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Can Christians Say 'Allah'? In Malaysia, Muslims Say No

By Baradan Kuppusamy / Kuala Lumpur

"Why are the Christians claiming Allah?" asks businessman Rahim Ismail, 47, his face contorted in rage and disbelief. He shakes his head and raises his voice while waiting for a taxi along Jalan Tun Razak, a main thoroughfare in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia's capital. "Everybody in the world knows Allah is the Muslim God and belongs to Muslims. I cannot understand why the Christians want to claim Allah as their God," Rahim says as passersby, mostly Muslims, gather around and nod in agreement.

The reason for their anger is a recent judgment by Malaysia's high court that the word *Allah* is not exclusive to Muslims. Judge Lau Bee Lan ruled that others, including Catholics who had been prohibited by the Home Ministry from using the word in their publications since 2007, can now use the term. She also rescinded the prohibition order that forbade the Malay-language edition of the Catholic monthly the *Herald* to use *Allah* to denote the Christian God. After widespread protests, however, the judge granted a stay order on Jan. 7, the same day the government appealed to the higher Court of Appeal to overturn the ruling.

The anger seemed to turn into violence late Thursday night after masked men on motorcycles firebombed three churches in the city, gutting the ground floor of the Metro Tabernacle Church, located in a commercial building in the Desa Melawati suburb of the capital. The attacks, which police said appeared uncoordinated, were condemned by the government, opposition MPs and Muslim clerics alike. On Friday, Muslims demonstrated in scores of mosques across the country, but the protest was peaceful. In the mosque in Kampung Baru, a Malay enclave in the city, Muslims held placards that read "Leave Islam alone! Treat us as you would treat yourself! Don't test our patience!" amid cries of "Allah is great!" ([See pictures of Islam's soft revolution in Cairo.](#))

Because of Malaysia's ethnic makeup, religion is a sensitive issue, and any religious controversy is seen as a potential spark for unrest. Some 60% of Malaysia's 28 million people are Malay Muslim, while the rest are mainly ethnic Chinese, Indians or members of indigenous tribes, practicing various

faiths including Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism and animism. Among Christians, the majority Catholics number about 650,000, or 3% of the population. Despite Malaysia's diverse national complexion, [political Islam is a growing force](#), and the country operates under two sets of laws, one for Muslims, the other for everyone else. The authorities regard such compartmentalization as essential to maintaining social stability.

To many Malay Muslims, Lau's ruling crosses the line. Prominent Muslim clerics, lawmakers and government ministers have questioned the soundness of the judgment. A coalition of 27 Muslim NGOs wrote to the nine Malay sultans, each the head of Islam in their respective states, to intervene and help overturn the verdict. A Facebook campaign by Muslims started on Jan. 4 has attracted more than 100,000 supporters. Among them: Deputy Trade Minister Mukhriz Mahathir, son of former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, who also waded into the controversy, saying the court is not a proper forum to decide an emotional religious issue. "The judgment is a mistake," says Nazri Aziz, Minister overseeing Parliamentary Affairs, speaking for many Malaysian Muslims. The few Muslims who have urged respect for judicial independence have been shouted down as traitors. "I can't understand how any Muslim can support this judgment," said legislator Zulkifli Noordin in a statement. ([See pictures of Islam in Asia.](#))

The case arose after the Home Ministry prohibited the *Herald* from using *Allah* for *God* in its Malay-language versions in 2007. "We have been using the word for decades in our Malay-language Bibles and without problems," the Rev. Lawrence Andrew, editor of the Catholic publication, tells TIME. In May 2008 the Catholics decided to take the matter to court for a judicial review — and won. "It is a landmark decision ... fair and just," says Andrew. During the intermittent trial in the closing months of 2008, lawyers for the church argued that the word *Allah* predated Islam and was commonly used by Copts, Jews and Christians to denote God in many parts of the world. They argued that *Allah* is an Arabic word for God and has been used for decades by the church in Malaysia and Indonesia. And they said that the *Herald* uses the word *Allah* for God to meet the needs of its Malay-speaking worshippers on the island of Borneo. "Some people have got the idea that we are out to convert [Muslims]. That's not true," the lawyers said on behalf of the *Herald*.

Government lawyers countered that *Allah* denotes the Muslim God, is accepted as such around the world and is exclusively for Muslims. They said that if Catholics were allowed to use *Allah*, Muslims would be "confused." The confusion would worsen, they said, because Christians recognize a "trinity of gods" while Islam is "totally monotheistic." They said the proper word for God in the Malay language is *Tuhan*, not *Allah*. Lau held that the constitution guarantees freedom of religion and speech, and therefore Catholics can use the word *Allah* to denote God. She also overturned the Home Ministry order prohibiting the *Herald* from using the word. "The applicants have the right to use the

word *Allah* in the exercise of their rights to freedom of speech and expression," she said.

Non-Muslim Malaysians worry that the vehement opposition to the *Allah* ruling reflects a growing Islamization in a multireligious society. Last October a Shari'a court sentenced a Muslim woman who drank beer to be caned in public; in another incident, in November, Muslims enraged over the construction of a Hindu temple near their homes demonstrated their anger with a severed cow's head. They kicked and stomped on the head, as Hindus — to whom cows are sacred — watched helplessly. As for the court ruling, bar-council president Ragunath Kesavan met Prime Minister Najib Razak on Thursday to discuss how to cool emotions. Says Kesavan: "We need to get the Muslim and Christian leaders together. They need to meet face to face and work out a compromise and not let this thing escalate."

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