

# PERSPECTIVE

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## Two Borneo Neighbours on Diversity: Comparing Religious Authority in Brunei and Sarawak

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*Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddien Mosque in Bandar Seri Begawan in Brunei on 11 January 2024. (Photo by Mohd RASFAN / AFP).*

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- Borneo represents a unique case study of religious diversity. It is ethnically diverse and presents three sovereign states: Brunei, Indonesia, and Malaysia. This paper focuses on Muslim attitudes towards diversity in Sarawak and Brunei and how Islamic institutions navigate issues and concerns.
- Sarawakian politicians and religious leaders are more vocal today than a decade ago in articulating minority rights and concerns than their counterparts in Putrajaya. In managing religious diversity, its leaders and religious elites (mufti) have argued for autonomy and have distanced themselves from the conservative and revivalist trends of Peninsula Malaysia.
- By contrast, Brunei is a small standalone state promoting its national philosophy of Melayu Islam Beraja (MIB), which now wants to push the Islamization agenda further. The religious elites have issued fatwas reversing court traditions, but they generally uphold the royalist ideology.
- Sarawak and Brunei, as neighbouring entities, offer interesting insights through the divergence in their pluralist and conservative trajectories. This paper considers the significance of political culture, demography, and religious elites' training as factors contributing to contemporary trends. It also measures religious institutions' preparedness in confronting external trends, especially as propagated through social media.

## INTRODUCTION

The Borneo island shares a common history of Islamization seven or eight centuries ago, housing Islamic kingdoms such as Brunei and Banjarmasin.<sup>1</sup> Today, the island is located off the sovereign states of Indonesia, Malaysia and Brunei, each with its own sub-regions. This paper compares Islamic institutions and religious authority in contemporary Sarawak (a Malaysian state) and in Brunei, focusing on Muslim attitudes towards inter-faith and intra-faith initiatives. The island is one of the most diverse religiously and ethnically compared to other parts of Southeast Asia. Generally, ethnic characterizations in Malaysia refer to Malays versus the others, while Brunei is almost homogeneously Malay.

Nevertheless, Sarawak is unique because the Bumiputera, a term to consolidate all indigenous communities, outnumber the Malays. While Islam is the dominant religion in Borneo, a sizeable Christian community lives in Sarawak, which makes the study of Muslim-Christian relations there interesting.<sup>2</sup> Official statistics from 2023 indicate that 76.1% of its population are Bumiputera, with 23.4% Chinese;<sup>3</sup> it has about 20 ethnic groups. The 2020 census indicates that 62.1% are Christians and 19.2% are Muslims.<sup>4</sup> By contrast, the Malays/Muslims constitute 73.8% of Brunei's 450,500 population, while the Chinese make up 9.6%.<sup>5</sup> But beyond inter-religious issues, the intra-religious dynamic, such as tensions between Sunni-Shias, progressive-conservative, and royalist(traditionalist)-revivalists, is worthy of more study.

This paper covers the behaviour of Islamic elites and their respective institutions. Besides comparing the origins, nature and functions of religious institutions, it also analyses fatwas or religious opinions relating to religious diversity, both inter-faith (Muslims and non-Muslims) and intra-faith (between the different Muslim denominations). How does one account for existing orientations towards other religious groups?

The paper will first trace the origins of Brunei's Islamic institutions and understand some common attitudes towards diversity. A similar discussion on the religious institutions and elites in Sarawak will follow. It will highlight some issues and tensions that measure attitudes towards interfaith and intra-faith diversity. Lastly, the paper discusses the development, or the lack thereof, of an indigenous religious class and how both societies navigate the openness of religious debates on social media. This section will also examine how institutional design and political contestation are crucial in developing pluralist religious discourse in both states.

## BRUNEI: MALAY, ISLAM AND MONARCHY (MIB)

Brunei is an absolute monarchy. Many consider the late Sultan Haji Omar Ali Saifuddien Saadul Khairi Waddien (reign 1950-1967) the founder of modern-day Brunei. The Written Constitution of Brunei Darussalam 1959 (PBNB), part II Article 3(2), states that the Sultan shall be the Head of Religion, and Sunni Islam is the state's official religion.<sup>6</sup> The constitution also indicates that no Chief Minister or Deputy Chief Minister or State Secretary can be appointed unless he is Malay, Muslim and a follower of the Shafie/Sunni school of law. Interestingly, the constitution also underscores the separation of the Mufti department from the Islamic Council and Jurist under the Islamic administration.

