

MALAYSIA 2013 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution protects religious freedom with some exceptions. Portions of the constitution, as well as other laws and policies, place restrictions on religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally enforced those restrictions. The constitution gives federal and state governments the power to “control or restrict the propagation of any religious doctrine or belief among persons professing the religion of Islam.” The government maintains a dual legal system, under which sharia courts rule on religious, family, and some criminal issues involving Muslims and secular courts rule on other issues pertaining to both Muslims and the broader population. Government policies promote Sunni Islam above other religions. Other teachings and forms of Islam are illegal, and the government maintains an official but secret list of banned sects of Islam. There have been reports of detentions of non-Sunni Muslims. The constitution defines ethnic Malays as Muslim from birth. Muslims may not legally convert to another religion except in extremely rare circumstances, although members of other religions may convert to Islam. Non-Islamic minority religious groups remained generally free to practice their beliefs, subject to certain limitations.

There were reports of societal abuse and discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, including reports of child marriages as an approved practice of Islam. Civil society organizations continued to criticize this practice.

U.S. embassy representatives maintained an active dialogue on religious freedom with the government and with leaders and representatives of various religious groups, including those not officially recognized by the government. The Ambassador visited and met with religious leaders across the country to emphasize the importance of religious freedom and tolerance among religions.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 29.6 million (July 2013 estimate). Census figures indicate that 61.3 percent of the population practices Islam, 19.8 percent Buddhism, 9.2 percent Christianity, 6.3 percent Hinduism, and 1.3 percent Confucianism, Taoism, or other traditional Chinese philosophies and religions. Other minority religious groups include animists, Sikhs, and Bahais. Ethnic Malay Muslims account for approximately 55 percent of the population.

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Several of the most prominent political parties are organized along ethnic and/or religious lines.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

Freedom of religion is written into the constitution as a protected right; however, portions of the constitution, as well as other laws and policies, place restrictions on religious freedom. Article 11 states that “every person has the right to profess and practice his religion,” but 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 “Parliament may by law make provisions for regulating Islamic religious affairs.” Article 160 defines ethnic Malays as Muslim from birth. The constitution identifies the traditional rulers, also known as sultans, as the “Heads of Islam” within their respective states. Sultans are present in nine of the country’s 13 states; in the remaining four states and the federal territories, the highest Islamic authority is the king. Sultans oversee the sharia courts and appoint judges based on the recommendation of the respective state Islamic religious departments and councils who manage the operations of the courts. In the states without a sultan and in the federal territories, the king oversees this process. The law allows citizens and organizations to sue the government for constitutional violations of religious freedom. Federal law has constitutional precedence over state law, except in matters concerning Islamic law.

The constitution establishes the power of the federal judiciary by creating two high courts of equal and independent authority, one in Peninsular Malaysia and one in East Malaysia. A constitutional amendment provides, however, that these courts have no jurisdiction in respect to any matter within the jurisdiction of the sharia courts. This ambiguity regarding sharia versus secular law remains unresolved. Civil courts generally rule in favor of the government in matters concerning Islam.

The government places some restrictions on religious assembly and denies legal status to certain religious groups. The Registrar of Societies, under the home ministry, determines whether a religious group may be registered and thereby qualify for government grants and other benefits. The registrar has no consistent policy or transparent criteria for determining whether to register religious groups. In cases where the government refuses to register a religious group, the group may pursue registration under the Companies Act. Examples of the latter include

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Jehovah's Witnesses and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons). Registration under the Companies Act is generally relatively quick and provides a legal basis for conducting business, but precludes government funding.

The Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM) within the prime minister's office establishes federal guidelines concerning what constitutes "deviant" Islamic behavior or belief. The government forbids religious assembly and worship for what the government deems as "deviant sects" such as Shia, Ahmadiyyah, and Al-Arqam. Members of banned groups may not speak freely about their religious beliefs. The government may detain Muslims who deviate from accepted Sunni principles and subject them to mandatory "rehabilitation" in centers that teach and enforce government-approved Islamic practices. State-level sharia courts also have the authority to order individuals who seek to convert from Islam or who profess belief in a "deviant" Islamic group to enter religious rehabilitation centers. The government forbids individuals to leave such centers until they complete the program, which varies in length, but can often last approximately six months.

