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## Non-Muslims, Islam and Muslims in Malaysia

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Malaysia is generally accepted by political scientists and sociologists as a 'divided society'. This concept posits profound and persistent cleavages within Malaysian society among various ethnic groups. However, contrary to expectations, Malaysia is widely accepted as a country where the different ethnic groups have co-existed peacefully and maintained racial harmony in a post-colonial context. The Malaysian political system is based upon a 'power sharing' formula whereby the ethnic communities form a grand coalition to rule and respect each other's way of life. Theories of inter-ethnic relations usually focus on how state authority enables credible commitments to interethnic political bargains ensuring interethnic cooperation. However, peaceful coexistence also depends upon the opinions held by ethnic groups about each other's religion and behavior. This study, based upon survey data, analyses the opinions of non-Muslims about Islam and Muslims in Malaysia. The discussion is preceded by an overview of historical forces and factors that made Malaysia a plural society with people of many faiths and races living in harmony.

### Malaysia as a Plural Society: A Historical Perspective

Malaysia achieved independence in 1957 as a Federation of Malaya. Singapore joined the Federation in 1963, together with Sabah and Sarawak in the East, and the new entity was then named Malaysia. Singapore's integration, however, lasted but a mere 23 months. In 1965, the island declared its separation from the mainland and became a sovereign city state. Malaysia is a federation of 13 states and 3 federal territories of Kuala Lumpur, Labuan and the newly created administrative capital for the federal government of Malaysia, Putrajaya. Kuala Lumpur remains the seat of parliament, as well as the commercial and financial capital of the country. Malaysia comprises an area of 127,320



sq miles (329,758 sq km) and consists of two land masses. West Malaysia, also known as Peninsular Malaysia, has an area of 50,700 square miles (131,313 sq km) and comprises 11 states and two federal territories.<sup>1</sup> East Malaysia, with an area of 77,730 square miles (201,320 sq km), consists of the states of Sabah and Sarawak, and the Federal Territory of Labuan.

According to 2008 estimate, Malaysia has a population of 27,465,544.<sup>2</sup> Malaysia is a multicultural society, with Malays (54.2 percent), Chinese (25.3 percent), Indians (7.5 percent) and others (13.0 percent) living side by side in peace.<sup>3</sup> By constitutional definition, all Malays are Muslim and they are of the Shafi'ite school. They, along with the natives of Sabah and Sarawak, are officially classified as Bumiputra (sons of the soil, or indigenes) and are accorded a variety of constitutionally enshrined special rights or privileges. On the other hand, there are the 'non-bumiputras' consisting mainly of two groups, the Chinese and the Indians brought in as workers in the 19th century. The Chinese have historically played an important role in trade and business. The bumiputras' arrival to modern sectors or urban-related enterprises is relatively late compared to the Chinese. With some exceptions, bumiputras traditionally tend to reside in agricultural sectors. Malaysians of Indian descent are mainly Hindu Tamils from southern India, speaking Tamil, Telegu, Malayalam, and some Hindi, and live mainly in the larger towns on the west coast of the peninsula. Bahasa Melayu is the official language of the country but English is widely spoken. Malaysia then and now is far from becoming a melting pot. Each ethnic group clings to its traditions, religion, and language.

Ethnic pluralism in Malaysia is the consequence of the British colonial policy of unrestricted and large-scale immigration of the Chinese and Indians to exploit the tin mines, discovered in the Selangor and Perak state in 1850, and open new lands for rubber estate cultivation.<sup>4</sup> By the mid-1930s, the immigrant population swelled and became almost equal in size to the indigenous Malay population.<sup>5</sup> The Chinese and the Indians were placed separately in the more developed western coastal areas, while the Malays were left in the rural parts of the country farming, working in rice paddies as well as fishing. The Chinese were in urban and commercial occupations where a lot of wealth was generated as opposed to the Bumiputras and Indians who worked in rural villages and plantations. The big plantations and industrial businesses were in fact owned by the British. Thus, the Europeans, Chinese and Indians belonged to the modern sector of the economy, the Malays were mostly engaged in the traditional sector. Indeed, positions in the civil service, the police and the Military were reserved for the Malays. These positions were not attractive to non-Malays because of the relatively low wages compared to earnings in the commercial sector.

The Malays experienced relative deprivation which was further accentuated when the British government came up with the Malayan Union scheme in 1946 which had as its main features the transfer of sovereignty from the Malay rulers to the British crown, the creation of centralized government, the abolition of Malay privileges and the introduction of common citizenship for all ethnic groups.<sup>6</sup> The Union scheme opened "the first chapter in organized communal agitation ... in

1. The eleven states are Johor, Kedah, Kelantan, Melaka, Negeri Sembilan, Pahang, Perak, Perlis, Pinang, Selangor, and Terengganu.

