

CONTEMPORARY ISLAMOPHOBIA IN MALAYSIA

Social Media, Legislation, and Cultural Tensions

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Abstract

Islamophobia in Malaysia remains a complex and under-explored phenomenon. This case especially occurs within the context of Muslim-majority society where both internal and external factors fuel hostility. Existing legal frameworks such as the Sedition Act and Penal Code inadequately address systemic and subtle Islamophobia, particularly in digital spaces. This study employs socio-political and legal analysis to examine how Islamophobia manifests in Malaysia's context. The paper also explores the limitations of current policies. It argues for a dedicated anti-Islamophobia legal framework aligns with international human rights standards and advocates for multi-stakeholder cooperation, incorporating both civil and Syariah law systems alongside educational initiatives to counter prejudice and promote religious harmony. The findings suggest that only through nuance, inclusive strategies can Malaysia effectively confront Islamophobia while respecting freedom of expression and multicultural coexistence.

[Islamofobia di Malaysia merupakan fenomena kompleks dan minim dieksplorasi. Kondisi ini utamanya dalam masyarakat mayoritas Muslim, yang dipengaruhi oleh faktor internal dan eksternal sebagai pemicu permusuhan. Kerangka hukum yang ada seperti Undang-Undang Hasutan dan Kitab Undang-Undang Hukum Pidana belum secara memadai menangani



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Islamofobia yang bersifat sistemik dan halus, khususnya dalam dunia digital. Studi ini menggunakan analisis sosial-politik dan hukum untuk mengkaji manifestasi Islamofobia dalam konteks Malaysia. Riset ini juga membahas keterbatasan kebijakan yang ada. Penelitian ini berargumen bahwa diperlukan kerangka hukum anti-Islamofobia yang menjunjung standar hak asasi manusia internasional, serta kerja sama antara sistem hukum sipil dan Syariah, disertai inisiatif pendidikan untuk melawan prasangka dan mendorong harmoni antaragama. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa hanya melalui strategi inklusif dan bernuansa Malaysia dapat menghadapi Islamofobia secara efektif sambil menghormati kebebasan berekspresi dan keberagaman budaya.]

Keywords: social media, Islamophobia, Malaysia, liberal Muslims, Islamophobia Law

A. Introduction

Islamophobia is a pervasive global phenomenon symbolises by irrational fear and hostility toward Islam and Muslims. According to the Council of Europe, Islamophobia is defined as “the fear of or prejudiced viewpoint towards Islam, Muslims and matters pertaining to them”.¹ Mohamed Azam further characterises the term as an “irrational fear and hostility towards Islam and Muslim that can lead to hate speech and social and political prejudice”.² This social ill has been described by Mohamad Ridhuan through Critical Muslim Theory as an endemic and pervasive form of discrimination that differs from general xenophobia because Muslim’s face prejudice due to their faith values.³

Much of the scholarship focuses on the experience of Muslim minorities in Western countries, where Islamophobia is often intensified by westerns cultural stereotype. This culture stereotyping stems from Orientalism as analysed by Edward Said; the West’s constructive view

¹ Ingrid Ramberg, *Islamophobia and its consequences on Young People*, Seminar Report (Budapest: Council of Europe, 2004).

² Mohamed Azam Mohamed Adil, “Stop Absolute Freedom in Encountering Islamophobia”, *Institute of Understanding Islam Malaysia (IKIM)* (9 Mar 2023), <https://www.ikim.gov.my/en/stop-absolute-freedom-in-encountering-islamophobia/>.

³ Mohamad Ridhuan Abdullah, “Islamophobia & Muslim’s Religious Experiences in the MidWest - Proposing Critical Muslim Theory a Muslim Autoethnography”, PhD. Dissertation (Manhattan: Kansas State University, 2013).

of non-Western “Others” as irrational, backward and threatening.⁴ This Western-centric narrative has shaped policies and discriminatory laws that have led to violence against Muslim minorities especially in European countries as well as the United States of America.⁵

However, Islamophobia’s presence in Muslim-majority countries such as Malaysia remain under-explored in academic literature.⁶ Muslim majority society like Malaysia provides a complex context of a multicultural society where Muslim-majority hold political power, yet face Islamophobia thanks to post-colonial legacies, internal ideological divides and external social pressures.⁷ While Islam is constitutionally established as the religion of the Federation with legal protections to Malay Muslims,⁸ Islamophobia arise from within the Muslim community itself particularly from liberal Muslims influenced by Western secular ideologies who may question or oppose Islamic values.⁹ Concurrently, there is also hostility from non-Muslim groups fearful of Islam’s growing influence, perceiving Islamic policies and education as attempts at Islamisation.¹⁰

Making the matters worse, social media exacerbates the spread of Islamophobic sentiments that may infest into potential hostile actions. The online platforms’ unique features such as the rapid dissemination and echo chambers consistently manipulate public opinion, allowing propaganda to proliferate against Muslims. Because of that, minority Muslims in western countries suffer real-life hostility situation such as threat and violence.¹¹ Similarly, social media plays a critical role in

⁴ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin Books, 1977).

