

Between Green Wave and Sharp Power

Religious and Racial Politics of Malaysia

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Introduction

On the evening of February 5, 2025, the national conversation had been tense: Mohd Na'im Mokhtar, the minister of the Department for Religious Affairs, had proposed new federal "guidelines" to regulate Muslim participation in non-Muslim religious celebrations in order to "strengthen unity and build an attitude of mutual respect among the people without feeling worried or misunderstood from the perspective of Islam."¹ The draft was stated to be explicitly advisory in nature and included prohibitions on certain religious symbols, attendance during prayer times, and events near houses of worship.

The proposed ruling soon turned into a political deadlock. Supporters argued the guidelines protect Muslim faith and uphold Islam's constitutional role, while its critics expressed concerns that the new rulings "threaten the harmony (Malaysia) have maintained for decades," even attacking the minister for failing to understand the nature and realities of Malaysian multicultural society.²

Days later, on February 9, the Sultan of Selangor appeared at Fo Guang Shan Dong Zen Temple, joining a Lunar New Year celebration hosted by the Malaysian Chinese Buddhist community. His presence was warmly acknowledged by the organisers and covered prominently in local media.³ The Sultan's intervention shifted the tone. Speaking as the constitutional Head of Islam in Selangor, he publicly objected to the guidelines and emphasised the importance of unity and mutual respect. His appearance at Dong Zen Temple, alongside Buddhist leaders and lay devotees, carried a message stronger than words: that shared celebrations could be embraced rather than avoided. The next day, Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim announced that the Cabinet had decided "there is no need to create guidelines" and that the matter would be referred to the National Council for Islamic Religious Affairs (MKI). Within days, the controversy had faded from the headlines.

Episodes like this reveal a recurring but often underplayed truth about Malaysia's religious and political life. Moments of potential escalation are not always the first steps toward communal fracture. More often than not, they are diffused by various stabilising forces embedded in different layers of society. These stabilising forces operate in different spheres: the monarchy as a symbolic and moral authority, the bureaucracy as a manager

1 "Malaysia's Proposed 'Guidelines' for Muslims Attending Non-Muslim Events Draw Brickbats, but Some Defend Move." CNA, 2025, Accessed Sept. 17, 2025.

2 Ibid.

3 Tan, Jimmy. "Sultan of Selangor Graces Multicultural CNY Celebration - Citizens Journal." Citizens Journal - Community, Food and Lifestyle, 12 Feb. 2025. Accessed Sept. 17, 2025.

of disputes, and the habits of everyday life that bring people of different faiths into regular contact.

Yet in both academic and media narratives, these forces rarely take centre stage. In recent years, the public conversation has been dominated by two vivid frames. The first is the so-called green wave: the electoral rise of Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS) and its coalition partners, interpreted as a surge of Islamic conservatism poised to reshape the state. The second is the notion of Chinese sharp power: the suspicion that the People's Republic of China, through economic leverage and diaspora ties, could influence Malaysia's ethnic Chinese community in ways that unsettle national politics. The concept of sharp power differs from soft power in both intent and mechanism. Whereas soft power—a term coined by Joseph Nye in 1990—rests on attraction, persuasion, and voluntary emulation, sharp power refers to the use of manipulative or coercive practices by authoritarian states to penetrate, distort, or constrain the political and informational environments of other societies. While both describe non-military forms of influence, they are grounded in fundamentally opposed logic: one seeks to attract, the other to compel.⁴

These narratives capture real concerns, but they are incomplete. The green wave, while electorally significant, has encountered institutional and political limits to translating electoral strength into sweeping policy changes. The sharp power frame, while relevant in the context of great-power competition, often overlooks the filtering effect of Malaysia's domestic structures and localised identities. In practice, episodes that seem to confirm either fear often end in compromise or quiet resolution, not confrontation.

To understand why Malaysia's religious-political landscape remains resilient despite the polarising rhetoric of the green wave and Chinese sharp power, one must look beyond the immediate headlines to a deeper structural mechanism: the administrative absorption of politics and religion. This theoretical framework, rooted in the historical governance of religious heterodoxy, suggests that a state achieves stability not by resolving theological differences, but by co-opting them into a “cage” of bureaucratic management.

⁴ The concept of “sharp power” emerged in academic and international relations discourse in 2017. It was coined by Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwig in a report published by the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) titled *Sharp Power: Rising Authoritarian Influence*, and later elaborated more systematically in 2018 in “What Is ‘Sharp Power’?” authored by Christopher Walker alone. The authors introduced the term to describe the aggressive and deceptive policies employed by authoritarian regimes to project influence internationally, particularly within democratic societies, with primary reference to China's interventionist practices. In this article, our focus is on the stigmatisation of ethnic Chinese communities in Malaysia, who are often perceived as being implicated in—or vulnerable to association with—China's sharp power strategies. See Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwig, “Sharp Power: Rising Authoritarian Influence,” National Endowment for Democracy, December 2017; Christopher Walker, “What Is ‘Sharp Power’?” *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 3 (July 2018): 9–23.

In this model, the state prioritises “statecraft” over question of “legitimacy” or “orthodoxy.” While the latter represents the pursuit of religious or ideological purity, the former focuses on the practical maintenance of political order and state security. Stability is maintained when the state successfully absorbs the political and ideological obligations of religious groups, effectively shifting the focus from the standardisation of worldviews to the assimilation of political identity. In the Malaysian context, this is visible in how potential flashpoints—such as the Lunar New Year guidelines or the “Allah socks” controversy—are systematically stripped of their populist, ideological fervour and transformed into technical and administrative files.

This article argues that a fuller understanding of Malaysia’s religious freedom politics requires turning our attention to the country’s architecture of stability. This architecture rests on three interwoven elements:

1. The calming hand of the monarchy: the ability of Sultans, as Heads of Islam in their states, to guide public sentiment and political decisions away from confrontation.
2. The quiet settlement of officialdom: the capacity of bureaucratic and legal processes to absorb tension and bring disputes to a technical or reconciliatory conclusion.
3. The Coexistence in everyday life: the ongoing interactions in schools, workplaces, and public life that embed habits of coexistence and mutual accommodation.

This study seeks to complement and challenge prevailing accounts that focus narrowly on the imagination of religious polarisation or foreign influence by shining a spotlight on these innate mechanisms at work in Malaysian society. Much of the recent public conversation has been framed through two dominant lenses: the green wave, a term used to describe the rise of Islamic conservatism in Malaysian politics and Chinese sharp power, which described China’s growing influence in Malaysia. Both capture anxieties that resonate deeply in Malaysian politics, yet they risk overshadowing the stabilising architecture that often prevents these pressures from tipping into open conflict.

By examining recent episodes of racial and religious tension in Malaysia, like the Lunar New Year guidelines dispute, the “Allah socks” controversy, the halal sandwich case, and debates over vernacular school enrolment, this paper situates these flashpoints within the broader dynamics of the monarchy, bureaucracy, and everyday coexistence, highlighting how these stabilising forces complicate predictions of rupture.

Two dominant narratives have shaped both domestic and foreign analyses of Malaysia's political trajectory in recent years: the green wave and Chinese sharp power. Both are evocative metaphors that capture particular anxieties about Malaysia's future: one drawn from electoral politics, the other from geopolitical discourse. Yet, while these concepts have gained considerable traction in political commentary and media coverage, their meanings, origins, and actual implications require careful unpacking.

The term green wave first entered Malaysia's political lexicon following the country's 15th General Election (GE15) in November 2022. Reportedly, the term was first used by Malaysian politician Lim Kit Siang to describe the significant electoral gains made by the Perikatan Nasional (PN) coalition, particularly the Islamist party PAS, in the November 2022 general election (GE15).⁵ PAS emerged as the single largest party in the Dewan Rakyat, with 49 seats, securing dominance in Kelantan, Terengganu, and Kedah, and gaining ground in other Malay-majority constituencies.