2. Department of Statistic Malaysia, available [Online] from <http://www.statistics.gov.my>, accessed January 8, 2008.

3. Economic Planning Unit, Prime Minister's Department, *Ninth Malaysia Plan 2006-2010* (Kuala Lumpur: Percetakan Nasional Malaysia Berhad, 2006).

4. See Abraham, C.E.R., *Divide and Rule: The Roots of Race Relations in Malaysia* (Kuala Lumpur: INSAN, 1997); M. Amin, and M. Caldwell, *Malaya: The Making of a New Colony* (Nottingham, UK: Spokesman Books 1977); Donald, M. Nonini, *British Colonial Rule and the Resistance of the Malay Peasantry, 1900-1957* (Yale University Southeast Asia Studies, 1992); Joel Kahn and Francis Loh ed., *Fragmented Vision: Culture and Politics in Contemporary Malaysia* (Sydney: Asian Studies Association of Australia, 1992); K.J. Ratnam, *Communalism and the Political Process in Malaya* (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1965).

5. D.R. Snodgrass, *Inequality an Economic Development in Malaysia* (UK: Oxford University Press, 1980).

6. The Union Scheme is also known as MacMichael Treaty. Sir Harold MacMichael had obtained, by threat and deceit, the signatures of all nine Sultans to transfer the sovereignty of the Malay states to the British Crown.



Malayan history.”<sup>7</sup> The United Malays National Organization (UMNO) was consequently formed in 1946 as a political organization that expressed the opposition of Malays to the Malayan Union concept. UMNO has remained the predominant political force for the Malays ever since. The colonial administration abandoned the implementation of Malayan Union and replaced it by a ‘Federation of Malaya Agreement’ which conceded to some of the Malay demands.<sup>8</sup> Unlike the Union scheme, the federation agreement made acquisition of citizenship difficult and somewhat restored the position of Malay rulers and the privileges enjoyed by Malays in certain positions. It also “expressed the desire of the United Kingdom Government and the Rulers that progress should be made towards eventual self-government.”<sup>9</sup>

Prior to independence, UMNO forged a coalition with the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), and later the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) to create the Alliance. They developed a working relationship based on an informal ‘historic bargain’ or ‘social contract’ establishing the political framework within which ethnic groups would henceforth operate. Laying the basis for sharing power, this contract also upheld the ‘special position’ and rights of the Malays. The agreement reached by the three components of the Alliance Party was subsequently written into the Constitution.<sup>10</sup> The Alliance Party won the first national election of 1955 and polled about 80 percent of the total votes cast.<sup>11</sup> This established a permanent political pattern of a ruling coalition, known first as the Alliance Party and later as the Barisan Nasional (National Front, BN), that united ethnically based parties with the UMNO as the major force. The Alliance has been widely held up as the example of ‘consociational democracy’ in a multiethnic society.<sup>12</sup>

The overwhelming victory of the Alliance in the elections of July 1955 enabled its leadership to negotiate with Britain for independence. The Federation of Malaya achieved independence on August 31, 1957. On September 16, 1963, the Federation of Malaysia emerged, composed of 11 states in Peninsular Malaysia (*i.e.* the former Federation of Malaya) and Singapore, together with Sabah and Sarawak in the East.<sup>13</sup> However, on August 9, 1965, Singapore seceded from the mainland and became a sovereign city-state.

7. K.J. Ratnam, *Communalism and Political Process in Malaya* (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1965), 43.

8. For further discussion on this *see*, *inter alia*, Karl von Vorys, *Democracy without consensus: Communalism and Political Stability in Malaysia* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1976) and Mohamed Noordin Sopiee *From Malayan Union to Singapore separation: Political unification in the Malaysian region 1945-65* (Kuala Lumpur: Penerbit Universiti Malaya, 1976).

9. Tun Mohamed Suffian bin Hashim, *An Introduction to the Constitution of Malaysia* (Kuala Lumpur: Government Printer, 1976), 10.

10. The social contract usually refers to a quid pro quo trade-off through Articles 14-18 of the Constitution, pertaining to the granting of citizenship to the non-Malay people of Malaysia, and Article 153, which grants the Malays special rights and privileges. The Constitutional provision (Art. 95B) for, what may be called, ‘legal pluralism’ (the provision to establish native court systems in addition to the existing common law and Shari’ah law) protects the heritage of distinct cultures throughout Malaysia.