The law strictly forbids proselytizing of Muslims by non-Muslims, but allows and supports Muslims proselytizing others. Neither the right to leave Islam nor the legal process of conversion is clearly defined in law.

Officials at the federal and state government levels oversee Islamic religious activities, and sometimes influence the content of sermons, use mosques to convey political messages, limit public expression, and prevent certain imams from speaking at mosques. State governments are legally responsible for the administration of mosques in the 13 states, including appointing imams and providing guidance on the content of sermons. In the three federal territories, the Federal Territories Islamic Department (JAWI) carries out these responsibilities.

Conflicts and inconsistencies among the constitution, the penal code, and sharia continue unresolved. Although federal law exempts women from caning, sharia law does not. Caning under Malaysian criminal law is carried out with a half-inch-thick wooden cane; under sharia, a smaller cane is used, the subject is fully covered with a robe, and the caning official cannot lift the cane above his shoulder, thus reducing the impact.

Authorities at the state level administer sharia through Islamic courts and have jurisdiction over all Muslims. Sharia laws and the degree of their enforcement

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vary by state and can be influenced by respective religious departments of the state. State governments impose sharia law on Muslims in some cultural and social matters, but generally do not interfere with the religious practices of non-Muslim communities; however, debates continue regarding states incorporating elements of sharia, such as *khalwat* (being in close physical proximity with an unrelated member of the opposite sex), into secular civil and criminal law. Although specific punishments for violation of *khalwat* vary from state to state, it is typically punishable by some combination of imprisonment up to two years, a fine of 3,000 ringgit (RM) (\$915), or several strokes of the cane.

State Islamic religious enforcement officers continued to have the authority to accompany police on raids of private premises and public establishments, to enforce sharia, including violations such as indecent dress, distribution of banned publications, alcohol consumption, or *khalwat*.

Laws and government policies do not restrict the rights of non-Muslims to change their religious beliefs and affiliation. Conversion to Islam, however, raises several issues. A non-Muslim wishing to marry a Muslim must convert to Islam before the marriage can be recognized as valid. A minor (under the age of 18, according to federal law) may not convert to another faith without the explicit permission of his or her guardian; however, some states have laws allowing conversion to Islam without permission after age 15.

The legal age of marriage is 16 for Muslim girls and 18 for Muslim males, although they may marry before those ages with the permission of their parents and the sharia courts.

Only the federal government may amend the penal code. Nevertheless, state laws in Kelantan and Terengganu make apostasy, defined as conversion from Islam to another faith, a capital offense. There have been no convictions under these laws, which cannot be enforced without a constitutional amendment, according to a statement by the attorney general. Nationally, civil courts generally cede authority to sharia courts in cases concerning conversion from Islam, and sharia courts remain unwilling to allow such conversions for those who are born Muslims and reluctant to allow conversion for those who had previously converted to Islam.

Muslims who seek to convert to another religion must first obtain approval from a sharia court to declare themselves “apostates.” Sharia courts seldom grant such requests and can impose penalties such as enforced “rehabilitation” on apostates. In the states of Perak, Malacca, Sabah, and Pahang, conversion from Islam to

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another religion is a criminal offense, punishable by a fine or a jail term. In Pahang, up to six strokes of the cane may also be imposed. In the states of Perak, Kedah, Negeri Sembilan, Sarawak, and Malacca, sharia allows one parent to convert children to Islam without the consent of the second parent.

The National Fatwa Council is an organization within the prime minister's office whose members are appointed by the Council of Rulers, and is comprised of state muftis (jurists of Islamic law) and other Islamic scholars. The Council issues fatwas (religious edicts) on a variety of subjects. Some fatwas prohibit the practice of yoga and bar Muslim women from participating in beauty pageants. A fatwa issued by the National Fatwa Council is legally binding for Muslims in the country's federal territories, but because Islam is a state matter, the decision to comply with or enforce edicts of the National Fatwa Council rests with each state's religious authorities.