Since 1984, when Brunei gained independence, the Kingdom adopted the Malay Islamic Monarchy (MIB) as the state philosophy. However, the ruling elites and citizens assume that the philosophy existed even before 1906 (some date it to the 10<sup>th</sup> Century).<sup>7</sup> Historically, Brunei played a significant role in Islamizing Borneo and even the Malay world.

On Islamic matters, the most influential body after the Sultan is the Brunei Islamic Religious Council and the Mufti. The Council houses a legal committee which the Mufti chairs.<sup>8</sup> In a way, Brunei's fatwa-issuing body arrangement is like many Malaysian states including Sarawak. The state also supports a mufti department that researches and issues fatwa and sermons and oversees the censorship of films and publications. The religious establishment also includes the courts, the *baitulmal* and zakat collection, and plays other roles, including managing the religious endowment, and providing assistance for *musafir* (converts), cemetery, and employment of religious officials in mosques.

The current Brunei mufti is Ustaz Haji Abdul Aziz Bin Juned, who has been helming the position since 1994. He graduated from the prestigious Al-Azhar University (Cairo) and studied at a Singapore religious school in his younger days. So far, in Brunei's post-independent history, he is only the second to occupy the position. His predecessor, Ismail Omar Bin Abdul Aziz, was mufti between 1967 and 1994; he was a graduate of Al-Azhar University, and was born in Johor. Interestingly, Brunei had to search for a mufti from Johor, though that would have been an obvious path to take if the state preferred someone from the Malay world. The Johor ulama institution has historically been closely tied to the royal courts. Johor had been a Malay nation upholding Sunni and Sufi doctrines closely.<sup>9</sup> Haji Abdul Aziz had been Ismail Omar's understudy, and a Bruneian.

Under the current Sultan Haji Hassanal Bolkiah Mu'izzaddin Waddaulah, Brunei demonstrates a deep Islamic identity and commitment to the religion. It emphasizes the Malay Islamic Monarchy philosophy and the *Negara Zikir* (Chanting Nation, in line with Sufistic elements). Personally, the Sultan also demonstrates strong convictions for the faith. On 5 April 1992, the Sultan surprised congregants during a Friday prayer at the Omar Ali Saifuddin Mosque when he went to the pulpit to deliver the sermon. The mufti Haji Abdul Aziz recapped the episode:

His religious inclinations became clear when, for the first time His Majesty agreed to deliver the sermon at the end of the Hari Raya Aidilfitri congregational prayer on 1 Syawal 1413 (5 April 1992). His Majesty's decision to go up the pulpit and deliver the sermon surprised everyone, for it had never happened before... The atmosphere immediately became very still, one of great expectations. Those who had been sitting in front with their backs towards the pulpit were now turning around to face the pulpit instead, an unusual happening indeed.<sup>10</sup>

It was one of the many moments in which the Sultan publicly demonstrated his religious leadership. In 1987, the Sultan performed his first haj pilgrimage to Mecca. He was greeted by a huge crowd at the airport upon his return, and received a royal salute and inspected the guard of honour.<sup>11</sup>

## BRUNEI FATWAS IN RECENT YEARS

Generally, the thinking of the mufti, religious institutions, and other religious elites is aligned with the MIB philosophy. This does not mean the mufti lacks autonomy or independence of thinking. One example is the fatwas on several court rituals, which the muftis critically re-examined. As an absolute monarchy, there are occasions in which the royal family parades its symbols of power and rituals, in accordance with Malay customs. In 1972, the religious council issued a fatwa popularly known as the Golden Cat fatwa. The mufti was asked to review some court rituals and give his opinion on whether these symbols were aligned with Islam and the Shafie school of thought. The questions included the permissibility of using Quranic verses on royal symbols and the status of two golden cat sculptures placed in front of the throne during royal ceremonies. Also queried were the caricatures of animals or living things found on flags and crowns. A fatwa was issued, and these acts were declared haram (forbidden in Islam) and discontinued. Relatedly, some other court accessories and artifacts were declared haram; one example was the Kabok Perak (Silver Jar), which contained water used for court rituals. The jar was declared un-Islamic and hence replaced with a glass jar. This shows that the mufti can exercise authority to reverse a longstanding royal custom.