⁵ Kai Arzheimer, “Islamophobia in Western Europe Is Unrelated to Religiosity but Highly Correlated with Far Right Attitudes”, *Research & Politics*, vol. 12, no. 3 (2025), p. 2.

⁶ Rabiul Islam, “Islamophobia in Muslim Majority Countries: A Case Study of Bangladesh”, Master Thesis (Istanbul: Ibn Haldun University, 2021).

⁷ Nur Bakri Abd Hamid and Naufal Ahmad Rijalul Alam, “The Development of Islamic Liberal and Its Impact on Muslim in Malaysia”, *Journal for Islamic Studies*, vol. 6, no. 3 (2023), pp. 627-41.

⁸ Sheila Ramalingam, “Does the Federal Constitution Have a Multiracial Malaysia in Mind?”, *Malayan Law Journal*, vol. 1, pp. 1–14.

⁹ Mohd Safri Ali et al., “Liberalism between Acceptance and Rejection in Muslim World: A Review”, *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, vol. 9, no. 11 (2019), pp. 798-810.

¹⁰ Poh Chua Siah et al., “Islamophobia Among Malaysian Non-Muslim Indian Undergraduate Students: A Focus group Study”, *Makara Human Behavior Studies in Asia*, vol. 26, no. 1 (2022), pp. 37–43.

¹¹ Gabriel Ahmanideen and Derya Iner, “The Interaction Between Online and Offline Islamophobia and Anti-Mosque Campaigns: The Literature Review with *Al-Jāmi’ah*”, Vol. 63, No. 1, 2025 M/1447 H

amplifying Islamophobic narratives in Malaysia, contributing to social division and tensions between races and religious communities. As matter of fact, Islamophobia in Malaysia transcends from a social concern to intersect deeply with legal and political dynamics.¹²

Unfortunately, Malaysia's current legislation does not specifically address Islamophobia but relies on general laws protecting public order such as the Sedition Act 1948 (SA), the Penal Code 1964 (PC) and the Communication and Multimedia Act 1998 (CMA). This legal framework often responds only after overt actions disrupt peace,¹³ leaving the Muslim community dependent on self-help measures such as education and public clarification to combat Islamophobia's spread. While the recent Online Safety Act 2025 aims to regulate harmful digital content, concerns remain regarding the authority to adequately tackle the Islamophobia online without stifling legitimate critique or free expression. This article thus seeks to address two central questions: 1) What constitutes Islamophobia in the Malaysian context; and 2) How can Malaysia's policy frameworks evolve and strengthen to effectively counter Islamophobia to uphold the nation's multicultural ethos? By examining socio-political dynamics and legal factors, this work aims to illuminate the challenges facing Muslims in Malaysia and the urgent need for more effective strategies to combat Islamophobia within a Muslim-majority society.

B. Islamophobia: Background and Context

From the nascent stages in the 7th century, Islam has faced persistent misrepresentation and hostility from others in particular from the Christian West. Early Christian texts often demonised Islam as a heresy and depicted Muslims as "Saracens", "infidels", or "pagans"—primitive, idolatrous threats to the nascent Christian world.¹⁴ This deep-rooted theological prejudice spread through various historical epochs, notably during the Crusades solidifying a narrative of conflict and Islam

Case Study from An Anti-Mosque Social Media Page", *Sociology Compass*, vol. 18, no. 1 (2024), pp. 1-14.

¹² Collin Jerome, Nazrinzulaiqa Hasbi, and Su Hie Ting, "Stop Being Racist?: What Malaysians Say About Race on Social Media - A Thematic Analysis", *International Journal of Law, Government and Communication*, vol. 9, no. 36 (2024), pp. 392-407.

¹³ Muhammad Muslim Rusli et al., "Regulating Social Media Responses to Online Harms: A Comparative Study between the European Union (EU) and Malaysia", *Environment-Behaviour Proceedings Journal*, vol. 10, no. SI33 (2025), pp. 45-51.