11. Ratnam, *Communalism and Political Process in Malaya*, 196.

12. According to some scholars, Malaysia operates consociational system. Arendt Lijphart, ‘Consociational Democracy,’ *World Politics*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (January 1969) defines ‘consociational democracy’ in terms of four characteristics. The first and most important element is government by a grand coalition of the political leaders of all significant segments of the plural society. This can take several different forms, such as a grand coalition cabinet in a parliamentary system, a ‘grand’ council or committee with important advisory functions, or a grand coalition of a president and other top officeholders in a presidential system. The other three basic elements of consociational democracy are (1) the mutual veto or ‘concurrent majority’ rule, which serves as an additional protection of vital minority interests, (2) proportionality as the principal standard of political representation, civil service appointments, and allocation of public funds, and (3) a high degree of autonomy for each segment to run its own internal affairs.” *See* Arnold Lijphart, *Democracy in Plural Societies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), p. 25.

13. The original date for the formation of Malaysia was August 31, 1963 which was postponed to September 16, 1963 to allow the United Nations Mission to verify the wishes of the peoples of North Borneo and Sarawak to the unification proposal. Thus, Malaysia was proclaimed as a federation at midnight of September 15, 1963.

Twelve years after independence, the delicate balance created by the 'bargain' was upset by a communal riot on May 13, 1969. The Alliance Party lost a significant number of seats in the 1969 election to the Chinese-based opposition parties. The noisy and racially provocative 'victory' processions led to riots which left 196 dead and 439 injured. In the process, at least 211 vehicles were destroyed and 753 buildings were damaged or burnt.<sup>14</sup> The total authority was offered to a new body, the National Operations Council (NOC), which worked to restore order and the eventual return of Malaysia to a stable democratic system.<sup>15</sup> It should perhaps be noted that the May 1969 riots represented the only serious instance of racial unrest in the history of independent Malaysia.<sup>16</sup> A Department of National Unity was established and it produced a national ideology, the *Rukunegara*, which is based on five principles: a) Belief in God; b) Loyalty to King and Country; c) Upholding the Constitution; d) Rule of Law; e) Good Behavior and Morality.<sup>17</sup> Sedition acts were passed that prohibited discussion of such sensitive issues as the prerogatives of the Malay rulers, the special rights of the Malays, and the official status of the Malay language.

The communal riot in 1969 turned out to be a 'blessing in disguise' because it forced Malaysia to embark on a long-term strategy of closing the economic gap between ethnic groups. The resultant New Economic Policy (NEP), formulated by the government led by Tun Abdul Razak Hussein, had a two-pronged objective of eradicating poverty and restructuring Malaysian society to eliminate the identification of race with economic functions. To achieve the twin objectives, the NEP, which took the form of five-year development plans, had to integrate the Malays into the main stream of commerce and industry, and prevent them from being permanently marginalized in the less developed sectors. With the NEP, public enterprises mushroomed and covered a wide range of economic activities. Bumiputra trust agencies were created to 'acquire assets on behalf of the community' and they were an immediate and effective means to elevate the Bumiputra economic status.<sup>18</sup> The government's affirmative action programs have slowly narrowed the gap between the ethnic groups and have probably contributed much to the political stability in Malaysia.

In the political arena, the post-1969 period witnessed deliberate attempt on the part of the ruling coalition to co-opt a number of political parties into an enlarged Alliance. The idea was to eliminate or at least minimize the sources of opposition and maximize national unity. The opposition parties were allowed to join the Alliance and bargain for their demands through the Alliance but in return they had to accept restrictions on their public pronouncements and mobilization activities. Eventually, in August 1972, the Alliance was replaced by a larger coalition, the Barisan Nasional (National Front, BN). By 1972, according to Means, "political stability was restored through the tactic of absorption of nearly all opposition parties and the transfer of potentially divisive political issues from public arenas to the secret and informal processes of inter-communal bargaining between leaders of communally based political organizations."<sup>19</sup> Parliamentary system was restored and since then elections have been held relatively orderly. Although elections were contested by many political parties, only the BN has succeeded in winning elections at the federal level.

The BN has been able to provide consistent policies, continuity, and much political stability that Malaysia needed to achieve a high rate of economic growth as a developing country. Yet, Malaysian leaders did not take the unity for granted. As Prime Minister, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, notes, "...

14. *The New Straits Times*, May 19, 1969.

15. R. Vasil, *Politics in a Plural Society: A Study of Non-communal Political Parties in West Malaysia* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1971).