A more recent fatwa can be considered courageous and would probably not have been passed by the religious authorities in Brunei's neighbours. The Brunei mufti declared that smoking cigarettes would be forbidden. This fatwa would not have been passed in Malaysia or Singapore as it would have created an uproar among smokers. In a book that deliberated on the fatwa, *Cigarette is Haram*, Sharifah Khadijah states that, "Therefore it is very clear that, from the aspect of *madharrah* (harm) there can be no excuse to lighten the *hukm* of cigarettes and smoking. We cannot take it lightly and ignore the destruction falling upon mankind due to smoking because Islam itself is a religion of safety and succour. Hence, relying on *syara' /shara* as well as strong scientific reasons, it is ruled that cigarette and smoking are haram."<sup>12</sup>

In a publication entitled *Islam in Brunei*, numerous fatwas were deliberated which touch on Muslim-non-Muslim relations, as well as intra-Muslim issues. It details some rulings that demonstrate the state's priorities to uphold a dominant Islam, since the majority of Bruneians are Muslims, and of the Sunni and shafie school. For example, a market in Bandar town that supplies pork was asked to move to a more secluded place on Jalan Teraja.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, building new places of worship other than mosques is restricted. Ideologies deemed to be anti-Islam, such as Marxism, secularism, Ahmadiyah, and Bahatism, are also banned.<sup>14</sup>

Recently, Brunei gained some negative publicity among scholars and the media after the Sultan's announcement that the country would implement shariah laws, under the Syariah Criminal Offences Code 2013. The announcement drew flak from the international community,<sup>15</sup> as it was intended to be implemented on anyone regardless of nationality or religion. The law also called for stoning for adultery and of homosexuals, though the Brunei government did say that punishments would only be carried out following the high standard of having two men with high moral and piety being witnesses; this was per Islamic law requirements. The law was to be fully implemented on 3 April 2019, but details on how it would be enforced remain wanting, and there have been no major reports of anyone being punished under the new legal changes.<sup>16</sup>

## ISLAMIC INSTITUTIONS IN SARAWAK

Islamisation in Brunei and Sarawak began before the pre-European colonial period in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century. When Islam first reached their shores, a sheriff of Arab descent was put in charge of Islamic affairs. In 1841, under Brooke's rule, the Datu's courts were installed. More than nine decades later, on 1 May 1955, the Islamic Religious Council of Sarawak was formed. After Sarawak joined Malaysia in 1963, Islam was administered in the state the same way this was done in Peninsula Malaysia. According to the Malaysian constitution, Islam is the religion of the federation. However, the Malay rulers have jurisdiction including deciding on key appointments of the mufti and members of the religious council of their respective states. Since Sarawak does not have a Malay ruler, unlike in states such as Pahang, Johor, Terengganu, Perlis, Selangor, Kedah, Kelantan, Perak, and Negeri Sembilan, appointments in the Sarawak religious council are overseen by the Malaysian King, a position rotated among the nine rulers every five years.<sup>17</sup>

However, Sarawak demonstrates some exceptions in Islamic matters. In 1963, Sarawak and Sabah had stipulated that Islam should not be declared as state religion as a condition for joining Malaysia under the Malaysia Agreement 1963. In 1973, Sabah revoked this condition, but not Sarawak. In 2015, when the status of Islam was raised in Sarawak, the state government re-affirmed that Islam is not its official religion and a line suggesting this to be so was removed from the government's website. Not having formal recognition as official state religion does not however negate a role for Islam in the state and in Sarawak's broader Borneo identity. Sarawak leaders call its maintenance of religious harmony "The Sarawak Formula".<sup>18</sup> Islamic religious institutions in Sarawak continue to issue fatwas, and should the fatwa be published in the gazette, it gains legal standing as an enforceable law. At the everyday level, Sarawak Muslims continue to practice their faith, and share a school of jurisprudence similar to that practiced in Brunei and Peninsula Malaysia, namely the Sunni and Shafie school of thought. Like any other fatwa institution, the current mufti Datu Haji Kipli bin Haji Yassin shared that MAIS has a chairman, and the mufti acts as the ex-officio member.<sup>19</sup> The fatwa committee has ten members and the mufti chairs it; the Malaysian King makes all appointments.

