words "Not for Muslims" printed on the cover and may be distributed only in churches and Christian bookshops. The distribution of Malay-language Christian materials faced fewer restrictions in East Malaysia.

On February 12, 2008, the Internal Security Ministry issued a directive to the Catholic Church to stop using the word "Allah" in its weekly publication, the *Catholic Herald*. The Deputy Prime Minister defended the action and denied that it undermined tolerance among the country's religious communities. The de facto minister for Islamic affairs claimed the word "Allah" in Christian literature could confuse the country's Muslims and draw them to Christianity. On March 9, 2008, the Catholic archbishop in Kuala Lumpur filed a suit against the Government to challenge the ban and declare use of "Allah" is not exclusive to the religion of Islam. On May 5, 2008, the High Court decided that the Catholic Church has the right to a judicial review of the Government's ban. The court gave permission for the *Catholic Herald* to continue to use "Allah" pending the review, which remained unscheduled as of the end of the reporting period.

In January 2008 officials from the Ministry of Internal Security seized Christian children's books from several bookshops because they contained pictures of Moses and Noah deemed "caricatures of prophets" and offensive to Muslim sensitivities. The Malaysian Council of Churches accused ministry officials of overstepping their authority by confiscating Christian literature not meant for Muslims. The Ministry subsequently returned the books with no further action.

On January 28, 2008, Juliana Nicholas returned to the country from the Philippines with two boxes containing 32 English-language Bibles meant for her church group. Customs officials in Kuala Lumpur seized all the Bibles, and Nicholas referred the case to the Internal Security Ministry's Publications and Al Quran Texts Controls Division. On February 4, 2008, after a follow-up call to the Ministry, the Customs Department allowed Nicholas to retrieve the Bibles. The Christian Federation of Malaysia, the country's biggest church group, reportedly received complaints that Christian religious books were similarly confiscated at various customs checkpoints around the country.

While practices vary from state to state, both the Government and the opposition PAS have attempted to use mosques in the states they control to deliver politically oriented messages. In recent years, several states

controlled by the BN banned opposition-affiliated imams from speaking at mosques, vigorously enforced existing restrictions on the content of sermons, replaced mosque leaders and governing committees thought to be sympathetic to the opposition, and threatened to close down unauthorized mosques with ties to the opposition. Similarly, the state government of Kelantan reportedly restricted imams affiliated with BN parties from speaking in mosques throughout the reporting period.

The Government continued to monitor the activities of the small Shi'a minority.

### *Abuses of Religious Freedom*

The Hindu Rights Action Force (HINDRAF), a legally unregistered NGO (i.e., an unregistered umbrella organization for various NGOs) focused on ethnic Indian concerns, organized a series of protests in 2007. HINDRAF appealed for redress of perceived government marginalization of ethnic Indians, including the demolition of some Hindu temples. HINDRAF's rallies culminated in a large street protest in Kuala Lumpur on November 25, 2007; police used tear gas and water cannons against demonstrators at various gathering points. Police arrested and released Waytha Moorthy, HINDRAF director, in November; he later traveled to the United Kingdom and remained abroad citing a fear of arrest if he returned to the country. On December 13, the Government utilized the Internal Security Act (ISA) to arrest five HINDRAF leaders claiming that their involvement in organizing protests served to upset interracial harmony and thus threatened national security. The five men remained in ISA detention at the end of the reporting period.

State-level Shari'a courts have authority to order individuals, requesting to convert from Islam to another religion or professing belief in a "deviant" Islamic sect, to religious rehabilitation centers. Individuals lacked the freedom to leave such centers and were forced to undergo religious "rehabilitation." The Government did not release statistics on the number of persons sentenced to religious rehabilitation centers during the reporting period.

At the end of the reporting period, religious authorities continued seeking Ayah Pin, the leader of a banned nonviolent religious group in Terengganu known as the Sky Kingdom, and one of his four wives for supporting "deviant" religious practices. On March 3, 2008, the Shari'a Court sentenced Kamariah Ali, 57, who converted from Islam to the banned group, to two years imprisonment for apostasy.

On April 28, 2007, officers from the Selangor Islamic Affairs Department (JAIS), a state-level agency, raided the home of Najeera Farvinli, a non-practicing Muslim woman who married a Hindu man in a Hindu temple in July 2006. Government officials intervened and removed the woman from the couple's home on suspicion of khalwat. She was sentenced to 180 days of religious "rehabilitation." In May 2007 the High Court reached an agreement with the Religious Department to grant custody of the children to the father, who was raising them as Hindus. The court granted his wife full visitation rights but refused to grant permission for her to live with her husband.