PAS supporters performing salah at a mosque in Terengganu. (Source: Wikimedia)

In the visual grammar of Malaysian politics, green is inseparable from the PAS, with its flag bearing the simple white circle against a field of green to symbolise Islam's centrality. The green wave evokes striking images: vast assemblies where thousands of supporters, often

⁵ Jamal, Azzman Abdul. "Kit Siang's 'Green Wave' Meant to Scare Non-Malays, Says Azmin." *MalaysiaNow*, 24 June 2023. Accessed Jan. 25, 2026.

clad in matching green attire, converge in mosques, football fields, open-air stadiums, and village squares, their presence animated by chants of Islamic slogans beneath banners adorned with PAS's crescent-and-star motif. In television broadcasts and on social media, these rallies produce a potent visual shorthand for Islamic solidarity and political momentum. The saturation of green—on flags rippling in the wind, on headscarves and T-shirts, on stage backdrops—transforms campaign events into spectacles of unity, signalling both religious identity and electoral strength. This is further supported by post-electoral analysis and polling shows a clear trend of younger voters drifting toward PAS.⁶

Most articles and studies written in English saw the green wave in less than charitable lights, characterising it as a result of “toxic politics of lies, fear, hate, race and religion,”⁷ and “a conservative, Islamically oriented extremist shift” conducted by a “conservative coalition (that) strategically weaponised these structural imbalances in the digital age.”⁸ Others saw it as an exaggeration that stretches limited and local electoral performances into a national movement.⁹ Even the PN coalition, which very political surge coined the term, was dismissive of the green wave as an actual phenomenon, with its information chief citing it as “a scare tactic being used to keep ethnic Chinese voters from supporting the political coalition.”¹⁰

If the green wave metaphor channels anxieties about domestic Islamisation, the narrative of Chinese sharp power reflects concerns about Malaysia's external alignments. Sharp power refers to the use of manipulative or coercive tools, may it be media, culture, and diaspora networks: to penetrate open societies and shape opinion in ways that advance authoritarian states' interests. In Malaysia, these initiatives can be seen in high-profile visits by Chinese officials to clan associations or Chinese Chambers of Commerce, in

6 Welsh, Bridget. “COMMENT | GE15 Generational Voting: Looking beyond Ethnicity Part 2.” Malaysiakini, 14 Apr. 2023. Accessed Sept. 17, 2025 ; Malaysiakini Team. “GE15: Was the ‘Green Wave’ Powered by Young Voters?” Kini News Lab | Malaysiakini, 20 July 2023. Accessed Sept. 19, 2025.

7 Mohamad, Marzuki. “Green Wave”: Is Malaysia Heading towards Renewed Islamisation or De-Islamisation?” MalaysiaNow, 13 Sept. 2023. Accessed Sept. 17, 2025.

8 Kirk, Graysen. “Digital Extremism and the Rise of the Green Wave in Malaysia.” Center for the Study of Organized Hate, 30 July 2025. Accessed Sept. 17, 2025.

9 Ong, Kian Ming. “Commentary: Debunking the Myths of Malaysia's ‘Green Wave’ in GE15.” CNA, 2021. Accessed Sept. 17, 2025; Ostwald, Kai, and Steven Oliver. “Continuity and Change: The Limits of Malaysia's Green Wave from a Four Arenas Perspective.” ISEAS Perspective, vol. 87, 27 Oct. 2023. Accessed Sept. 17, 2025.

10 Mohamad, Marzuki. “Green Wave”: Is Malaysia Heading toward Renewed Islamisation or De-Islamisation?” MalaysiaNow, 13 Sept. 2023. Accessed Sept. 17, 2025.

cultural diplomacy events linked to Lunar New Year and other festivals,¹¹ in the expansion of Confucius Institutes and Chinese language programmes,¹² and in business and infrastructure projects associated with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).¹³

Western and sinophone media outside China often interpret such activities as infiltration: a deliberate attempt to sway political attitudes, influence local elites, or cultivate loyalties to Beijing. Doublethink Lab, a Taiwanese thinktank, ranked Malaysia eighth among 36 countries facing China's "undue influence," especially in technology, economy, and law enforcement. Similarly, a News Lens profile of a Malaysian Chinese YouTuber, Louis, illustrates how content promoting "One China" unity is translated into Malay, raising concerns about whether such identity work subtly shifts loyalties or perceptions among Malaysia's non-Chinese communities.¹⁴ By linking cultural symbolism to geopolitical strategy, they frame diaspora engagement as a potential threat to Malaysia's sovereignty and national cohesion.

Hsiao and Yang (2014)'s study of Confucius Institutes in Southeast Asia situates them firmly within the logic of "guanxi" politics.¹⁵ They observe that "Confucius Institutes work as nodes of a guanxi network and their strategic proliferation will facilitate and enhance the interaction between state-to-state, state-to-society, institute-to-society, and institute-to-institute links." Beyond language teaching and cultural promotion, these institutes are designed to cultivate trust and familiarity that can smooth political and economic

11 "Speech by Consul General Lu Shiwei of Penang at the 2021 Xinchou Year Online Ming Ying Ci Open Day—Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China (驻槟城总领事鲁世巍在 2021 辛丑年线上名英祠开放日的致辞 — 中华人民共和国外交部)." Fmprc.gov.cn, 2021. Accessed Sept. 17, 2025.

12 Xidian University. "Unveiling! Xidian University Malaysia Shenzhai Confucius Institute Officially Established - West China Network (Shaanxi News Network) (揭牌！西电马来西亚深斋孔子学院正式成立 - 西部网 (陕西新闻网))." Cnwest.com, 2023. Accessed Sept. 17, 2025.

13 Consulate General of the People's Republic of China in Penang. "Consul General Lu Shiwei of the People's Republic of China in Penang Attended the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation at the Mara University of Technology Penang (驻槟城总领事鲁世巍出席玛拉工艺大学槟城分校“一带一路”大讲堂 _ 中华人民共和国外交部)." Fmprc.gov.cn, 2022. Accessed Sept. 17, 2025.

14 Hong Chweihwa 馮垂華. "Is It the Red That Permeates or Is Blood Thicker than Water? A Brief Discussion on the 'Chinese Glue' Phenomenon among Malaysian Chinese - TNL the News Lens Critical Commentary Network (是紅色滲透還是血濃於水？淺談馬來西亞華人的「中華膠」現象 - TNL the News Lens 關鍵評論網)." TNL the News Lens 關鍵評論網, Oct. 2019. Accessed Sept. 17, 2025.

15 Guanxi (關係) politics refers to the cultivation of personal relationships and reciprocal obligations as a means of conducting political, economic, and social affairs in Chinese contexts. Rather than relying solely on formal institutions, networks of trust, familiarity, and exchange create durable linkages that shape decision-making and cross-border influence.

engagement. As they argue, the ultimate purpose is “to concretely increase China’s acceptability within Southeast Asian societies.”



At an event in celebration of the worship of Guan Gong in Johor Bahru, Malaysia, on Oct. 20, 2024, where Chinese attendees waved their national flag. (Source: benarnews.org)

Religion also becomes a heated salient. Si (2025) extensively listed religious and cultural exchange activities between China and overseas Chinese diasporic communities. Religious and cultural exchanges between China and Malaysian Chinese communities have grown markedly in recent decades, often centred on transnational networks of temples and clan associations. Pilgrimages to ancestral temples such as Mazu in Fujian or Guandi in Shanxi, reciprocal visits, and festivals like the Malaysia International Guandi Cultural Festival illustrate how faith traditions, rituals, and heritage function as bridges linking diaspora communities to their ancestral homeland. While the journal article, being one published in China, did not ostensibly cover the political aspect of such exchanges, an Oriental Daily article reports that Mazu worship and temple networks, once purely folk belief, are being

woven into China's United Front projects, festivals, dramas, and song productions under state plans serve not only cultural but political ends.¹⁶

Green wave and Chinese sharp power are metaphors elegant in their simplicity, the kind of metaphor favoured by media and academics alike, the kind of metaphor that reinforces themselves by having pundits argue whether they exist or not. They capture public imagination and intellectual bandwidth by compressing the daily reality of Malaysian society into a two-dimensional scale: the green wave is a far-right Islamist movement on a national level or an electoral success overblown by fear and racial tension, or something in between; Chinese sharp power is a scheme for China to infiltrate Malaysia via its Chinese community with varying or questionable efficacy in actually swaying their opinions.

While these metaphors capture snapshots of racial, ethnic and religious tension, they do not reveal the underlying stabilising forces inherent to Malaysian society, built into its constitution, political system and long-standing history as a multi-ethnic society.

For instance, under Malaysia's federal constitution, matters of Islamic law and practice fall under state jurisdiction, with each state's Sultan or governor serving as the constitutional Head of Islam. This means PAS's capacity to enact its moral and legal agenda, such as expanding Shariah criminal punishments, is largely confined to states under its direct control. At the federal level, coalition politics, constitutional safeguards for minority rights, and the monarchy's mediating role all act as checks on sweeping Islamisation.