## SARAWAK'S EXCEPTIONALISM THROUGH FATWAS

Compared to neighbouring Brunei and many other states in Peninsula Malaysia, Sarawak's religious authorities are more pluralist on both interfaith and intra-faith issues. The mufti office's response to the *kalimah Allah* (the use of the term Allah as God by non-Muslims), attitudes towards Shiism, and religious conversion demonstrated this.

In 2008, the national fatwa council based in Kuala Lumpur issued a non-binding edict that the term "Allah" (God for Muslims) could only be used by Muslims, and other religions should not apply the term to refer to their God. It emphasized the need for Muslims to protect the term. In instances where the term was used in a derogatory fashion, then the parties involved would be sanctioned according to the federal constitution. Now, fatwas issued at the federal level do not apply to states unless passed and gazetted by the respective religious councils; and in this case, the Sarawak Religious Council did not do so.

The controversy started in Sarawak when Bibles used by the Christian community used the term "Allah." This purportedly led to confusion among Muslims, including those living on the

peninsula. The matter was brought to the courts by a Sarawakian, Jill Ireland. The High Court soon ruled that non-Muslims are allowed to use the term “Allah”, plus three others: *kaabah*, *solat*, and *baitullah*. It stated that the government’s earlier decision prohibiting it 35 years ago was “illegal” and “irrational.”<sup>20</sup> The Malaysian government initially appealed against the ruling, but later withdrew it. The Prime Minister gave assurance that despite the High Court ruling, only Christians in Sarawak are allowed to use the term in their publications. This allows for the differing stances taken by the Sarawak Mufti and by the Malaysian government to co-exist.

In the same vein, the Sarawak religious authorities and the state government have been seemingly open about Muslims converting out of Islam. In other Malaysian states, *murtad* (conversion out of Islam) is deemed sensitive and complex. As religion is indicated on every Malaysians’ identity card, changing one’s religious status gets complicated. There are also other consequences stemming from a conversion: this may affect the religious status of the child/children, especially minors, whether they remain Muslims or not, and the status of marriages if only one of the couple converts out of Islam, since mixed religious marriages are considered illegal. However, Sarawak seems to be open about religious conversion, as demonstrated by the case of Roney Rebit, who managed to remove Islam from his identity card.<sup>21</sup> Both of Sarawak’s recent chief ministers, Adenan Satem and Abang Johari, have committed to amending state law to allow conversion out of Islam.<sup>22</sup>

The Allah issue and religious conversion are interfaith ones, and the Sarawak religious elites have been demonstrating a pluralist attitude on these matters. However, their attitude towards intra-faith matters is less open. Shiah, a sect in Islam that is quite different from the dominant Sunni school of thought in Malaysia, is not accepted in Sarawak. Initially, the attitude to Shiism had been quite open, but in 2012, a 1996 fatwa against it was reinstated at the federal. However, Sarawak (and Sabah) has not gazetted it, which means that the fatwa still does not carry the weight of law in these states.

Religious conservatism, it seems, is not welcomed in Sarawak, and evidently, the Islamic PAS (Islamic Party of Malaysia), which has increased its vote share and seats nationally since the 2022 general elections and 2023 state elections, has not been able successful in Sarawak. Sarawak Chief Minister Abang Johari has continued to discuss the Sarawak formula for maintaining racial and religious harmony.

