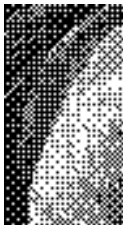
relevant authorities need to elevate muslim empowerment in malaysia



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Malaysia is well-known as a Muslim majority nation that also claims to celebrate its racial and religious diversity. Most things written or spoken about the country typically stress its multi-racial and multi-religious element. This is especially true when we are reminded that Malaysia is made up of East and West Malaysia, with East Malaysia having more sub-ethnic groups beyond the main three racial groups in Peninsular Malaysia–Malay, Chinese and Indians. Moreover, unlike most states in the peninsula (or West Malaysia), Muslims do not make up a majority in Sarawak, where Muslims are only 34.2 percent of the state population according to the 2020 census. This diversity in Malaysia has left many perplexed by recent suggestion by Mohd Na'im Mokhtar, the Minister in the Prime Minister's Department in charge of Religious Affairs under the Anwar Ibrahim administration, to have guidelines for Muslims attending non-Muslim events or celebrations when we have been living side-by-side for many decades.

Most recently, on February 4, 2025, in a reply to Parliament, Mohd Na'im said that the Malaysian Islamic Development Department (JAKIM), which coordinates and implements Islamic activities and policies in Malaysia, is finalising a guideline for Muslims to attend non-Muslim events or celebrations. While some have defended the guidelines as a guide for Muslims (CNA, 2025a), a closer examination suggests that Muslims may not be the most affected group. Under the proposal, non-Muslim organisers must avoid religious songs or speeches that could insult Muslims, and they must gain approval from relevant authorities and Islamic agencies when inviting Muslims to non-Muslim events. It is understandable that events involving Muslims cannot take place during Muslim prayer times, such as Friday prayers. Additionally, event locations should not be near prayer halls, mosques, Muslim cemeteries, or endowment lands, and the premises must not display non-Islamic religious symbols. It is evident that this rule would primarily impact non-Muslims, requiring them to tread carefully.

While the intention is noble, as pointed out by the minister himself, the execution is very short-sighted. Not only did citizens and politicians criticise these rules, such as former DAP member Ronnie Liu and current Bangi MP Syahredzan Johan, but also the Sultan of Selangor himself. As the Head of Islamic Religion in the State of Selangor, the Sultan rejects the proposal as unnecessary, as Islam itself has provided enough guidelines for its adherents on do's and don'ts (Muthiah, 2025). Of course there are those, especially from the political opposition, who welcomed the guideline to "protect one's faith."

On this, Dr. Zulkifli Al-Bakri, himself a former Minister in the Prime Minister's Department in charge of Religious Affairs from March 2020 to August 2021, wrote on his personal X account on 9 February 2025:

"In Islam, visiting the grave of a non-Muslim or attending their funeral as a gesture of respect is permissible. This is well-established in Islamic law. However, Muslims are advised to refrain from engaging in any religious rituals during the ceremony... Don't be surprised; many Muslims are still unsure about what is appropriate and inappropriate to do in non-Muslim religious events, whether weddings, celebrations, or funerals. That is why continuous education is important."

The key here is education. Institutions and authorities, such as JAKIM, should prioritise teaching Muslims about prohibited practices instead of imposing restrictions on non-Muslim Malaysians. The responsibility should be on the Muslims if the protection of their faith is at stake. It does not make sense for non-Muslims celebrating or mourning to have to take off religious symbols just because Muslims are present. It is akin to asking Muslims to remove decorative Quranic verses whenever there are non-Muslims attending a Muslim wedding. Islam being the official religion of the federation does not make it right to force worshippers of other religions to alter their practice.

Following the controversy, the government decided to scrap the guideline on 7th February, 2025.

Mohd. Na'im claimed that these guidelines were introduced due to queries by Malaysian Muslims about receiving invitations to events that may include non-Islamic religious elements (CNA, 2025b). This could have also been an indirect response to a Christmas celebration held at the Ministry of Housing and Local Government in Putrajaya the previous year (Bernama, 2024). If that is the case, the guideline should have focused on Muslims, such as prohibiting singing hymns or carrying kavadi. I believe if the guidelines were as such, no non-Muslims would have made any comments.

Unfortunately, the proposed guideline was only one in a string of other suggestions. In September 2024, Mohd Na'im also caught flak for proposing all restaurants and eateries to obtain mandatory halal certification. The process of being halal-certified by JAKIM may take months, with additional costs for businesses to maintain their halal status. Of course, for businesses that have halal certification, it adds value, and the cost can easily be covered by patrons who trust the establishment, thus making it good for business. There is already a pull factor that makes having a push factor redundant. But even Kelantan, where the state government wants to make the certificate mandatory, has received appeals to postpone the requirement due to the difficulties faced by some eateries to get the certificate on time when renewing their licenses (Sekaran, 2024).

The claim that this too is a "Muslim issue" is dishonest, as it also affects non-Muslim business operators. If there are operators found to be using JAKIM's halal certification illegally, the specific perpetrators should be dealt with by the law. Calmer heads prevailed again, and the government decided against having mandatory halal certification for restaurants claiming to have "no pork, no alcohol" (Salama, 2024).

Those who claim to protect Islam are causing political tension in Malaysia by exploiting Muslim insecurity. Insecurity is typically the result of limited education and awareness and has nothing to do with actual threats to Islam or Muslims.

The minister finds himself in a difficult situation. He is trying to convince the Malay-Muslims in Malaysia that this current government is doing all it can to "protect" Muslims. It is 2025, but Malaysia is stuck in a perpetual cycle of demanding non-Muslims to make sure Muslims adhere to their Islamic faith. Political expediency is to blame, not the Muslims in Malaysia.

There is a call then, for Anwar Ibrahim needing to use all the acumen he has gathered over the years, not just as a politician but also as someone close to ulama' from all around the world, to make the right decision to create more confident Muslims who can build Malaysia to its highest potential.

The government is infantilising Muslims instead of giving them the information they need to decide. It is not about "normalising" things that are "haram" or forbidden; it is about having good Muslims with strong faith and the ability to discern rather than being treated like cattle in a herd.

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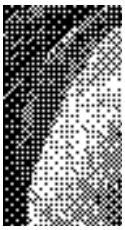

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