Seen through this lens, the green wave looks less like an unstoppable force sweeping the nation and more like a surge that runs up against institutional guardrails. Shad Saleem Faruqi (2025) reminds us that the monarchy acts as a stabiliser, stepping into moments of heightened tension to preserve Malaysia's delicate communal balance. Royal interventions, such as during the 2025 Lunar New Year controversy, show how symbolic authority can recast divisive issues in ways that blunt populist fervour and provide political leaders with space to compromise.

16 Sit Pui Ling 薛佩菱. "China Infiltrates Taiwan's Temples, Even Using Mazu Culture as a Tool for United Front Work (中国渗透台湾宫庙组织 妈祖文化也成统战工具)." *Oriental Daily 東方網 馬來西亞東方日報*, 4 May 2023. Accessed Sept. 17, 2025.



In February 2023, PAS Youth organised a parade in Terengganu featuring participants dressed as medieval Arab warriors, carrying replica swords, spears, bows, and shields. (Source: Facebook/Himpunan Pemuda Islam Terengganu – HIMPIT; images widely circulated at the time and subsequently reported in local media).

The BTI 2024 Malaysia Country Report places this dynamic within a broader structural frame by highlighting the resilience of Malaysia’s hybrid political order. While PAS’s electoral surge suggests momentum, the report emphasises that Malaysia’s system of coalition politics and federal–state divisions has proved resistant to domination by any single force. This adaptability ensures that even disruptive shocks, from the “Sheraton Move” to GE15, have been absorbed without dismantling the system’s competitive, if untidy, pluralism.

As for Chinese sharp power, Malaysian Chinese are far from being monolithic and passive receivers. Mara Yue Du (2025) situates these outreach efforts within the broader ideological framework of the “Great Rejuvenation,” which casts overseas Chinese as integral to China’s national identity and development strategy. This vision is carried out through the United Front Work Department (UFW) and other state-linked bodies that foster ties with diaspora associations, Chinese-language media, educational institutions, and business networks. Du emphasises that sharp power is not a fixed force but a contingent one, shaped by the receptivity of local political structures and the agency of domestic actors. In Malaysia,

such influence is filtered through entrenched ethnic politics, long-standing commercial ties, and competing visions of national identity. Beijing's overtures to Malaysian Chinese communities therefore do not unfold in a vacuum but are mediated by Malaysia's institutions, electoral dynamics, and the community's own internal diversity.

Media coverage, however, often simplifies the picture. Episodes, such as high-profile visits by Chinese officials to clan associations, or cultural diplomacy events during Lunar New Year, are easily slotted into a narrative of Chinese influence.



On February 18, Consul General Zhou Youbin attended the opening of the 2024 Jiachen Year Penang Temple Fair, joined by Penang Governor Ahmad Fuzi and his wife, Chief Minister Chow Kon Yeow, fair organiser Leong Kim Hoe, State Exco Yeoh Soon Hin, along with legislators and community representatives. (Source: penang.china-consulate)

For some Malay commentators, these spectacles raise suspicions of divided loyalties; for some Malaysian Chinese observers, they risk inviting unwelcome scrutiny. Chang offers a nuanced view, showing how many in the Chinese diaspora embrace China's rise and cultural outreach through Mandarin, cultural platforms, and diaspora-oriented state bodies, while simultaneously affirming a deeply Malaysian identity and expressing

discomfort at overt efforts that could blur the line between cultural admiration and political allegiance.¹⁷ Yet empirical evidence of such events altering Malaysia's foreign or domestic policy in a decisive way remains thin.

In Malaysia, the monarchy's mediating role, the hybrid system's adaptability, and the procedural resilience of Malaysia's democratic sphere all complicate the picture. Beneath the surface of electoral spectacle and ethnic tensions lies a political order designed to withstand precisely such surges. For example, the same week that headlines warned of "Islamist encroachment" in Selangor, the Sultan's intervention over Lunar New Year celebrations effectively diffused a potential flashpoint. Likewise, amidst debates about Chinese influence, JAKIM's quiet interfaith initiatives went largely unreported.

When viewed through the lens of Malaysia's constitutional and institutional design, both the green wave and sharp power are bounded phenomena. The Islamic turn is channelled through state jurisdictions, filtered by royal authority, and tempered by coalition politics. Chinese influence is mediated by domestic law, public opinion, and Malaysia's multi-aligned foreign policy tradition.

This is not to deny that either trend can generate tension, nor that they can be strategically exploited. Rather, it is to recognise that their impact is refracted through a system in which multiple actors, from monarchs to bureaucrats, have both the incentive and the capacity to prevent escalation from tipping into crisis.

In this sense, the green wave and sharp power are best understood not as uncontrollable forces, but as recurring challenges that interact with, and are often contained by, Malaysia's deeper structures of stability.

17 Chang, Peter T. C. "Chinese in Malaysia: Proud of China's Rise, yet Fiercely Malaysian." FULCRUM, Dec. 31, 2024.

In much of the recent commentary on Malaysia's religious and political life, moments of tension are treated as harbingers of lasting division. Yet, as the following examples will show, these tensions often resolve through enduring mechanisms that are woven into the country's constitutional arrangements, political traditions, and social fabric. For clarity, this study groups them under three interrelated themes: the calming hand of the monarchy, the quiet settlement of officialdom, and Coexistence in everyday life. Each has its own history, institutional setting, and mode of operation, but together they constitute what might be called Malaysia's architecture of stability.

The Calming Hand of the Monarchy

The position of the Malay rulers as Heads of Islam in their respective states is one of the most distinctive features of Malaysia's constitutional settlement. Article 3 of the Federal Constitution declares Islam the "religion of the Federation" while safeguarding the right of others to practise their faiths ("Constitution of the Malaysia 1957," art. 3, sec. 1); crucially, it also recognises the authority of each ruler over Islamic affairs in his state. The Yang di-Pertuan Agong (YDPA), King of Malaysia, holds this authority in the Federal Territories and in states without hereditary rulers, but elsewhere it belongs to the Sultan or Ruler.¹⁸



In 2019, Sultan Abdullah took his oath of office as Malaysia's 16th Yang di-Pertuan Agong. (Source: CGTN)

18 In Malaysia's constitutional monarchy, nine hereditary Sultans serve as rulers of their respective states and rotate the federal kingship (Yang di-Pertuan Agong).

This arrangement has deep roots in the colonial and pre-colonial history of the Malay states, when the ruler's role encompassed both temporal and spiritual leadership. In the post-independence era, these powers have been formalised through state constitutions and institutions such as the State Islamic Religious Councils. The Sultan of Perak, Raja Nazrin Shah, in an academic paper, explained that the monarchy of Malaysia serves as a “unifying figure” that is recognised across the broad by the plurality of its subjects.¹⁹ Although much of the day-to-day administration is delegated, the ruler retains the ability to speak publicly on religious matters and to take symbolic actions that resonate well beyond the legal sphere.²⁰

Such gestures can carry significant weight in moments of uncertainty. The Sultan's objection to the 2025 Lunar New Year “guidelines” and his presence at the Dong Zen Temple celebration signalled that Muslim participation in non-Muslim festivities was not inherently suspect. As Shad Saleem Faruqi (2025) have noted, the rulers' interventions are not merely ceremonial; they can reframe a heated debate and make it politically easier for the executive to adopt a more accommodating stance. In this way, the monarchy can act as a mediator of tensions, drawing on both historical legitimacy and constitutional authority.

The Administrative Buffer for Religious Matters

If the monarchy's influence is visible and symbolic, the work of the bureaucracy is often quiet and procedural. The Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM), created in its current form in the 1990s, sits at the centre of the federal apparatus for Islamic affairs. Its responsibilities range from advising the Conference of Rulers (Majlis Raja-raja) to coordinating policy among state religious authorities, overseeing halal certification, and carrying out dakwah (Islamic outreach) programmes.

Less well known, but equally important, are JAKIM's roles in verification, counselling, and mediation. When a moral panic erupts, be it over a product's halal status, the alleged misuse of Islamic symbols, or the conduct of a Muslim public figure, the office and related agencies often move to contain the issue. This may involve laboratory testing of suspect goods, closed-door discussions with those accused of offending religious sensitivities, or coordination with civil and Shariah authorities to determine the appropriate course of action.

