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People hold placards during a Women's Day march in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, calling for gender equality, an end to child marriage, and recognition of LGBT rights on 12 March 2023. (Photo by Zahim Mohd / NurPhoto / NurPhoto via AFP)

## LGBTQ Issues in Malaysia and the Politics of Conservative Modernity

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**Malaysia's ruling government has a tough balancing act to pull off on the reform front.**

Malaysia's recent enforcements and cancellations linked to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer (LGBTQ)-related activities have ignited debate about whether the government is backsliding on reform. Rather than reading these moves purely as contradicting past administrations' policies, these government actions may be better understood as an attempt to balance two political imperatives. For the political establishment, appearing and being conservative remain central to political survival in a context where Malay-Muslim legitimacy continues to shape Malaysian politics.

Highly publicised raids carry symbolic weight and function as a moral statement. Even if enforcement levels by various state Islamic Religious Affairs Departments seem low, with [135 LGBTQ-related arrests](#) from 2022 to 2025, the visibility of action communicates resolve. Earlier police statistics recorded [670 cases](#) (not arrests) of "unnatural sex" between 2020 and 2021, suggesting that such enforcement predates the current administration. A late 2025 [raid on a men-only spa](#) in Kuala Lumpur by the police, City Hall and the Federal Territories Islamic Religious Department (JAWI) reportedly led to over 200 individuals being detained.

In January 2026, a planned "[Glamping with Pride](#)" retreat was cancelled after official pressure and public backlash. During a [HIV/AIDS outreach programme](#) in Kota Bharu, police raided it for being an 'LGBT' event. The Ministry of Health later clarified that the outreach programme was a public health initiative. However, that such a medical outreach programme could trigger enforcement action based on suspicions of association with LGBTQ causes illustrates how moral anxieties shape enforcement decisions.

These developments appear to signal a tightening climate or perhaps the chilling effect that may have to do more with people's expectations of what Malaysia's governing coalition should do. The Anwar Ibrahim-led Pakatan Harapan (PH) entered office with reformist ideals, suggesting a break from overtly punitive cultural politics. The coalition's composition, including parties historically associated with pluralist and equality-forward narratives, reinforced that perception.

Yet the Madani unity government was not elected in a liberal vacuum. It governs a society in which public opinion on recognition of LGBTQ rights remains overwhelmingly conservative. A [study in 2017](#) by seven scholars from the Philippines, Thailand and Malaysia based on the World Values Survey (9,182 respondents across six regional countries) found that close to 60 per cent of Malaysian respondents did not want gay or lesbian neighbours. This result was echoed in a 2024 comparative study by the [ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute](#) among undergraduate students in six Southeast Asian countries. In

that study, Malaysia was, after Indonesia, the country with the highest percentage of respondents (70.7 per cent) who did not agree that the state should protect LGBTQ rights.

## Table 1: Should the State Protect Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) Rights?



	Total	Indonesia	Malaysia	Philippines	Singapore
Strongly disagree/ Disagree	36%	78%	71%	20%	20%
Neutral	17%	8%	12%	20%	26%
Strongly agree/ Agree	43%	11%	15%	57%	50%
Don't know/ No answer	4%	3%	3%	3%	4%

Table: Fulcrum / Cha Hae Won • Source: Source: Saat et al, Youth and civic engagement in Southeast Asia: A survey of undergraduates in six countries, ISEAS, 2025, p. 68, Table D4 • [Download image](#) • Created with [Datawrapper](#)

In this context, enforcement actions are not simply administrative decisions but signals: they reassure segments of the electorate that the state remains morally anchored. This is not unique to Malaysia. [Right-wing resurgence](#) has often reframed freedom away from liberal individual autonomy towards the protection of 'tradition', including heterosexual-led nuclear families. Governments navigating rightward currents often position themselves as defenders of a moral majority, using restrictions on non-traditional lifestyles to reinforce legitimacy through [cultural politics](#).

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Malaysia's case has distinctive features. Coalition politics amplify the need for ideological reassurance. The memory of intense political competition on [identity issues](#) in recent elections means that no governing coalition can afford to appear culturally detached from Malay-Muslim sensibilities. The result is what might be termed conservative modernity. For many Malays,

modernity does not necessarily mean emancipation from communal norms but competent governance, economic opportunity, and technological advancement within a moral order that remains recognisably conservative and Islamic. The aspiration is not to dissolve religious boundaries but to ensure dignity within them.

This helps to explain why the government's messaging often attempts a delicate distinction: there has been **no formal recognition of LGBTQ rights**, but Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim has stated that **harassment (of LGBTQ individuals) should not be allowed** despite Malaysia's existing legal **position** criminalising same-sex relations. Nevertheless, visible enforcement – such as police raids – shapes what citizens perceive as permissible and narrows social space without requiring sweeping legislative change or calling for stronger enforcement of syariah law.

For the Madani government, the tension is sharper because its reformist branding raises questions when enforcement aligns with long-standing conservative norms. However, framing the issue as hypocrisy misses the structural constraint: Malaysian politics remain anchored in a contest for Malay-Muslim legitimacy. No coalition can govern sustainably while appearing indifferent to majoritarian moral concerns. In that sense, the current developments are less aberration than continuation.

The paradox is that Madani's durability does not depend on expanding liberal social space, but convincing conservative voters that reformist governance does not threaten moral order. For PH, the challenge is about ensuring their **modest Malay support** does not erode further. Liberal and progressive voters have limited political alternatives; they are unlikely to shift their support towards Perikatan Nasional, whose ideological orientation is far more conservative. To appease its core base, the ruling coalition must demonstrate progress in other areas of governance and needs to reassure its supporters that the broader reform agenda remains intact even if social policy advances cautiously. After all, its electoral platform was centred primarily on **institutional reform** and governance rather than ambitious social liberalisation.

Malay modernity, for now, is not about the freedom to defy communal norms but the freedom to preserve them under a state that remains committed to moral guardianship. Whether that equilibrium is sustainable will depend on how carefully the government manages LGBTQ-related enforcement, among other sensitive issues. Conservative modernity can stabilise politics but can harden its boundaries. The balance the Madani government seeks to strike may define the next phase of Malaysia's political and social evolution.

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