

Malay court says only Muslims may use 'Allah'

by [Richard S. Ehrlich](#) in the [November 13, 2013](#) issue

A court in Muslim-majority Malaysia has ruled that only Muslims are permitted to use the word *Allah* to describe God, overturning a lower court's 2009 decision that allowed others to use the word.

"The usage of the word *Allah* is not an integral part of the faith in Christianity," chief judge Mohamed Apandi Ali said October 14 in the ruling, supporting the government's case.

"The intended usage will cause unnecessary confusion within the Islamic community and is surely not conducive to the peaceful and harmonious tempo of life in the country," said Ali, according to the government-run Bernama news agency.

Allah is the Arabic word for God. Ali expressed the unanimous decision by the court's three Muslim judges. "The name 'Allah' does not appear, even once, in either the Old or New Testaments."

The ruling was aimed primarily at a Catholic newspaper, the *Herald*, which had been printing the word in its Malay-language stories to describe the Christian God, until the government deemed it was illegal in 2008.

When the *Herald* sued, a lower court ruled in favor of free speech in 2009 and allowed the paper to use the word.

That decision resulted in clashes between the two religions, including arson attacks against dozens of churches and a few mosques.

"It is a retrograde step in the development of law in relation to the fundamental liberty of religious minorities," the *Herald's* editor, Lawrence Andrew, said after losing the case. Andrew, an ordained priest, said he would appeal to Malaysia's highest court.

“Some Muslim groups have said that the Christian use of the word *Allah* could be used to encourage Muslims to convert to Christianity,” the BBC reported.

Christians in Malaysia had used the word *Allah* for decades in churches and Malay-language Bibles, but the government decided a judicial ruling was needed to determine if the terminology should be legal.

Nonetheless, in the Middle East and in many other Muslim countries, Christians are not prohibited from using the word *Allah*. —RNS

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