19 Shah, Nazrin. “The Monarchy in Contemporary Malaysia.” ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, 2004.

20 Ahmed, Mughees, et al. “Analysis of Democratic Constitutional Monarchy: A Case Study of Political System of Malaysia.” *Asia Pacific*, 34 (2020): 76–90.



Halal certifications issued by JAKIM to restaurants in Malaysia. (Source: Sinarharian.com)

These processes rarely attract the same headlines as the incidents that trigger them. Yet their function is crucial: to steer disputes toward outcomes that are legally sound, procedurally defensible, and socially calming. The “Allah socks” case in 2024 and the halal sandwich scare in 2025 are instructive in such displays and will be examined in detail in the following sections. Both began with public outrage and calls for punishment; both ended with bounded administrative decisions, with legal fines in the first case, and technical exoneration in the second. This form of “procedural justice” allowed the matter to close without sustained communal conflict.

Such settlements draw strength and grounding upon Malaysia’s parallel legal system, which divides jurisdiction between civil and Shariah courts, and on the tradition of resolving sensitive matters through negotiated administrative channels rather than protracted litigation. In historical perspective, this reflects a broader Southeast Asian pattern in which officialdom’s role is as much about containing disputes as adjudicating them.

Coexistence in everyday life

The third element of stability is found not in palaces or ministries but in the ordinary routines of Malaysian life. Markets, workplaces, schools, and neighbourhoods bring people of different faiths into regular contact, creating what anthropologists call “habits of coexistence.” In Malaysia, one of the clearest illustrations comes from Chinese-medium primary schools, or Sekolah Jenis Kebangsaan Cina (SJK (C)).



Rul Hazrien Khairi, an ethnic Malay, visiting a Chinese temple in traditional Han Chinese costume to “pay respect to the Malaysian Chinese culture of this country.” (Source: Sinchew.com)

Once attended almost exclusively by ethnic Chinese children, these schools have in recent decades seen a steady rise in enrolment from other communities. By 2020, non-Chinese students made up roughly 20 per cent of SJK (C) enrolment nationwide, with Malay pupils forming the largest share of that minority. This shift reflects parental choices motivated by perceptions of quality education and language acquisition, and it results in classrooms where children encounter linguistic and cultural diversity as a matter of course.²¹

Beyond education, the state has also invested in interfaith engagement. The International Conference of Religious Leaders in Kuala Lumpur in May 2024, co-hosted by the government and the Muslim World League, brought together nearly 2,000 religious leaders

21 Chai, James. “Malaysia’s Chinese Primary Schools: Saved yet Threatened by Rising Inflows of Malay Students.” ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, May 13, 2025.

from over 55 countries to endorse the proposed Malaysia Harmony Charter. While such events are often dismissed as ceremonial, they are open displays of multiculturalism and reaffirm a public narrative of Malaysia as a multi-religious nation committed to coexistence.

In historical terms, this Coexistence in everyday life is not new. Malaya has been multi-ethnic since the Malacca Sultanate in the 15th century (founded in c. 1400), a hub in the Indian Ocean trade that drew Arab, Indian, and Chinese merchants. British colonial rule in the 19th and early 20th centuries deepened diversity: Chinese migration expanded after the 1850s with tin mining, and Indian migration grew after the 1870s with labour in rubber plantations. Malaysian cities and towns have long been shaped by such interethnic interaction. These enduring patterns persist, even as political rhetoric sometimes sharpens communal boundaries, providing a social foundation that helps contain disputes.

These three elements: the calming hand of the monarchy, the quiet settlement of officialdom, and Coexistence in everyday life, operate as an interlinking system that, in the long term, alleviates ethnic and religious tensions, as well as massaging public opinion toward relative calmness. A royal statement may lend legitimacy to a bureaucratic settlement; administrative closure may be more readily accepted when it aligns with prevailing social habits of coexistence; everyday pluralism may give rulers and officials greater confidence to adopt inclusive stances.

Taken together, they help explain why Malaysia's religious freedom controversies so often end in managed compromise rather than spiralling into prolonged conflict. Recognising their role does not mean ignoring the challenges posed by politicised religion or foreign influence. It does, however, shift the analytical emphasis from the inevitability of polarisation to the resilience of structures and practices that have repeatedly drawn the country back toward balance.

Legal–Institutional Baseline

The interplay of Malaysia's constitutional provisions, state traditions, and bureaucratic arrangements has created a complex yet resilient framework for governing religion. Understanding this framework is essential to explaining why tensions around religious freedom and interfaith relations so often resolve in ways that maintain, rather than rupture, social order.

The roots of Malaysia's parallel legal system lie in the colonial era. Under British rule, Islamic law was confined largely to matters of personal status: marriage, divorce, and inheritance, while English common law governed civil and criminal affairs. This division

was reinforced by the Civil Law Enactments of 1937 and 1956, which entrenched English law as the basis for most domains while recognising “Mohammedan law” under the jurisdiction of Malay rulers and their councils. At independence in 1957, this bifurcated arrangement was constitutionalised in the Federal Constitution, itself the product of negotiations between colonial authorities, Malay rulers, and leaders of the country’s diverse communities. Article 3 declared Islam the “religion of the Federation,” affirming its privileged status without establishing a theocracy, while confirming the continuing authority of the rulers over Islamic affairs in their respective states. Article 11 guaranteed that “every person has the right to profess and practise his religion,” though with restrictions on proselytisation to Muslims, a compromise reflecting the delicate politics of 1957. The Ninth Schedule further placed Islamic law under the State List, ensuring that each state retained control over religion while the federation inherited the common law courts and codes. As Azahar (2016) notes, this historical compromise institutionalised two parallel sources of authority, creating the “grey zones” that continue to both animate and settle disputes today.

Malaysia’s federal structure further entrenches the complexity. Under the Ninth Schedule, Islamic law falls under state jurisdiction, giving rise to distinct state Islamic Religious Councils, Shariah courts, and legislative frameworks. Yet the federal government coordinates through the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM) and the National Council for Islamic Religious Affairs (MKI). JAKIM advises the Conference of Rulers, harmonises state practice, and administers halal certification and dakwah programmes. As Azahar (2016) points out, this fragmented but overlapping system fosters both friction and adaptability: while rulers and state agencies often guard their prerogatives, federal coordination has enabled disputes to be resolved quietly without direct confrontation.

This arrangement also underpins Malaysia’s parallel legal system. Civil courts adjudicate all federal and state laws, while Shariah courts handle Muslims’ religious and family matters within limits set by state enactments. Azahar highlights that this parallel system produces “grey areas” in custody, conversion, and burial disputes, where civil and Shariah courts may issue conflicting orders. Jurisdictional conflict is not simply legal but political: civil courts, constitutionally supreme, are often hesitant to assert authority in ways that might inflame Malay-Muslim sensitivities. Instead, many cases are steered toward negotiated settlements or bureaucratic closure, demonstrating how institutional design channels disputes away from zero-sum confrontation.

Two landmark cases illustrate these tensions. In *Lina Joy v. Majlis Agama Islam Wilayah Persekutuan* (2004),²² a Malay woman’s attempt to formally leave Islam was blocked when the Kuala Lumpur High Court deferred to the Shariah court’s authority over apostasy, citing

22 The case was later escalated toward the Federal Court (FC), yet the judgement remained the same.

“Article 11 of the FC speaks of freedom of religion but this did not mean that the plaintiff was to be given the freedom of choice to profess and practise the religion of her choice.”²³ And “a Malay is defined as a person who professes the religion of Islam.”²⁴ As noted by Tew (2011), the Federal Court’s decision effectively shifted responsibility for the substantive issue of allowing conversion out of Islam out of the civil judiciary to the Syariah Court.



During a demonstration outside the National Mosque in downtown Kuala Lumpur on January 20, 2006, protesters raised their fists and held signs backing Article 121 (1A) of the Malaysian Constitution, which grants Syariah Courts sole jurisdiction over matters relating to Islam, excluding the authority of civil courts. (Source: Southeastasiaglobe.com)

A decade later, in *Indira Gandhi a/p Mutho v. Pengarah Jabatan Agama Islam Perak* (2018), the Federal Court annulled the unilateral conversion of a Hindu mother’s children to Islam by her estranged husband. This time, the civil judiciary asserted its supremacy, ruling that only the High Court, not state religious authorities, could determine the conversion of minors. This form of judiciary juggling shows how jurisdictional disputes are managed not only through constitutional reasoning but also through calibrated judgements that weigh legal hierarchy (religious freedom) against political stability (the definition of Malay).