16. Since 1969, there have been several minor skirmishes with racial overtones. The latest was on March 9, 2001, at Kampong Medan, Petaling Jaya. Police reported that six people were killed and over fifty injured. *The New Straits Times*, March 10, 2001.

17. See Government of Malaysia, *Rukunegara* (Kuala Lumpur: Di-Chetak Di-Jabatan Chetak Kerajaan, 1970), pp. 17-19.

18. See Gomez, Edmund Terence. *Malaysia's Political Economy: Politics, Patronage, and Profits* (New York, Cambridge University Press, 1997).

19. Gordon, P. Means, *Malaysian Politics, The Second Generation* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1991).

unity in this country are still very fragile; under stress it may crack, and under greater pressure it may shatter completely. We do not want this to happen."<sup>20</sup> This underscores the need, among others, for various ethnic groups in the country to have positive evaluation of each other.

This study explores how Malaysian non-Muslims view Islam and Muslims in Malaysia. As stated, non-Muslims constitute about 40 percent of Malaysia's population. Extreme misperceptions about the faith and behavior of majority Muslims would have negative implications for inter-religious and inter-racial harmony which is the hallmark of the Malaysia's multi-ethnic society. This, in turn, would have serious repercussions for the country's developmental efforts.

### Data Base

This study is based upon data obtained through self-administered questionnaire, personal interviews and observations. Three thousand questionnaires were distributed to randomly selected respondents from the professionals and university students among non-Muslim Chinese, Indians and other races in Federal Territory and some major districts in Selangor. Only 624 duly filled questionnaires were collected giving a response rate of 20.8 percent. The questionnaire contained 21 items including religion, race, gender, occupation, marital status, and organizational affiliation. It also contained several statements to tap the Malaysian non-Muslims' opinion about Islam as a way of life, Islamic books and Muslim behavior. Each statement gave respondents five (5) options ([1] strongly agree, [2] agree, [3] disagree [4] strongly disagree and [5] no comment) to choose from. In addition to the questionnaire, unstructured interviews were conducted with 30 respondents. The interview sessions were much more encouraging as the institutions run by non-Muslims extended their fullest cooperation and provided free and frank opinion about Islam and Muslims in Malaysia.

### Sample Profile

The questionnaire was distributed to a stratified sample of 76.8 percent Chinese, 18 percent Indians and 5.2 percent others. The sample of 624 is composed of 47 percent male and 53 percent female. They are all professionals, teaching in universities, practising law, working as administrators, medical doctors and engineers. Their age group varies between 25 and 40. In terms of religion, many of them (43.4 percent) declared that they adhere to Buddhism, followed by 22.4 percent Christians, 11.1 percent Hindus and 5.1 percent others. Some 17.9 percent of respondents did not declare their religious affiliations. Apparently, they have a good understanding of Islam in that about 41 percent of them have read at least one book on Islam. Almost the same percentage of respondents came to know about Islam through conversation with friends and the rest preferred not to respond to this item. The following section discusses their responses to the questions relating to Islam, Islamic books and Muslim behavior in Malaysia.

### Image of Islam

Islam is not a religion in the conventional sense confining itself to rites and rituals but a complete and comprehensive way of life covering all fields of human existence and providing guidance in all aspects of life. Yet, Islam is most misunderstood and much maligned. Muslims are labeled as

20. Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, "Reflections on Fifty Years of Independence" in Syed Arabi *Idid* (ed.), *Malaysia at 50: Achievements and Aspirations* (Singapore: Thomson Learning and International Islamic University Malaysia, 2008), p.3.



fundamentalists, militants, extremists and terrorists, and Islam is portrayed as the religion of the sword.<sup>21</sup> In relations between the West and the Muslim world, phrases like 'clash of civilizations' or 'clash of cultures' recur as does the charge that Islam is incompatible with democracy or that it is a particularly militant religion.

It has been argued that a considerable number of non-Muslims are not well acquainted with other religions, including Islam. It seems that they have very little or almost no exposure to Islamic literature and hence their knowledge of Islam is mostly based on the media and other literature designed to demonize Islam. This propaganda seems to have created a huge gap between Muslims and non-Muslims. According to some observations, non-Muslims living in Malaysia are also not well acquainted with Islam and Muslims and hence succumb to anti-Islam propaganda. How true is such perception about non-Muslim Malaysians?