The government provides financial support to Islamic religious institutions and more limited funding to non-Islamic groups.

Islamic religious instruction is compulsory for Muslim children in public schools; non-Muslim students are required to take nonreligious morals and ethics courses. Local churches and temple groups unsuccessfully urged the government to include the option for non-Muslim religion classes to be held during the school day. 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 homeschooling. The government offers grants only to private Islamic schools agreeing to allow government supervision and adopt a government-approved curriculum. Religious teachers in many national schools, particularly in peninsular Malaysia, ensure that Muslim girls wear the *tudung* (Muslim head covering) at school.

State governments have exclusive authority over allocation of land for, and the construction of, all places of worship, as well as land allocation for all cemeteries.

The government prohibits publications, public events, and public debates that it alleges might incite racial or religious disharmony.

Tax laws allow a tax exemption for registered religious groups for donations received and a tax deduction for the individual donors. The tax relief for donations by individuals to religious organizations differs for Muslims and non-Muslims.

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National identity cards specify religious affiliation, and are used by the government to determine which citizens are subject to sharia. The cards identify Muslims as such on the card's surface; for members of other recognized religions, religious affiliation is not printed, but is encrypted in a smart chip within the identity card. Married Muslims must carry a special photo identification of themselves and their spouse as proof of marriage.

Government Practices

The government promoted Sunni Islam above other religions, including other forms of Islam, and detained individuals for violating restrictions on religious freedom. Members of minority religious groups sometimes faced limits on religious expression and demolition of nonregistered non-Muslim shrines. The government occasionally suppressed public discussions of controversial religious issues such as religious freedom, apostasy, and conversion of minors. The government exerted influence over the content of sermons in mosques and used mosques to convey political messages. Controversy continued over the use of the term "Allah" for God by non-Muslims. Observers continued to express concern that the secular civil and criminal court system had ceded jurisdictional control to sharia courts, particularly in areas of family law involving disputes between Muslims and non-Muslims. Government and social pressure operated to encourage Muslims to dress and act in prescribed ways.

The government reportedly had a secret list of "sects" banned as "deviant" interpretations of Islam which included over 50 groups. With the consent of a sharia court, the government arrested and detained members of "deviant" groups for "rehabilitation" to the "true path of Islam." The ban on assembly and worship was not uniformly enforced, especially against small assemblies in private residences. State religious authorities generally followed JAKIM guidelines regarding "deviant" behavior.

In November Hatijah Aam, better known as Ummu Jah, the widow of the founder of Al-Arqam, a banned Islamic group, and 17 other followers, including a member of the opposition People's Justice Party's Central Leadership Council, pled guilty at the Gombak Barat Lower Sharia Court to a charge of reviving the sect. Judge Kamarulzaman Ali released all on a one-year good behavior bond and ordered them to refrain from activities involving Al-Arqam and to undergo 500 hours of moral rehabilitation under the supervision of the Selangor Islamic Religious

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Department (JAIS). Ummu Jah was also fined RM 1,000 (\$305) after pleading guilty to a charge of publishing a book containing “deviant” teachings.

The government continued to monitor the activities of the Shia population. In September a minister in the Prime Minister’s Department, Jamil Khir Baharom, announced in parliament that 16 people had been arrested from January to September for disseminating Shia teachings, which are banned. In August the Perak Islamic Department (JAIPK) arrested two individuals in Taiping for allegedly possessing books, CDs, and posters on Shia teachings.

In December a religious court heard the case against two Shia Muslims accused of possessing Shia publications, allegedly in violation of a fatwa stating that only the Sunni branch of Islam can be promoted. Home Minister Ahmad Zahid Hamidi publically stated that Shia teachings deviate from the real Islamic teachings and that recognizing only Sunni Islam is necessary to ensure harmony in society. The case was pending at the end of the year.