²³ *Lina Joy v. Majlis Agama Islam Wilayah Persekutuan & Anor*, Court of Appeal (Malaysia), Malaysianbar.org, April 18, 2005. Accessed Sept. 19, 2025.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 2.

Yet courts are only one part of Malaysia's religious governance framework. At the *de jure* apex stands the Conference of Rulers, whose role complements judicial restraint with royal authority and elite consensus. The monarchy has deep historical roots, tracing back to the Kedah Sultanate in the seventh century and the Malacca Sultanate in the thirteenth. Its modern character, however, was defined in the 1957 Federal Constitution, which distinguishes between the Yang di-Pertuan Agong (YDPA) as Head of State at the federal level and the Malay rulers as Heads of State at the state level. While their functions are generally symbolic and ceremonial, both the YDPA and the rulers may, on occasion, exercise consultative roles.²⁵

The nine surviving Malay sultanates, preserved after independence, collectively constitute the Conference of Rulers. Meeting at least three times a year, the Conference elects one of its members to serve as YDPA on a five-year rotational basis.²⁶ It must also consent to any constitutional amendments affecting Islam or royal privileges, ensuring that major changes in religious governance emerge through collective deliberation rather than unilateral assertion.²⁷ The broader social and political influence of this institution will be examined in the following section.

Within this constitutional and monarchical framework, JAKIM and its state-level counterparts, like the Shariah Committee,²⁸ carry out day-to-day governance. Since its consolidation in 1997, JAKIM has drafted model laws, trained religious officials, overseen Islamic education, and managed halal certification.²⁹ Less visible, but equally important, are its mediating roles: laboratory testing in halal disputes, interfaith dialogue, and quiet counselling in cases of alleged offence. This reliance on bureaucratic management reflects a broader Southeast Asian tradition: disputes are contained through negotiation and administrative discretion rather than adversarial litigation.

25 Azrae, Ahmad Nasyran. "Reassessing the Roles of the Yang di-Pertuan Agong and the Rulers in the Making of International Treaties." *UUM Journal of Legal Studies*, 11, no. 2 (2020): 123–152. Accessed Sept. 19, 2025.

26 *Ibid*, 124.

27 Harding, Andrew, and Harshan Kumarasingham. "The Malay Monarchies in Constitutional and Social Conception." *Asian Journal of Law and Society*, 9, no. 3 (2022): 399–417. Accessed Sept. 16, 2025.

28 The Shariah Committees, established under the Central Bank of Malaysia Act 2009, advise Islamic financial institutions on compliance with Shariah principles. Their rulings, endorsed by the Shariah Advisory Council of Bank Negara Malaysia, ensure uniformity in Islamic finance practices and provide authoritative guidance on banking, contracts, and investments.

29 Ahmad, Fadzila Azni, and Noor Aini Mohd Salleh. "The Image of the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia." *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 9, no. 11 (2019): 676–689.

Taken together, these features show why Malaysia's legal-institutional baseline functions as both a constraint and stabiliser. The existence of parallel jurisdictions introduces friction and occasional controversy but also provides multiple sites for compromise. Overlapping authority among rulers, federal bureaucracies, and courts creates space for negotiated outcomes that temper polarisation. In this sense, the parallel system is less a flaw than a design feature: its very complexity underpins Malaysia's capacity to absorb shocks without systemic breakdown.

In early February 2025, just weeks before the Lunar New Year celebrations, Malaysia found itself in the midst of an unexpected cultural controversy. Social media posts began circulating a set of purported “guidelines” issued to Chinese temples, suggesting that certain decorative elements, performances, and religious rituals should be toned down to avoid offending Muslim sensibilities. The timing was politically charged: the Malay-Muslim political discourse had been running high since the previous year’s elections, and some observers quickly framed the matter as an example of the so-called green wave encroaching upon minority cultural space.³⁰

The initial days saw a predictable cycle of reaction. Online outrage among Chinese community leaders and temple organisers was met with defensive statements from certain local officials, and some Malay-language commentary even defended the guidelines as necessary for “harmony.” Several media outlets reported the guidelines as if they were official policy, further stoking unease. In reality, the “guidelines” originated from a district-level advisory that had not been approved at the state or federal level, but by the time this was clarified, the perception of restriction had already taken root.

It was at this point that the Sultan of Selangor stepped into the public conversation. In his capacity as the Head of Islam in the state—a constitutional role under Article 3 of the Federal Constitution—issued a formal statement affirming the right of non-Muslim communities to celebrate their festivals in full accordance with their customs.³¹ He went further, reminding the public that harmony in a plural society depended on mutual respect, and cautioning against the spread of misinformation that could inflame relations.³²

The symbolic weight of this intervention was amplified by his personal attendance at the Dong Zen Temple’s New Year celebrations, a high-visibility event covered widely in both Malay and Chinese media.³³ His appearance alongside Buddhist monks and Chinese community leaders sent a powerful message: that the monarchy’s religious authority

30 Sin Chew Daily (星洲网). “Government to Issue New Guidelines Regulating Muslim Participation in non-Muslim Celebrations (政府将发布新指南 规范穆参与非穆庆典).” 星洲网 Sin Chew Daily Malaysia Latest News and Headlines, 星洲网, Feb. 5, 2025. Accessed Sept. 19, 2025.

31 “Muhyiddin: All Races Must Respect Each Other and Not Interfere in Each Other’s Affairs (慕尤丁：各族需互相尊重 互不干涉他族事务).” 星洲网 Sin Chew Daily Malaysia Latest News and Headlines, 星洲网, Feb. 9, 2025. Accessed Sept. 19, 2025.

32 “Guidelines against Muslim Participation in Non-Islamic Celebrations; Sultan Supports Diversity in Action (反对穆参加非伊庆典指南 雪苏丹行动挺多元).” 星洲网 Sin Chew Daily Malaysia Latest News and Headlines, 星洲网, Feb. 8, 2025. Accessed Sept. 19, 2025.

33 “People of All Ethnicities Gather at Dongchan Temple for Selangor Spring Festival Celebrations (雪新春团拜 各族聚东禅寺闹春).” 星洲网 Sin Chew Daily Malaysia Latest News and Headlines, 星洲网, Feb. 8, 2025. Accessed Sept. 19, 2025.

could also be a shield for minority cultural expression. In jest, the Premier of Sarawak, Abang Johari, an ethnic Malay, asked if he was to attend the wedding of children of his deputy premier, who are ethnic Chinese, would they be required to consult with such regulations.³⁴

The Sultan's statement had a cascading effect. The Selangor state government promptly clarified that no restrictive guidelines were in force, while at the federal level, Cabinet ministers from both Malay-majority and multi-ethnic parties echoed the royal position.³⁵ By the end of the week, the controversy had largely dissipated from mainstream news, replaced by images of multi-ethnic festivities.

This rapid de-escalation illustrates the monarchy's capacity to set the tone for pluralist engagement. In Malaysia's constitutional framework, the Sultans' headship of Islam in their respective states gives them a unique standing to address religiously framed disputes. When they choose to do so in an inclusive register, they can disarm narratives that might otherwise spiral into ethno-religious polarisation.

The Lunar New Year episode fits into a longer historical pattern. From the colonial period through the post-independence decades, the Malay monarchy has often played a mediating role between the Muslim majority and minority communities, especially during symbolic moments of tension. Faruqi (2025) has argued that this mediating function is under-recognised in both legal scholarship and political analysis, where the monarchy is more often treated as a ceremonial relic than as an active actor in managing diversity. Yet episodes like the 2025 Lunar New Year intervention remind us that the Sultans' constitutional powers are not merely decorative; they can be activated as instruments of de-escalation.

34 Sin Chew Daily (星洲网). "Criticising the Guidelines for Muslims to Participate in Non-Muslim Celebrations as Foolish. Abangjo: 'Do I Need to Look Up the Guidelines Before Attending a Wedding?' (批规范穆参与非穆庆典指南愚蠢. 阿邦佐: "难道我出席婚礼前要翻指南?)" 星洲网 Sin Chew Daily Malaysia Latest News and Headlines, 星洲网, Feb. 15, 2025. Accessed Sept. 19, 2025.