Islam, Muslims believe, is a religion of peace, living with other communities without much problem.<sup>22</sup> No other civilisation in history has demonstrated a more resolute commitment to pluralism than Islam. Islam is rational and pragmatic and promotes knowledge, science and development. It makes seeking of knowledge obligatory upon all Muslim males and females. To assess, non-Muslim views about Islam in general, the questionnaire contained 6 statements on Islam and the respondents were asked to choose from among five responses: strongly agree, agree, strongly disagree, disagree, and no comment. For ease of analysis, strongly agree and agree responses were collapsed into one category 'agree' and strongly disagree and disagree were collapsed into one category 'disagree' giving three columns as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1**  
**Non-Muslim Perceptions about Various Aspects of Islam (in percentage)**

Statements	Agree	Disagree	No Comment
Islam is a rational religion	53.9	21.5	24.6
Islam is a practical and pragmatic religion	49.3	20.3	30.4
Islam is a religion of progress and development	50.5	26.4	23.1
Islam obligates pursuit of science	37.9	23.9	38.2
Islam is a comprehensive way of life	30.7	30.8	38.5
Islam is a religion of tolerance	53.7	22.1	24.2
Islam advocates promotion of women's rights	22.0	43.4	34.6
Islamic state provides equal rights to all citizens	23.7	41.8	34.5

Clearly, Islam is viewed positively by majority of respondents. A little over 50 percent of respondents believe that Islam is a rational religion (53.9 percent), it is a tolerant (53.7 percent), progressive and development oriented (50.5 percent) and that it is a practical and pragmatic religion (49.3 percent). One interview commented that "Islam is a religion which inspires its believers to do good things and prevent bad things, but most Muslims do not follow this obligation."

Many respondents also agreed that Islam makes it obligatory upon the believers to pursue science. However, percentage of those who agreed with this statement is only about 37.9 percent, still constituting a high percentage among those who responded to this item. As to the statement that

21. Farish A. Noor, "Images of Islam in America: Terrorising the Truth," *JUST Commentary*, 1997, p.4.

22. See Al-Qur'an. 6:54. K.K. Usman (ed.), *This is Islam*, 2nd edition (Cochin: Forum for Faith and Fraternity, 2001); Khurshid Ahmad, *Islam-Its Meaning and Message* (London: The Islamic Foundation, 1976).



Islam is a complete, comprehensive way of life, only 30.7 percent agreed while almost equal number of respondents (30.8 percent) disagreed. Likewise, only a quarter of the sample seems to agree that Islam stands for women's rights (22.0 percent) and that Islamic state provides equal rights to all citizens (23.7 percent). The explanation of such a low level perception came from an interviewee who suggested to "make a clear distinction between what Islam teaches (the actual teachings, faith) and how many Muslims practise it." Another interviewee said:

Many people, including Muslims, are misconceiving Islam as a religion. The teachings of Islam are practical and beneficial to the society. It is the Muslim people who give wrong impression about Islam. When one learns about Islam from the right and authorised sources he or she can understand it better.

It implies that the respondents formed their views on these statements on the basis of Muslim behavior and practise rather than upon Islamic teachings. The negative responses to the six items, however, should not be discounted. These responses vary between 20 to 31 percent. Some respondents during the interview session even suggested that Muslims should rewrite the Qur'ān to suit the modern world.

The interesting thing to note in the table is the large percentages in the 'no comment' column. It means that between 23.1 to 38.5 percent of the respondents refrained from giving any positive or negative feedback on these statements. Their silence could mean that they have negative opinion about Islam but they do not want to express it publicly. It could also mean that they are following the 'golden rule' inherent in the 'power sharing' formula practised in Malaysia of not commenting upon 'sensitive' issues like religion of others. Alternatively, these respondents have not made up their mind one way or another. Irrespective of interpretations, the percentages in "no comment" column suggest that Muslims have a lot to do to explain Islam better and to endear themselves to their non-Muslim counterparts in Malaysia.

### Views on Islamic Literature

Many Muslim organizations in Malaysia publish books, pamphlets and magazines to promote a better understanding about Islam and Muslims. Most of these books are in Bahasa Malaysia and English but some of these are available in other local languages. Muslim organizations and government agencies believe that the resources are enough to help non-Muslims understand Islam better. What is the opinion of non-Muslims about published works on Islam? Do they have positive opinion about these works and would they like these books to be introduced in schools and colleges to promote better understanding of Islam? Table 2 summarizes the answers to the above questions. As in Table 1, the answers have been collapsed into three columns for ease of analysis.