In July the Chief Minister of the State of Kedah, Mukhriz Mahathir, announced the state of Kedah would enforce the National Fatwa Council’s ruling that Shia teachings were “deviant.” Mukhriz reportedly stated the reason for banning Shia teachings was to preserve the stability of the Muslim community. Some religious teachers and Muslim nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) reportedly praised the announcement saying that Shia teachings confuse Sunni Muslims. Baharom was reported as saying that human rights have limits and the ban on Shia teachings was not related to human rights. In August the Secretary General of Home Affairs, Abdul Rahim Radzi, reportedly called for the eradication of the “Shia movement” to be carried out by the home ministry, the police, the Registrar of Societies, and others. He noted that of the 13 states in Malaysia only Kelantan, Sabah, and Sarawak had not banned the “Shia movement” but were in the process of doing so. He announced in September that the government had set up a special “laboratory” in Malacca to prevent the spread of Shia teachings in Malaysia.

In September the National Security Council organized an anti-Shia seminar for more than 1,000 people to warn Muslims of the “threat” posed by Shia teachings.

The government maintained bans on and confiscated religious materials it found to be “deviant,” although it did not initiate any new bans on religious books.

The government did not release statistics on the number of persons sentenced to religious rehabilitation centers during the year for attempts to convert from Islam,

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and maintained that historically there were very few apostasy cases. Generally, the only conversions recognized were for non-ethnic-Malay individuals who had previously converted to Islam for marriage, but were seeking to reconvert to their previous religious affiliation after their marriages had dissolved.

There were reports of minors converting to Islam in cases where one parent voluntarily converted to Islam and converted the children without the consent of the non-Muslim parent. Sharia courts usually upheld the conversions of minors despite the opposition of a non-Muslim parent, and the government in most cases did not act to prevent such conversions.

The custody and religious conversion case of the children of M. Indira Gandhi, dating from 2009, continued to attract publicity. Gandhi's estranged husband, K. Patmanathan, had converted their three minor children to Islam without her knowledge. In July the high court annulled the conversion of the children. In August Patmanathan and JAIPK filed an appeal against the high court's decision. In October Gandhi obtained a court order to cite her ex-husband for contempt for refusing to hand over their youngest daughter, despite Gandhi's having won custody of all three children in 2010. At year's end, the police had taken no action to return the youngest child to Gandhi, and the case was ongoing.

In July the Malaysian cabinet withdrew from parliamentary consideration a controversial child conversion bill that would have permitted unilateral conversions of minor children to Islam with the permission of only one parent. Although this is allowed under sharia law in the states of Perak, Kedah, Negeri Sembilan, Sarawak, and Malacca, the controversial bill would have allowed the practice throughout the country. The cabinet withdrew the bill amid vigorous criticism originating from the opposition, civil society, and some members of the ruling party.

In January an appellate court ordered the Penang High Court to hear an application brought by Siti Hasnah Vangarama Abdullah questioning the validity of her conversion to Islam when she was seven years old. Vangarama stated she was an orphan when a Muslim Welfare Organization officer took her to the State Religious Department to renounce Hinduism and embrace Islam. As a Muslim, Vangarama was unable to register her marriage to a Hindu man because the law does not permit Muslims and non-Muslims to marry legally unless the spouse converts to Islam. On October 1, the Federal Court heard submissions on whether the civil court or the sharia court has the jurisdiction to hear the case, but it reserved its judgment to a date that was not decided on at year's end.

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In May the Sharia Court in Kota Kinabalu allowed a 40-year-old restaurant manager, Riduan Masmud, to marry a 13-year-old girl after he was charged with raping her in February. Masmud defended his actions by stating that it was by mutual consent and acceptable under sharia. The attorney general's chambers filed a suit against Masmud for statutory rape. The case was ongoing at year's end.

The Publications and Quranic Text Control Division of the Ministry of Home Affairs supervised the publication of religious texts, and restricted the use of the words Allah (God), *baitullah* (house of God), *Kaabah* (location toward which Muslims pray) and *salat* (prayer) to Muslim groups only, asserting that these words were the sole jurisdiction of the Muslim community.

