

With new leadership, Malaysians hope for more interfaith understanding

After voters ousted the party that had ruled Malaysia since independence from Britain, some are looking to improve interfaith relations—starting with getting to know each other.

by [Taylor Luck](#) in the [September 26, 2018](#) issue

([The Christian Science Monitor](#)) Jason Lee holds three smoldering incense sticks at his forehead and bows three times at an altar. He then pauses in prayer and places a candle on a mantle in front of the altar. The Muslim call for noon prayer, the *adhan*, rings out overhead.

Lee is a Buddhist, his neighbor is a Hindu, his cousin is a Taoist, his best friend is a Christian. They are all Malaysians living in a country whose official religion is Islam.

“We are many faiths but one country,” Lee said while leaving the Buddhist Maha Vihara temple.

While Malaysians of many faiths and cultures have lived side by side for centuries, increasingly over the past two decades ethnosectarian politics have built barriers between communities.

In May voters ousted the party that had ruled Malaysia since it gained independence from Britain. And some are now looking to improve interfaith relationships in the country. The first step, they say, is to know one another.

“It is part of Malaysian society and culture to be tolerant,” says Victoria Cheng, lead program manager at Projek Dialog, a nonprofit that promotes interreligious understanding. “By saying *tolerance*, we send the message: I tolerate your presence enough not to attack you, but I do not like you enough to understand you. And that has to change.”

Religions came in waves to Malaysia. Islam was brought by merchants between the tenth and 12th centuries; Buddhism and Taoism came over with Chinese immigrants; Hinduism and Sikhism arrived with Indian immigrants; and Christianity first appeared with Arab Christian traders, then flourished with conquests by the Portuguese, Dutch, and British.

Today Malaysia is 61 percent Muslim, 20 percent Buddhist, 9 percent Christian, and 6 percent Hindu, in addition to smaller numbers of followers of Sikhism, Taoism, indigenous beliefs, and other religions. In some subdivisions, a common sight is one yard with a red wooden Taoist altar box covered in gilded Mandarin characters, next to a yard with a stone Buddhist statue on a pedestal in a carefully arranged garden, adjacent to a villa with the Arabic words “Ma Shah Allah,” the Islamic equivalent of a plaque saying, “God bless this house.”

The United Malays National Organisation, the party that had dominated Malaysia since the 1950s, frequently turned to identity-based politics. Analysts say former prime minister Najib Razak wooed more hard-line Islamist voters as a graft scandal engulfed his administration. Najib was arrested and charged with corruption in July. He has denied all wrongdoing.

“The use of ethno-politics and Islamism was not common, but UMNO increasingly resorted to it in recent years to get their base mobilized, get the Muslim Malay vote and distract the public from corruption,” says HuiHui Ooi, a Malaysia analyst and associate director of the Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security at the Atlantic Council.

The government’s Department of Islamic Development and its local offices also restricted interfaith initiatives involving Muslims, advocates say. They describe an increasingly intolerant atmosphere, with public condemnation of “un-Islamic” events and restrictions on non-Muslims using the word *Allah* to refer to God.

“There were always attempts from Malaysians of different faiths to reach out, to have true interfaith initiatives, but the authorities would prevent them from happening,” says Kevin De Rozario, a lawyer and activist with CAN Malaysia, a Christian organization.

Many Malaysians say they have never stepped into a house of worship other than their own; others struggle to differentiate between the different religions.

Projek Dialog has hosted a series of forums explaining the basics of Malaysia's different faiths, from Shari'a 101 to Taoism 101, delivered by religious experts and activists in Kuala Lumpur and other locations. Malaysians are invited to ask about stereotypes they have held for years that have otherwise gone unchallenged.

Participants have asked whether it is true that Sikh men must never cut their hair (yes) or whether marrying four wives is compulsory in Islam (no, but it is allowed).

"Sometimes we get complaints that Chinese Malaysians are building a second temple in the same neighborhood, and we have to explain this is a Buddhist temple and that is a Taoist temple, and they all must have access to their houses of worship and they do not threaten yours," said Mohd Faridh Hafez of the outreach bureau at the Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia (ABIM). "We are working against the disinformation that has been spread over the years."

Breaking barriers can also be as simple as breaking bread. After UMNO lost the election on the eve of Ramadan, Malaysians looked for ways to capitalize on the Muslim holy month to show solidarity. ABIM worked with a Christian group and KOMAS, an antidiscrimination NGO, to organize an interfaith iftar—a fast-breaking meal at sunset—at a Kuala Lumpur mosque.

Hundreds showed up to pass out porridge and water and share the meal.

"There is a strong urge among Malaysians to meet and learn about each other," says Faribel Fernandez, financial officer of KOMAS. "It is only a question about allowing a meeting space."

ABIM opens its social services to all Malaysians.

"We all want to see Malaysia as a model," said Ahmad Fahmi, the group's vice president, "a Muslim country with a pluralistic society where all live together in harmony and understand each other."

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