Once again, most responses are positive concerning Islamic works published in Malaysia. The responses to three statements eliciting their opinion about Islamic literature show a remarkable consistency. About 38.5 percent of the respondents believe that Islamic books could help build a peaceful and prosperous Malaysia. About 37.4 percent agree that Islamic books are rational and intellectually stimulating and about 40.4 percent believe that they promote religious tolerance. One of the items in the table is negatively worded saying that Islamic works portray militancy and fanaticism. Most of the respondents, 37.8 percent, disagreed with this statement and thus is consistent with responses to other positively worded statements.

To portray the significance of the positive responses to items in Table 2, it is necessary to point out that the questionnaire contained an item enquiring about the number of books or articles the respondents have read on Islam. Only 41.2 percent of our respondents have read one or more than one work on Islam. The positive responses of about 38 percent to the items in Table 2 were from those who are familiar with the literature on Islam. The implication of this finding is that literature plays a significant role in creating positive image of Islam among non-Muslims.

**Table 2**  
**Non-Muslim Views about Books on Islam**

Statements	Agree	Disagree	No Comment
Islamic books could serve as guide to establish peace in Malaysia	38.5	33.2	28.3
Islamic books are rational and intellectually stimulating	37.4	18.6	44.0
Islamic books should be prescribed for college students, particularly for non-Muslims	33.7	43.0	22.3
Islamic books portray militancy and fanaticism	20.4	37.8	41.7
Islamic books promote religious tolerance	40.4	19.4	40.2

The positive responses should, however, be juxtaposed along with the responses in the 'disagree' column to get the true picture. The disagreement with the statements depicting Islamic books being rational and non-militant is 18.6 and 20.4 percent respectively. However, 33.2 percent believe that Islamic books do not promote peace in the society. This implies that most Islamic books are worth reading but they do not emphasise peace as a value. Likewise, while most of the respondents are positive about Islamic books, only 33.7 percent agreed that Islamic books should be prescribed to non-Muslim students in the institutions of higher learning for their correct understanding of Islam. However, many (43 percent) disagreed with this statement. About 18.6 percent of these respondents disagreed with this statement strongly. One interviewee reacted to this question by saying that "Muslims wish others to understand Islam but they are not prepared to understand other's religions." It is to be noted that the percent of 'no comment' response for this particular statement is only about 22.3 percent. This implies that on the issue of introducing Islamic books to non-Muslims through higher institutions, the respondents decided to break their silence and voice their disapproval.

On other statements concerning Islamic books, the no comment responses vary between 28 and a high of 44 percent. The fact that about 59 percent of non-Muslims have never read any book about Islam explains the large percentages in the no comments column.

### **Image of Muslims in Malaysia**

A Muslim is defined as someone who professes faith in Islam. To profess faith is one thing, to lead an Islamic way of life is something different. Muslims have not always lived according to the tenets of Islam. Non-Muslims, however, look at the deviant behaviour of Muslims and demonise Islam. Those who adhere to the fundamental principles of Islam are pejoratively labelled as fundamentalists. The events of September 11, 2001, which is blamed entirely upon Muslims, have added insult to the injury. What is the opinion of non-Muslims in Malaysia about their Muslim counterparts? Table 3 provides some answers to this question. The table contains seven statements and the responses, in percentages, are collapsed into three categories.

Evidently, the positive responses far outweigh the negative ones. Of special note are the statements branding Muslims as non-cooperative and militants. A solid majority of 63.1 percent and 52 percent Non-Muslim Malaysians rejected such characterisations of Muslims. There is a degree of consistency between the responses in Table 1 and Table 3. In Table 1, over 50 percent of respondents believe that Islam is a rational, tolerant and a progressive religion. The adherents of Islam are likewise evaluated

**Table 3**  
**Image of Muslims in the eyes of Non-Muslim Malaysians (in percentages)**

Statements	Agree	Disagree	No Comment
Muslims are narrow minded	34.8	41.9	23.3
Muslims are extremists	24.4	47.1	28.5
Muslims are non-cooperative	14.1	63.1	22.8
Muslims are militants	15.5	52.0	32.5
Muslims are suspicious of others	23.0	47.7	29.3
Muslims compel others to join Islam	24.4	47.8	27.8
Muslims look down upon other religionists	24.5	45.8	29.7

positively as shown in Table 3. Interestingly, the positive evaluations of Muslims supersede those about Islam.

The percentages in the 'no comment' column are also worth comparing. In Table 1, the highest was 38 percent which shot to 44 percent in Table 2. In Table 3, however, such responses dropped sharply to a maximum of 32 percent. This is perhaps due to the fact that these statements are not very sensitive and hence respondents felt free to comment.