In a long running controversy stemming from the government's ban on the use of the word "Allah" by non-Muslims in Malay-language Bibles and other Christian publications, on October 14, the court of appeal overturned a 2009 decision by the High Court of Kuala Lumpur and upheld the government's decision that the *Catholic Herald* cannot use the word "Allah" to refer to God in its Malay language edition. The court ruled that the freedom to practice a religion other than Islam is limited by Islam's status as the religion of the federation and the constitution's guarantee that "other religions may be practiced in peace and harmony" was intended to protect the sanctity of Islam. The court of appeal held that: the use of "Allah" by non-Muslims would create confusion among Muslims; the word "Allah" is not "an integral part" of the Christian faith; and the use of the word "Allah" in the Malay version of the *Herald* would potentially harm public order and safety. Following the ruling, the attorney general emphasized that the court of appeal's decision was confined to the publication of the Malay-language text of the *Herald*. Deputy Home Minister Junaidi Jaafar reportedly stated the ruling was meant for the weekly publication of the *Herald* only and would not affect other Christian publications or the Malay-language version of the Bible, the Al-Kitab, used widely in Sabah and Sarawak. The Catholic Church planned to file an appeal against the verdict in the Federal Court.

In May a former Selangor state lawmaker filed a police complaint against the National Evangelical Christian Fellowship of Malaysia (NECF), accusing them of attempting to convert Malays to Christianity through Facebook. In response, JAIS began an investigation into NECF's use of the word "Allah" on their Facebook site.

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In January the Pahang mufti, appointed by the State Islamic Authority, declared that non-Muslims were prohibited from using the word “Allah” and 34 other words associated with Islam. He told reporters that non-Muslims were barred from using the words in statements, speeches, publications, or in any broadcast as it could “mislead” and affect the faith of Muslims. He said that doing so would violate the law, which, with a conviction, carries a fine up to RM 5,000 (\$1,526) and/or imprisonment up to two years.

On October 24, the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission questioned two radio producers after they conducted an interview with American religious scholar Dr. Reza Aslan, who criticized the Malaysian government over the ban of the use of word “Allah” by non-Muslims.

In August the Sultan of Johor, the highest Islamic authority in the state, called for a Muslim prayer hall at a privately-owned resort to be demolished after a group of Buddhists used the hall for religious meditation. The relevant municipal council carried out the destruction August 28. The owner of the prayer hall was detained and subsequently charged with “injuring or defiling a place of worship with intent to insult the religion of any class.”

The federal and states’ budgets continued to fund Muslim places of worship. Government funding for non-Muslim places of worship came from a special allocation within the Prime Minister’s Department or from state governments. Minority religious groups continued to assert that non-Muslim places of worship were poorly funded and the government made funding decisions on an arbitrary basis. Local NGOs reported that both federal and state governments continued to delay, sometimes for years, permission to build or renovate non-Islamic places of worship, although they granted approvals to build mosques without delay.

Enforcement of sharia in some states placed additional restrictions on Muslims, who were affected by sharia court sentences such as caning for violations including alcohol consumption and *khalwat*. Islamic officials stated the intent was not to injure, but to make offenders ashamed of their sins so they would repent and not repeat the offense.

Non-Muslim family members, including spouses and children, continued to lose all rights to inheritances in sharia court in cases of conversion by one spouse to Islam.

Religious NGOs contended that sharia courts did not give equal weight to the testimony of women. Several NGOs dedicated to the advancement of women’s

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rights continued to state that women did not receive fair treatment from sharia courts, primarily in matters of divorce, child custody, and enforcement of alimony payments.

In September JAWI expressed the desire to withdraw the case against Nik Raina, a Muslim employee at a bookstore in Kuala Lumpur who was arrested under sharia in 2012, for distribution of the book, *Allah, Liberty and Love*, a book which was banned after the sale took place. Despite the lift on the ban in September the sharia court ruled that the case should continue. The case was pending at the end of the year.

According to the Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, Sikhs, and Taoists (MCCBCHST), the government continued its practice of restricting 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 committee sought MCCBCHST recommendations in most non-Muslim cases.