35 E Nanyang (e南洋). "Selangor Sultan Objects to the Guidelines for Non-Muslim Celebrations. The Religious Minister: We Will Obey His Majesty's Orders (雪州苏丹反对非回庆典指南 宗教部长: 遵从殿下谕令)." E Nanyang, Feb. 9, 2025. Accessed Sept. 19, 2025.



The Sultanah of Selangor joining the head monk of Dong Zen Temple in an event celebrating ethnic diversity. (Source: Inanews.com)

Of course, royal interventions are not a panacea. They depend on the willingness of individual rulers to adopt an inclusive stance, and their effectiveness can vary with the political climate at both the state and federal levels, as well as, in some cases, the ruler's personal charisma. Moreover, there is always the risk that such interventions become politicised themselves, especially if one community perceives the monarchy as leaning consistently toward the other.

An important aspect of the monarchy's adaptation to contemporary realities lies in public expectations that it upholds universal values transcending ethnic and religious boundaries. Controversies in 2012, such as the Sedition Act pressures on former Perak Chief Minister Mohammad Nizar for criticising royal expenditure, or the arrest of Ahmad Abdul Jalil for mocking the Sultan of Johor on Facebook, revealed the fragility of this legitimacy when criticism is securitised rather than engaged constructively.³⁶ The constitutional crisis of 1983, during which the Malaysian parliament attempted to curb royal assent to legislation, only to face firm resistance from the rulers, likewise illustrates both the vulnerability and resilience of the institution when its authority is tested.

³⁶ Fauzi Abdul Hamid, Ahmad, and Muhamad Takiyuddin Ismail. "The Monarchy in Malaysia: Struggling for Legitimacy." *Kyoto Review of Southeast Asia*, Mar. 13, 2013. Accessed Sept. 19, 2025.

Nevertheless, in the case examined here, the Calming Hand of the Monarchy operated as a stabilising force. By affirming constitutional principles, embodying symbolic unity, and aligning state and federal actors, the Sultan of Selangor transformed a potentially divisive episode into an affirmation of Malaysia’s pluralist fabric.

The “Allah Socks” Incident

If royal intervention operates in the realm of symbolism and public tone, the machinery of Malaysia’s religious administration works in the quieter domain of rules, procedures, and case-by-case resolutions. This layer of stability is less visible in media narratives precisely because it thrives on avoiding spectacle. Yet it is here, in the offices of the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM), state religious councils, and the courts, that many religiously charged disputes are channelled into predictable, bounded outcomes. According to its own official report, in 2023, the organisation oversaw an extensive halal certification regime combining domestic audits, laboratory testing, and international inspections. A total of 2,619 audits were conducted nationwide (nearly 90% on-site), resulting in 2,902 certifications approved.³⁷

In March 2024, images began circulating online of socks sold in KK mart, one of the most popular convenience store chains that is owned by an ethnic Chinese, bearing the word “Allah” in stylised Latin script.³⁸ The public reaction was swift: Muslim groups expressed outrage, opposition politicians called for boycotts,³⁹ and the store issued an immediate apology. On the surface, it looked like the prelude to a prolonged cultural conflict. Instead, the matter entered an established procedural track. JAKIM coordinated with the Ministry of Domestic Trade to verify the claims, while the company withdrew the offending stock nationwide. Meetings were held between store representatives and Islamic scholars to assess whether the incident had been deliberate (it was deemed not to be). Within weeks, the authorities announced the conclusion: no legal charges, but a public reminder to

37 JAKIM. “Laporan Tahunan JAKIM 2023.” Islam.gov.my, Aug. 14, 2024. Accessed Sept. 19, 2025.

38 “Malaysia Store Attacked over ‘Allah’ Socks.” Al Jazeera, Mar. 30, 2024. Accessed Sept. 19, 2025.

39 San, Law Phei. “Chong Sin Woon: It Is Right to Defend the Rights of Muslims, but Akmal Should Adopt a More Peaceful Approach (张盛闻：捍卫穆权益没错 阿克马应采更平和方式).” *Guang Ming Daily* (光明日报), Feb. 24, 2025. Accessed Sept. 19, 2025.

retailers about cultural sensitivity.⁴⁰ The moral panic had been absorbed into a technical resolution.



Socks with the word "Allah" printed on them were sold at KK Mart in Bandar Sunway and the issue has gone viral on social media since then. (Source)

From a conflict-escalation perspective, what matters is not that all parties left satisfied, with some activists still felt the resolution was too lenient, but that the dispute was shepherded through a bureaucratic channel that imposed limits on how far it could spiral.

A similar pattern emerged in the so-called non-halal sandwich case. A Muslim consumer alleged that a fast-food outlet had served a product containing non-halal meat. Social media amplified the complaint, prompting calls for punitive action. Here again, JAKIM's

40 Guang Ming Editorial. "Nazri: KK Mart Did Not Intentionally Sell Socks with the Allah Logo. Anwar Urges All Sides to Back Down. Akmal, However, Urged the Public to Boycott KK. 纳兹里 : KK Mart 非故意卖印真主字眼袜子 元首谕令到此为止 阿克瑪卻吁民抵制 KK." 光明日报 , Feb. 23, 2025. Accessed Sept. 19, 2025.

verification process was key: inspectors visited the outlet, reviewed supply chain documentation, and publicly reported that the product was indeed halal-certified.⁴¹

The transparency of this fact-finding process served to redirect public anger from the realm of religious grievance into one of technical compliance. The complainant withdrew their allegation; the story receded from headlines. The handling of both the “Allah Socks” and “non-halal sandwich” cases reflects the repertoire of strategies that scholars have identified in JAKIM’s crisis management.

Lai (2025) summarised that JAKIM’s strategy in crisis resolution combines corrective action (withdrawing products or verifying supply chains), denial or minimisation (emphasising lack of deliberate intent), and mortification by way of corporate apologies. It also engages stakeholders, notably Islamic scholars and affected communities, to lend credibility to its assessments, and reframes disputes from moral affronts into technical compliance issues. In the “non-halal sandwich” case, JAKIM further bolstered its legitimacy by publicly affirming the integrity of its halal certification system. These strategies illustrate how the bureaucracy channels potential flashpoints into bounded administrative outcomes, aligning closely with the patterns observed in recent studies of JAKIM’s crisis communication.

These cases illustrate what might be called the pressure-valve function of Malaysia’s religious bureaucracy. The machinery is slow, procedural, and often criticised for opacity in other contexts, but in moments of potential escalation, these same qualities can contain disputes. By insisting on verification, documentation, and formal channels, JAKIM and its state-level counterparts create a cooling-off period that tempers the immediacy of moral outrage.

At the same time, JAKIM’s role is not confined to mediation. While its enforcement arm also polices morality and religious discipline among Muslims, including arrests for alleged slander under Shariah provisions⁴² or “closed-door counselling” for public cross-dressing,⁴³ the government has taken the effort to clarify that such enforcement applies

41 Oriental Daily (東方網). “Amijan: KK Mart Ham Sandwiches Contain No Pork, according to the Chemistry Department’s Test Results. (化学局检测结果出炉 阿米占: KK Mart 火腿三明治不含猪肉成分).” 東方網 馬來西亞東方日報, Feb. 16, 2025. Accessed Sept. 19, 2025.

42 “61 Muslims Arrested for Insulting Islam between 2020 and 2024 (2020 年至 2024 年 61 穆斯林因侮辱伊教被捕).” United Daily, Feb. 25, 2025. Accessed Sept. 19, 2025.

43 Sin Chew Daily. “Internet Celebrity Dressed as a Woman to Attend Awards Ceremony. JAKIM: Demands Explanation and Closed-Door Counselling (网红男扮女装出席颁奖礼 JAKIM: 将要求解释和闭门辅导).” 星洲网 Sin Chew Daily Malaysia Latest News and Headlines, 星洲网, Feb. 18, 2025. Accessed Sept. 19, 2025.

only to Muslims, highlighting both jurisdictional boundaries and the inward, community-disciplinary character of its authority. Complementing this, the courts form another layer of the ecosystem: civil and Shariah jurisdictions operate in parallel, and disputes spanning both spheres often require inter-jurisdictional coordination. While cumbersome, this process introduces additional brakes on escalation, ensuring that conflicts are channelled into structured, bounded outcomes rather than open confrontation.