The answers to unstructured questions also showed positive evaluation about Muslims. Some illustrations may be useful in this regard. A Hindu resident commented that "Muslims of Malaysia are kind and friendly." A Chinese woman stated that she has been living in Malaysia for more than twenty-five years and she feels very happy living here. She "never felt inferior to communicate or deal with Muslims" and that she associates with many Muslims and they are friendly. Another Hindu woman said that she doesn't feel any threat living in a Muslim locality and that she could perform her religious rites and rituals without any protest from the Muslims. She thanks "the government for allowing non-Muslims to maintain their religious identities." A Chinese interviewee said: "A good number of Muslims are lazy in Malaysia. They are dependant upon government subsidies. They enjoy special treatment. It is very disappointing to others." Some interviewees believe that Muslims are rapidly and gladly responding to modern and secular ways of living and taking less serious note of dating and free mixing of the sexes.

Between 14 to 35 percent of the respondents have negative opinion about Muslims. The most pronounced (34.8 percent) is the view that Muslims are narrow-minded, implying that Muslims are rigid and uncompromising in their religious practices and are not open to criticism against their religion. Many non-Muslim interviewees were of the opinion that Muslims are backward at all levels, especially in the economic sphere, because they are slow, lethargic and dependent upon others. An orthodox Hindu, a sales representative of a private company, said that he has been living with Muslims for over twenty five years. He observed that Muslims are good in praying, fasting and performing pilgrimage but "many practise double standards" in their dealings with others. Some are even "superstitious and often visit sorcerers, and astrologers."

### **Explaining the Positive Image of Islam and Muslims**

The data presented in the preceding section suggest that a majority of non-Muslims have positive image about Islam and Muslims in Malaysia. Is the non-Muslim positive opinion about Islam and Muslim influenced by such variables as gender, education and religious affiliation? This necessitates



cross-tabulating the demographic variables with positive opinion.

Of the three variables, gender seems to have the least influence on positive opinions. With minor exceptions, the responses of the male and female non-Muslim Malaysian respondents do not differ much on all items listed in Tables 1 to 3. The Chi-square for all the statements in the three tables was non-significant except for three items. Table 4 shows the three statements with their respective Chi-square values. The male non-Muslims seem to agree more than their female counterparts on statement concerning Islamic state giving equal rights to all (Chi-square = 4.899,  $p = 0.027$ ). A similar observation can be made on the statement "Islam advocates promotion of women's rights" (Chi-square = 4.038,  $p = 0.044$ ). As to the third statement in the table, more females than males tend to look at Muslims as narrow-minded (Chi-square = 7.220,  $p = 0.007$ ).

**Table 4**  
**Opinion about Three Items by Gender**

Statements	Gender (%)		Total	$\chi^2$	df	P
	Male	Female				
1. Islamic state provides equal rights to all citizens	59.4	40.6	138	4.899	1	0.027
2. Islam advocates promotion of women's rights	58.8	41.2	131	4.038	1	0.044
3. Muslims are narrow minded	40.5	59.5	200	7.220	1	0.007

Unlike gender, education has a definite influence on the opinions held by non-Muslim Malaysian respondents. Scholars agree that education does play a role in widening the perception of the individuals on other religions, including Islam. This is confirmed by the survey which shows that those with higher educational achievement tend to have a better perception of Islam, Islamic literature, and Muslims in general. Given the uniformity of this relationship, all the items under the three themes have been collapsed into one and their respective Chi-square coefficients are shown in Table 5. Specifically, those with degree are more positive in their perception of Islam and the Islamic literature. However, education does not differentiate much the perception of the non-Muslims on Muslim's image with one exception. Respondents with degrees more than those with diploma and secondary school education think that 'Muslims are suspicious of others' (Chi-square = 15.138,  $p = 0.0001$ ).

**Table 5**  
**Non-Muslim Opinion by Educational Achievement**

Statements	Educational Achievement (%)				$\chi^2$	df	p
	Secondary School	Diploma	Degree	Total			
Islamic Literature	23.8	29.2	48.0	97	9.16	2	<0.012
Aspects of Islam	22.2	26.9	52.3	81	12.7	2	<0.0001
Muslim Image	26.7	33.4	45.6	54	5.4	2	<0.061

Of the three variables, religion seems to make much difference on the perception of non-Muslims. As earlier stated, many of the respondents (43.2 percent) adhere to Buddhism, followed by 22.4 percent Christians, 11.1 percent Hindus and 5.1 percent others. Cross tabulating religious affiliation with Islam (8 items), Islamic literature (5 items) and the behaviour of Muslims in Malaysia (7 items) yielded interesting results. These items are collapsed under the three themes as shown in Table 6. Buddhists in the sample are positive consistently on all the items scoring 57.2, 57.2 and 56.2 percent. They are followed by Christians whose score ranges between 26.7 to 33.6 percent and Hindus between 14.8 and 16.8 percent.