The government placed or maintained restrictions on some religious customs and sought to enforce certain religious precepts. Observers reported a continued increase in the quantity and volume of broadcasts from government-run mosques and other Muslim places of worship or learning over public address systems. The government continued to condone some restrictions on religious expression, including with respect to religious teaching, use of religious clothing and symbols, proselytism, and religious publishing. In August Deputy Minister of Communications and Multimedia Jailani Johari suggested that the private cable TV operator Astro was complying with licensing regulations set by the government when it repeatedly placed a warning message during a documentary about Pope Francis that stated: “This program portrays depiction of religious figures and represents views other than Muslims’. Viewer discretion is advised.”

The National Fatwa Council issued a fatwa banning foreign exchange trading by individuals or unregistered moneychangers using an electronic platform, to ensure that financial transactions adhered to Islamic law.

The government continued to require, but did not strictly enforce, all Muslim civil servants to attend approved religion classes, and several government agencies pressured non-Muslim women to wear headscarves while attending official functions.

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The government of Kelantan, which some consider the country's most religiously conservative state, maintained its ban on Mak Yong, a traditional Malay dance drama performed for 800 years, due to its animist elements, and on Wayang Kulit, a form of shadow puppetry, because of its Hindu influences and its focus on folklore and mythical characters considered un-Islamic. The state also prohibited the sale of lottery tickets and advertisements showing what it considered to be inappropriately dressed women. Kelantan's dress code prohibited Muslim women from wearing clothes exposing more than their faces and hands. The law also stipulated that non-Muslim women should avoid dressing "sexily or indecently." Violators of the dress code faced fines up to RM 500 (\$153). Kelantan also enforced headscarf requirements for Muslim women and imposed fines for violations. Kelantan regulations required men and women to form separate lines at supermarkets, although the rule reportedly was not enforced. Kelantan courts also fined couples who sat too closely in public areas, such as on park benches. In September three salon owners in Kelantan were required to remove posters from their windows displaying different hairstyles. Enforcement officers for the Kota Baru Municipal Council who issued the demand for the removal of the posters reportedly said that various hairstyles featured in the posters were "too sexy" and the models should be covering their hair.

Some indigenous people in Sabah and Sarawak continued to report errors in the names printed on their national identity cards, misleading the reader to believe that the card holder was Muslim and therefore subject to sharia.

Unlike previous years, there were no reports of public anti-Semitic statements made by government representatives.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

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

Religious converts, particularly those converting from Islam, sometimes faced severe stigmatization. In many cases converts concealed their newly adopted beliefs and practices from their former coreligionists, including friends and relatives. Women and girls faced social pressure to wear the *tudung*.

Civil society activists continued to criticize both the practice of underage marriage and statements by government officials supporting child marriages as an approved

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Islamic practice. Activists pushed for raising the minimum age for women to be married to 18 without exception, the standard set by the UN Convention of the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, which the country has ratified.

In January Ibrahim Ali, president of the Muslim NGO Perkasa, called for Bibles to be burnt. He reportedly stated that “Muslims must unite to protect their religion. They must seize those Bibles, including the Malay editions, which contain the term Allah and other Arabic religious terms, and burn them.” In response to his statement, lawyers and human rights activists called for action to be taken against Ali for inciting religious disharmony, hatred, disunity, and discomfort, which is punishable by law. The Attorney General’s Chambers noted that they would only take action against Ibrahim Ali if the Bibles were actually burnt.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy representatives maintained an active dialogue on religious freedom with government officials and leaders and representatives of religious groups, including those not officially recognized by the government. The Ambassador met with royal rulers and underscored the importance of tolerance and mutual understanding. The Ambassador hosted a roundtable conversation with religious leaders to discuss religious tolerance. Embassy programs also included lecture tours by American Muslim community leaders and imams, roundtables with think tanks and religious and civil society leaders to promote interfaith dialogue, and other media engagements highlighting religious tolerance. The embassy arranged visits to the United States for Islamic educators and hosted several iftar dinners during Ramadan. The U.S. government also funded civil society grants and exchange grants for representatives of NGOs working to promote religious tolerance and respect for diversity.

Senior U.S. Department of Justice officials visited the country in January to take part in a conference on legal reform, during which they shared the U.S. government’s approach to handling hate crimes and hate speech. The officials also discussed these and similar issues in meetings with religious leaders, youth leaders, and officials in the Prime Minister’s Department in charge of national unity.