In January 2007 the Malacca Shari'a Court ordered Revathi Masoosai, an ethnic Indian woman whose parents converted to Islam, to an Islamic rehabilitation center for 180 days after she went to the court to change her Muslim name and religion on her identity card to Hinduism. The court ruled she could not convert from Islam, declared her Hindu marriage null and void, and gave custody of both Revathi and her two-year-old daughter to Revathi's Muslim parents. While in "rehabilitation," authorities reportedly tried to make her pray as a Muslim, wear a headscarf, and eat beef. In June 2007 Revathi was released into the custody of her parents, ordered to attend weekly religious classes, and banned from living with her husband. Revathi's parents continued to retain custody of the child at the end of the reporting period.

On November 14, 2006, JAIS detained 107 persons, including several children, during a raid in Kuala Lumpur on suspected followers of the banned al Arqam Islamic group. While all detainees were subsequently released, JAIS stated it intended to press charges in a Shari'a court against six of the arrested individuals. The Government banned al Arqam in 1994, labeling it a "deviant" sect. Ashaari Muhammad, the leader of its approximately 10,000 followers, established a holding company, Rufaqa Corporation, to manage his business interests. Rufaqa Corporation came under investigation for allegedly supporting the revival of the al Arqam group. On March 1, 2007, JAIS raided the homes of 28 individuals with links to Rufaqa Corporation to gather

further evidence against the company. JAIS also raided several business premises of Rufaqa Corporation on March 2, 2007, tearing down posters and signs bearing the word "Rufaqa" and seizing books and other materials featuring Ashaari.

In June 2008, the Government of Malaysia, at the request of the Chinese Embassy, deported two Chinese nationals, who identified themselves as Muslims, to China.

#### Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

#### Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

On June 9, 2008, the Government cohosted the Third International Conference on the Muslim World and the West in Kuala Lumpur. The conference sought to address the "divide" between Muslims and the West and develop project concepts. Prime Minister Abdullah gave the keynote address, in which he stressed, "The Islamic World and the West must work to regain mutual trust, respect, understanding, and cooperation." Some participants, however, reportedly pushed for the adoption of laws that could prohibit freedom of expression in order to prevent the defamation of Islam.

On May 22, 2008, the Home Ministry lifted the ban on a book entitled *A History of God: The 4000-Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, by Karen Armstrong, which was initially banned in April 2005 with eight other English-language books.

On April 24, 2008, the Ministry of Unity, Culture, Arts, and Heritage announced a streamlined set of guidelines to solve unsettled religious issues, including the construction and demolition of places of worship. The Ministry was gathering feedback from all religious groups, including JAKIM and representatives from the Hindu and Buddhist communities, with the intent of creating guidelines to be presented to the Cabinet and state legislative assemblies.

On July 9, 2007, Prime Minister Abdullah asked Islamic authorities to be more understanding in handling conversion issues, stating, "I have always told the religious departments to listen to their [intending converts'] grouses about why they want to leave the religion. We have to be ready to listen and to resolve the problem."

### **Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination**

There were a few reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

Some people that convert outside of their religion may face stigmatization or, in cases of conversions from Islam, the possibility of being labeled an "apostate." Because of this, they sometimes conceal their newly adopted beliefs and practices from their former coreligionists, including their friends and relatives.

Following the May 2008 Shari'a court ruling allowing Siti Fatimah to officially return from Islam to Buddhism, Hizb ut-Tahrir, a group committed to the establishment of a global Islamic state, tried to pressure the Government to review the ruling and declared publicly that those who renounce Islam should be put to death. The group reportedly maintained an ongoing recruiting effort from a number of the country's universities, including the Universiti Teknologi Malaysia.

Anti-Semitic literature, including books such as *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, was readily available at street vendors and bookstores in various parts of the country.

The Government sometimes intervened to suppress discussions of controversial religious disputes between Muslims and non-Muslims.

#### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy**

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Embassy representatives maintained an active dialogue with leaders and representatives of various religious groups, including those not officially recognized by the Government. The Embassy coordinated funding for a Fulbright scholar who addressed interfaith concerns while in residence as a lecturer at a public university. The Embassy sponsored visits by American Islamic scholars; the U.S. Government also funded civil society grants and exchange grants for representatives of NGOs working to promote greater religious tolerance, respect for diversity, human rights, and openness in the country.

Released on September 19, 2008

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