**Table 6**  
**The Image of Islam and Muslims among Non-Muslim Malaysians by Religion**

Statements	Religion (%)			Total	$\chi^2$	df	p
	Christian	Buddhist	Hindu				
Islamic Literature	27.0	57.2	16.8	168	45.8	2	<0.05
Aspects of Islam	26.7	57.2	17.1	146	37.8	2	<0.05
Muslim Image	33.6	56.3	56.2	14.8	32.9	2	<0.05

What accounts for a relatively high positive response of Buddhists *vis-a-vis* other religionists? The impression gained through friendly exchanges with colleagues specializing in comparative religion is that Buddhists do not claim any revealed absolute truth but they are enlightened and very accommodative, for as Buddha said, "there is no need to change culture or even religions." Anyone who found anything useful in Buddha's teachings was welcome to partake of them.<sup>23</sup> Buddhism, like Islam, is well known for following the 'middle way' with an emphasis on modesty and balance. In many respects, they are closer to Islam and hence they are appreciative of Islam. Fruitful dialogues are possible between the adherents of these religions. This suggests a need, among others, for more efforts at explaining Islam to Christians and Hindus.

### Summary and Conclusion

Most of the non-Muslims do hold opinion on many features of Islam and Muslims in Malaysia. The Malaysian non-Muslims are aware that Islam is a monotheistic religion. Between 35 to 56 percent have positive opinion about Islam and Muslims. These respondents are well educated and have good Muslim neighbours or have positive dealings with Muslims. They feel no threat to their religion and culture from the Muslim majority population. They did not feel constrained in performing their religious rites and rituals. These people probably are the pillars of stability in Malaysia.

One interesting phenomenon that emerged from this survey and also voiced by interviewees is the positive image of Muslims held by non-Muslims. This is against the generally held view about Muslims in the West. Time and again, it has been said that Islam is a good religion but the Muslims

23. See Alexander Berzin, *Buddhism and Its Impact on Asia*. Asian Monographs, No. 8 (Cairo: Cairo University, Center for Asian Studies, June 1996); Harun Yahya, *Islam and Buddhism* (Delhi: Islamic Book Service, 2003); Hans Kueng and Mohd Kamal Hassan, *Towards A Common Civilization* (Kuala Lumpur: Institute of Islamic Understanding Malaysia, 1997).

are not following Islam in its true sense. This study, however, found that while Islam is considered by the majority to be good, a solid majority of 63 percent of the respondents considered Muslims to be cooperative and another 52 percent believed Muslims to be not militant. One variable that may explain this is perhaps the Malay culture but it needs to be further probed.

A cross-tabulation of gender, education and religious affiliation with positive opinion of non-Muslim respondents shows that the perceptions of the male non-Muslim Malaysian are similar to the perceptions of the females non-Muslims for all items (except three) listed under the three categories. The Chi-square values for these items are non-significant. Education has a role in widening the perception of the individuals on Islam and Muslims. Those with higher educational achievement are more positive in their perception of general issues on Islam and Muslims. In terms of religious affiliations, the Buddhists seem to have a high regard for Islam and Muslims than the Christians and the Hindus.

The study also found a good percentage of people who refrained from expressing their opinion on matters related to Islam and Muslims. These respondents perhaps belong to the category of people who abide by the principle of 'non-interference' in sensitive matters as long as it does not affect their way of life. This is the principle of power-sharing among various ethnic groups which is practised in Malaysia and which gave the country its much admired quality of stability and peace. Given the absence of items in the questionnaire to tap this aspect of Malaysian people's opinion, the conclusion has to be tentative. One indicator of the high probability of this interpretation is the majority disapproval to the suggestion of introducing Islamic books in higher institutions of learning particularly for non-Muslims. Thus, in matters affecting their way of life, they are willing to break their silence.

The study also found about one-fourth of the sample holding negative opinion about Islam and Muslims in Malaysia. As revealed in the interview sessions, some Malaysians believe that Islam downgrades non-Muslims and does not give equal rights to them. These responses suggest the need to formulate policies to solve inter-ethnic problems and to devise strategies to create a better understanding of Islamic worldview and develop inter-faith tolerance and respect among the citizens of Malaysia.

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