The “quiet settlement” model has its limitations. Bureaucratic closure does not necessarily resolve underlying grievances; it can leave activists feeling stonewalled, and in certain cases, procedural opacity fuels suspicion. Yet in a political environment where both green wave fears and sharp power narratives can inflame ethnic-religious relations, the capacity of officialdom to transform volatile incidents into managed files is a stabilising asset. Survey research reinforces this point: Ahmad and Salleh’s (2019) study of public perceptions of JAKIM found that its legitimacy depends heavily on being seen as fair, transparent, and procedurally competent. Visible crisis management, such as halal verification and clear public communication, strengthens trust, while perceived opacity or overreach undermines it. In this sense, JAKIM’s careful calibration in the Allah socks and non-halal sandwich episodes was not only about technical resolution but also about maintaining its institutional image as a credible adjudicator of Islamic affairs.

The contrast with royal intervention is telling: while the monarchy operates in the register of symbolism and public reassurance, the bureaucracy works by narrowing disputes into technical categories that can be administratively closed. Together, these two layers form complementary pillars of Malaysia’s religious-political stability.

From Schools to Markets: Coexistence in everyday life

While royal authority and bureaucratic procedure shape the public handling of religious controversies, there exists a third, quieter arena of stability: the realm of everyday life. Here, stability is not the product of top-down interventions or administrative rulings, but of the ordinary rhythms of coexistence—the spaces where Malaysians of different faiths, languages, and cultural traditions grow up together, work together, and share public rituals.

One of the most durable features of Malaysia’s multicultural society is the persistence of multi-ethnic enrolment in Chinese-language primary schools (SJK (C)). James Chai (ISEAS, 2025) shows that Malay enrolment in Sekolah Jenis Kebangsaan Cina has risen steadily over the past two decades, driven by perceptions of educational quality and language acquisition opportunities. Recent media reports underscore this trend: a Chinese primary

school in Johor, for instance, welcomed an intake made up entirely of non-Chinese pupils.⁴⁴ These early experiences are not a panacea for communal prejudice, but they seed habits of accommodation and familiarity that persist into adulthood. When political rhetoric heightens interethnic suspicion, these lived relationships act as counterweights to abstract fears. However, as per every multicultural setting, accepting students from outside the sinophonic community requires accommodation. In Perak, community leaders debated the long-term impact of reducing Chinese literature components in the curriculum, warning that such shifts might dilute the cultural character of SJK (C) even as their multi-ethnic composition grows.⁴⁵



The offending hawker offering his apology alongside representatives from the Indian community in a restaurant. (Source)

Beyond the schoolyard, the state occasionally sponsors initiatives that foreground Malaysia's pluralism on the regional and global stage. A recent example is the *HARMONI*

44 Guang Ming Daily, "Baling Dahuo Civic School Welcomes 13 New Students, All Are Non-Chinese Malaysians (华玲打活公民学校迎13新生全是友族)." 光明日报, Feb. 16, 2025. Accessed Sept. 19, 2025.

45 Sz looi. "Ma Hanshun: Removing Chinese Literature from Form Six is Unwise as It Will Impact Chinese Language Proficiency (马汉顺：中六剔除中国文学影响华文水平不明智)" 光明日报, Mar. 4, 2025. Accessed Sept. 19, 2025.

Interfaith Conference, jointly organised by Malaysian and international partners, which brought together religious leaders from Islam, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, and Sikhism.⁴⁶ The conference's agenda emphasised coexistence as a shared civic responsibility, and government ministers attended to signal official endorsement.⁴⁷

Such events serve both symbolic and practical purposes. Symbolically, they articulate a national narrative in which religious diversity is a source of strength rather than instability. Practically, they foster networks between faith leaders who can mobilise against extremism in their own communities. In a political climate where green wave anxieties dominate headlines, these initiatives underscore that Malaysia's pluralism is not merely a relic of the past but an actively maintained policy stance.

Outside formal institutions, the marketplace remains one of Malaysia's most consistent venues for intercommunal interaction. From wet markets in Penang to night bazaars in Johor Bahru, traders and customers cross religious lines daily, negotiating prices, swapping festival treats, and maintaining personal relationships that span generations. Media reports often capture these dynamics: a small trader in Selangor, for example, apologised after a sign advertising roasted corn with an unfortunate connotation offended Indian customers, an episode that was defused through dialogue and apology rather than prolonged outrage. In a display of communal spirit, a local Neighbourhood Watch leader and a cohort of representatives from the Indian community came together with the vendor to formalise the acceptance of his apology.⁴⁸

At times, politicians have sought to amplify market-level disputes into broader cultural debates. Recent controversies over the use of three languages on shop signage in Johor Bahru or the removal of street banners in Klang were framed by some political actors as signs of creeping cultural domination or erosion of Malay identity.⁴⁹ These disputes, while local in origin, were quickly elevated into talking points about national integration and

46 "Harmony Committee: Appointment of 25 Scholars Reflects National Commitment to Unity - YADIM." BERNAMA, Feb. 20, 2025. Accessed Sept. 19, 2025.

47 "International Conference of Religious Leaders Promoting Interfaith Harmony among Followers of Religions | Muslim World League." Muslim World League, 2024. Accessed Sept. 19, 2025.

48 Guang Ming Daily (光明日报). "A Malay Hawker Posted a Poster Refusing to Sell Corn to People in Keling, Prompting a Public Apology. Seven Indian Representatives Urged the Public to Forgive the Hawker. (贴大字报拒卖玉蜀黍给吉灵人 马来小贩公开道歉 7 印裔代表促国人宽恕小贩)." 光明日报, Feb. 16, 2025. Accessed Sept. 19, 2025.

49 Sin Chew Daily. "PAS MP Questions Use of Three Languages on Renovated Signboard at Ir Tua Market; Dr Sean Thum Slams Attempt to Incite Division (伊党议员质疑爱大华巴利翻新招牌用 3 语 谭政宗抨试图煽动制造分裂)." 星洲网 Sin Chew Daily Malaysia Latest News and Headlines, 星洲网, Feb. 24, 2025. Accessed Sept. 19, 2025.

minority rights, illustrating how everyday commercial practices can be politicised when linked to wider anxieties about language, religion, and ethnicity.

Yet these attempts often run up against the lived reality of traders and customers, who continue to interact pragmatically across communal lines. Even when tensions flare, the rhythms of buying and selling, of chatting across counters and exchanging festive greetings, tend to absorb and soften conflict. What appears mundane is, in fact, the micro-foundation of trust in a plural society, where the neighbour who sells you corn or bargains over durian prices is also the person who affirms the possibility of coexistence.

These patterns of daily contact are a constant exercise of bargaining, between accepting more non-Chinese students and cutting Chinese literature from the curriculum, between signage and the lack thereof, and between a comment too acerbic and the following social pressure to apologise. This “condition of coexistence” imposes what might be called a ceiling on escalation. While sharp power and green wave narratives may inflame segments of the population, the extent to which such rhetoric can translate into sustained conflict is constrained by the fact that many Malaysians live in material, social, and emotional proximity to those of other communities. The neighbour you are told to fear is also the person who loaned you a ladder last week.

Examples of such coexistence are plentiful even in the divisive topic of religion. In my field study at the Sin Sze Si Ya (仙四師爺) Temple in Kuala Lumpur, I conducted an interview with a Sikh woman helping at the Chinese temple, Ranjit Kaur. Her father had previously served as the temple’s caretaker, and her family had lived in staff housing across from the main shrine. Having spent her childhood within the temple grounds, she later became a key helper to the clergy. At the temple’s 2024 anniversary celebration, she organised offerings, tended incense burners, and guided devotees in proper ritual conduct.

Ranjit Kaur’s role illustrates what might be described as “membership through intimacy.” She is neither Chinese nor an adherent of Confucian, Daoist, or Buddhist traditions; nonetheless, years of routine service wove her into the temple’s everyday life. This incorporation did not require the abandonment of her Sikh identity, as she continued to worship at her gurdwara⁵⁰ and her participation in the Sin Sze Si Ya temple was acknowledged by the local granthis.⁵¹ Yet during the procession she was treated as an authentic insider of the Sin Sze Si Ya community. In our observations, this sense of belonging also broadened participation: dozens of worshippers of South Asian

50 A place of worship and communal gathering under the Sikhist faith.

51 Leaders of the clergy of a particular gurdawa.

background—people she identified as relatives and friends—joined the parade and, afterward, entered the temple to venerate Sin Sze Si Ya as believers.⁵²

The procession's interreligious etiquette carried the same logic into the street. When the parade passed a Hindu temple, Chinese priests, spirit mediums, and performers marked the moment with formal respect: Daoist ritual specialists slowed and bowed; lion and dragon dancers dipped their heads; musicians reduced their volume. Hindu priests waited at the entrance and returned the gestures. No dialogue took place and no doctrinal reconciliation was proposed, yet this carefully staged civility—the choreography of reciprocal regard—functioned as a public enactment of coexistence. Here, pluralism was performed rather than argued. The principle at work was procedural, not theological: one behaves rightly toward one's neighbours, and, in doing so, acknowledges their place within the city's shared sacred landscape.