## CONCLUSION

What explains Sarawak’s pluralism vis-à-vis Brunei today? The obvious answer is demography, with Sarawak being more multicultural and having a lower population density than Brunei, which is more homogeneously Malay/Muslim. Yet, demography alone cannot satisfactorily explain the behaviour of the religious elites (the muftis) and their responses to religious and ethnic minorities and intra-faith diversity. Religious elites make judgements according to their reading of texts and religious traditions and applying them according to social conditions. Their views cannot be persuaded, at least in theory, by what society thinks. Moreover, since contemporary religious discourse is also shaped by social media, which chips away at the influence traditional mediums of religious dissemination such as mosques, madrasahs and fatwas, does this also affect the religious elite’s responses?

Observably, the religious leaders in Sarawak are mostly trained in Malaysian universities and interestingly, in neighbouring Singapore madrasahs. The current mufti Kipli Yasin received his training from the University of Malaya. Except for Loling Othman Alwi, who was educated at the Al-Azhar University in Cairo, the rest took courses at Islamic College Malaya. By contrast, Brunei has only had two muftis since independence, and both are graduates of the Al-Azhar University. However, training in Al-Azhar alone does not imply conservatism, as many Southeast Asian ulama from the region are trained from the university, and their attitudes vary greatly.<sup>23</sup>

The views of the religious elites in Sarawak and Brunei parallel those of the political elites except under certain very few circumstances. In the current political climate, the muftis in Sarawak have more leeway to disagree with those in the Peninsula. Sarawak muftis follow the guidance of the political elites that respect non-Muslims and indigenous communities. While their patron is by constitution the Malaysian King, they are aligned with Sarawak chief ministers. Sarawak ulama also exercise autonomy of judgement by the strategy of not aligning fatwas with muftis in Putrajaya. As for Brunei, while the ulama have reversed many court customs, they generally promote MIB, *Negara Zikir*, and shariah laws, and uphold strict views on inter-faith and intra-faith issues.

Still, contemporary religious elites everywhere are grappling with a borderless exchange of ideas through social media, which have supplanted local and traditional authorities in favour of celebrity preachers, some of whom are English speaking. The changing class dynamics in both countries will likely stretch religious thought and challenge accepted traditions. Comparing the two, the Sarawak religious discourse has a longer history of negotiating differences than Brunei's.

To be sure, Brunei society has developed a strong middle-class society, which means mosques and madrasahs no longer have full monopoly of the religious discourse. In these traditional mediums, preachers and teachers must be approved officially. However, Bruneians, especially the young, are consuming content online, including religious ones; yet, Brunei does not have many homegrown influencers and popular preachers.<sup>24</sup> The young may require time to reconcile the singular MIB ideology with alternative discourses on religion and identity, which they are now exposed to daily. Already Bruneians are familiar with foreign preachers, including Singaporean-born Tarmizi Wahid (known as Mizi Wahid) and Malaysian Wadi Anuar. Besides, they are also exposed to English-speaking ones such as Mufti Menk, Nouman Ali Khan, Dunia Shuaib and Zakir Naik. The nexus between Malayness, monarchy, and Islam may be foreign to these influencers/preachers.

As for Sarawak, the religious elites are always confronted with muftis from the peninsula, and they are always in a dilemma to situate the collective federal Islamic positions onto the local Sarawak context. Conservative thought from Peninsular Malaysia does not apply to Sarawak's multi-religious and multicultural setting,<sup>25</sup> and young Sarawakians are better placed to negotiate differences found on social media. In the age of social media, Sarawakians are ahead of their neighbours when internalizing external ideas.



**ENDNOTES**

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- <sup>7</sup> See Awang Asbol et al, 1
- <sup>8</sup> Awang Abdul Aziz, 101
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- <sup>11</sup> Pehin Datu Seri Maharaja Dato Paduka Seri Setia Dr Ustaz Haji Awang Abdul Aziz Bin Juned, *The King Who Shapes History*. (Brunei: State Mufti's Office, Prime Minister's Officer, 2019), 270-271.
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- <sup>14</sup> Chang-Yau Hoon and Asiyah Kumpoh, "Minorities in Brunei Darussalam: Intersecting Religion and Ethnicity," ISEAS Perspective
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- <sup>19</sup> Bicara Mufti "Bagaimana Kedudukan Fatwa Di Sarawak" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=enIMz-5lvvY>
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