In this way, “Coexistence in everyday life” operates not through dramatic interventions but through countless small acts of coexistence, acts that rarely make headlines but cumulatively anchor Malaysia's religious and ethnic stability.

52 For a detailed discussion of the Kuala Lumpur Sin Sze Si Ya case and the Sikh faith, see Hung Tak Wai, “Chinese Religious Parades as Intangible Heritage: Community, State, and Participatory Diversity in Japan and Malaya,” *Review of Religion and Chinese Society*, forthcoming (2026).

This study began with a seemingly narrow controversy: a set of proposed Chinese New Year “guidelines” that quickly became a lightning rod for debates over Malaysia’s religious and ethnic relations. The story appeared to fit neatly into two familiar frames: the advance of a green wave of Islamic conservatism, and the alleged reach of Chinese sharp power. These narratives, amplified in both scholarly and media discourse, are compelling precisely because they promise a clear, dramatic conflict between opposing forces.

Yet the closer examination offered here suggests a different, less sensational story. Malaysia’s religious-political landscape is not solely a theatre for ideological confrontation; it is also a space where multiple stabilising mechanisms are at work. The constitutional role of the monarchy, the bureaucratic routines of Islamic administration and legal pluralism, and the quiet habits of coexistence embedded in daily life—together, these forces form an architecture that repeatedly absorbs shocks, lowers the temperature of disputes, and maintains a working pluralism.

This is not to romanticise Malaysia’s system. Religious freedom remains unevenly distributed, and there are legitimate concerns over jurisdictional asymmetries, minority rights, and the instrumentalisation of religion for political gain. Nor does stability guarantee justice. However, recognising stability as an active process rather than a passive default allows us to move beyond the binary of “creeping theocracy” versus “foreign subversion” that dominates much commentary.

The implications for scholarship are clear. If studies of religious freedom in Southeast Asia are to capture the full picture, they must account for the stabilisers that keep plural societies functioning under strain. These are not accidental by-products of history; they are maintained by specific institutions, actors, and everyday practices. For Malaysia, this means the monarchy’s capacity to de-securitise, the administrative system’s ability to channel disputes, and the population’s embedded interdependencies all deserve sustained analytical attention.

The Monarchy as the Ultimate Absorber

The Sultan of Selangor’s intervention in early 2025 provides a textbook illustration of this absorption in practice. When a district-level advisory attempted to impose “guidelines” on Chinese temples, it represented a surge of religious legitimacy—an attempt to enforce a specific, restrictive interpretation of Islamic social conduct. Had this been left to the realm of street-level politics, it might have fuelled the narrative of the green wave encroaching on minority rights, sparking a cycle of communal resentment.

However, the Sultan, acting as the constitutional Head of Islam, utilised his symbolic and moral authority to “absorb” the dispute. By attending the Fo Guang Shan Dong Zen Temple in Chinese-styled clothing, the Sultan did not engage in a theological debate about Islamic purity. Instead, he asserted the primacy of the *zhitong*—the state’s interest in social harmony and constitutional order. His presence signalled that non-Muslim cultural practices were not “heretical” threats to the state, but rather managed components of a multi-ethnic polity. In this way, the monarchy acts as a de-securitising force, redefining potential “political heresy” as manageable diversity, provided it remains within the boundaries of national loyalty.

The Bureaucratic Buffer: Officialdom and Procedural Justice

If the monarchy provides the symbolic umbrella for this absorption, the “Quiet Settlement of Officialdom” provides the “cage.” This process is best observed in the technical handling of the “Allah socks” incident and various halal-related scares. In these cases, the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM) and other federal agencies do not simply side with the loudest religious voices. Instead, they activate a procedural machinery of audits, laboratory testing, and legal verification.

This reliance on “procedural justice” serves a vital stabilising function. It weakens the impulse for communal revolt by offering a structured outlet for grievances. When a dispute is moved from the mosque or the town square into a government laboratory or a courtroom, it is being “absorbed” into the state’s administrative logic. The state cares less about changing the beliefs of the parties involved than it does about ensuring their behaviour conforms to a set of manageable, technical rules. By redefining these controversies as issues of “compliance” or “consumer protection” rather than “religious war,” the bureaucracy marginalises the extreme religiosity of the actors and prioritises their status as subjects of the law.

Stability Amidst the Instability of Narratives

The prevailing narratives of green wave and sharp power represent forces of instability because they rely on the logic of rupture and infiltration. The first narrative suggests an unstoppable tide of conservatism that will eventually overwhelm the state’s pluralist institutions. The second suggests an external influence that will subtly shift the loyalties of the ethnic Chinese community away from the Malaysian state.

However, the theory of administrative absorption suggests these forces are less uncontrollable than they appear. In practice, the green wave runs up against the “cage” of federal-state jurisdictions and royal oversight. PAS’s attempts to implement a more

rigid daotong at the state level are often checked by the federal zhitong, which maintains control over the overarching legal and economic structures. Similarly, Chinese Sharp Power is filtered through Malaysia's domestic commercial ties and political structures. The Malaysian state "absorbs" these external cultural and economic overtures, utilising them for development while simultaneously monitoring them through the lens of national security.

Coexistence as a Daily "Condition"

The final layer of this architecture is "Coexistence in everyday life." This is not an idealised vision of interfaith harmony, but a pragmatic, habitual "condition" of living in material and social proximity. In schools and markets, Malaysians engage in a constant, micro-level version of administrative absorption. They negotiate boundaries, trade goods, and participate in shared rituals not because they have resolved their religious differences, but because the "Tradition of Governance" in their daily lives—the need to work, learn, and trade—takes precedence over theological conflict.

The presence of non-Chinese students in SJK(C) schools or the participation of Sikh and Hindu devotees in the rituals of the Sin Sze Si Ya Temple illustrates this perfectly. These actors are not seeking a "dialogue" to find a common truth; they are engaging in "participation" based on shared behaviour and space. This is the social foundation of the "cage." Because many Malaysians are embedded in interethnic networks, the political rhetoric of the green wave or sharp power has a "ceiling" on how far it can escalate before it disrupts the practical routines of life.

For policymakers, both in Malaysia and abroad, the lesson is that supporting religious freedom is not only about guarding against threats. It is also about nurturing the existing mechanisms that allow disputes to be resolved without violence and diversity to be sustained without segregation. Such support may involve legal reforms, educational programmes, or interfaith initiatives, measures that rarely make headlines, but which quietly underpin the resilience of the system.

Future research should build on this approach by developing metrics for measuring the speed and effectiveness of de-securitisation, the closure rates of administrative resolution, and the long-term effects of everyday pluralism. Comparative work across Southeast Asia could also reveal whether similar stabilising architectures operate in other multi-ethnic, multi-religious societies, and how they interact with pressures from both domestic politics and external influence. Malaysia's religious-political landscape is characterised by a persistent tension between the instability of populist narratives and the stability of its institutional architecture. By viewing this through the lens of administrative buffer,

it becomes clear that the state's primary strength lies in its ability to co-opt potential conflict into a system of managed pluralism. The Sultan of Selangor's temple visit was more than a gesture of goodwill; it was a high-stakes performance of the state's capacity to absorb religious identity into a broader national framework. As long as the monarchy, the bureaucracy, and the habits of daily life continue to prioritise "statecraft" over "religious orthodoxy," Malaysia will likely continue to absorb shocks that, in other societies, might lead to systemic rupture. Stability, in this sense, is the ongoing, quiet work of keeping heterodoxy within the cage of the state. In the end, religious freedom in Malaysia is not simply the product of avoiding extremes; it is the outcome of a layered, ongoing negotiation between competing visions of society. Recognising the stabilisers in this negotiation allows us to tell a more complete, and perhaps more hopeful story, one in which stability is not the absence of conflict, but the presence of structures that keep conflict from overwhelming the shared life of the nation.