¹⁴ Frederic H. Chase, Jr, (ed. and trans), *St. John of Damascus: Writing* (Washington, DC: Catholic Univ. of America Press, 1999).

as an existential threat. In this worldview, Islam was often portrayed by western colonisation in Muslim countries around the world where Islam was often regarded as backward, emotional, barbaric, sexist, misogynist and irrational and remain concurrently.¹⁵

Post-colonial narratives continued to perpetuate these stereotypes. The Cold War era often depicted Islam as a bulwark against communism or as a potential destabilizing force. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Samuel Huntington's highly influential "Clash of Civilizations" re-framed Islam as inherently conflicting with Western modernity and values, posing an inevitable ideological struggle. This thesis gained significant traction particularly after the 9/11 attacks, profoundly shaping Western foreign policy and public opinion equated Islam with terrorism, fanaticism, and a global threat inherently incompatible with modernity, democracy, and progress.¹⁶ Media outlets worldwide including Malaysia frequently echoed these reductive narratives.¹⁷

In addition, the rise of Islamophobia in recent decades has become a salient global concern symbolises by growing hostility, discrimination and violence targeting Muslims. Various international events such as the 9/11 attacks the "War on Terror"¹⁸ and tragedy like the Christchurch shooting permanently escalate perceptions of Muslims as security threats worldwide. This hostile narrative is further fueled by far-right movements, political rhetoric as well as media portrayals of Islam as monolithic, violent and incompatible with modern values. The digital age further accelerates the proliferation of online hate by providing echo chambers environment that magnify prejudicial content and disinformation.¹⁹

Similarly in Malaysia, Islamophobia intersects with distinct local dynamics; from multicultural society fluid to a unique constitutional framework. Despite Muslims constitute the majority in Malaysia

¹⁵ R.W. Southern, *Western Views of Islam in the Middle Ages*: (Cambridge, Masschuset: Harvard University Press, 1962).

¹⁶ Samuel P. Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?", *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 72, no. 3 (1993), p. 22.

¹⁷ Isyaku Hassan and Mohd Nazri Latiff Azmi, "Islamophobia in Non-Western Media: A Content Analysis of Selected Online Newspapers", *Newspaper Research Journal*, vol. 42, no. 1 (2021), pp. 29–47.

¹⁸ Naved Bakali, "Islamophobia in Myanmar: The Rohingya Genocide and the 'War on Terror'", *Race & Class*, vol. 62, no. 4 (2021), pp. 53–71.

¹⁹ Nathan Lean, *The Islamophobia Industry: How the Right Manufactures Hatred of Muslim*, 2nd edition (London: Pluto Press, 2017).

58.1%,²⁰ Islamophobia manifests differently compared to Western contexts. Enes Bayraklı et al. aptly describes this term as “non-dominant Islamophobia”, meaning this type of Islamophobia does not typically involve a numerically superior non-Muslim group systematically oppressing a Muslim minority. Instead, its roots lie in internal dynamics already exist through Malaysia’s unique socio-political structure and historical essence.²¹

In the first place, British colonial rule in Malaya (approximately 1824–1957) profoundly redefines the role and perception of Islam. Prior to colonisation, Islam had already established a profound presence across the region. This includes Malay sultanates governed by Islamic principles and a rich Islamic identity interwoven into governance, legal systems, and everyday life.²² The British introduced the concept of “indirect rule” in Malaya, a strategy that allowed local Malay rulers to maintain their symbolic authority while actual political power was vested in British officials. This approach, while ostensibly preserving traditional Malay customs and institutions fundamentally confined Islam to the realm of personal law—governing matters such as marriage, divorce, inheritance and religious rituals. This relegated Islam to a private, rather than a public matter effectively disenfranchise it from broader state governance, administration and economic policy.²³

Subsequently, the British established secular administrative structures. This paradigm shift revamps the previous regime to a Western legal systems, education and bureaucratic models thereby creating a binary where “modernity” equals to secularism and “tradition” (including Islam) with the parochial. Hence, this colonial legacy fosters a new elite; British-educated Malays who were often proficient in English law and administration but view the traditional Islamic legal system as less developed or efficient. This internal division as Hatem Bazian argues contributes to a form of “anti-Islamic modernity” where local expressions

²⁰ Departments of Statistics, *Malaysia - Current Population Estimates 2025* (Putrajaya: Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2025).

²¹ Enes Bayraklı, Farid Hafez, and Léonard Faytre, “Making Sense of Islamophobia in Muslim Societies”, in *Islamophobia in Muslim Majority Societies*, ed. by Enes Bayraklı and Farid Hafez (London and New York: Routledge, 2019), pp. 5-20.

²² Sadiqa Abdul Rahman, “The Impact of Islam on Malaysia Before Independence”, *Journal of Middle East and Islamic Studies*, vol. 11, no. 1 (2024), pp. 1-14

²³ Hafiz Zakariya, “British Policy Towards Muslims and its Impact on the Administration of Islam in the Federated Malay States, 1874-1920S”, *Journal of Humanities, Language, Culture and Business*, vol. 3, no. 13 (2019), pp. 68–76.

of Islam were implicitly or explicitly deemed backward in comparison to Western norms.²⁴ The influence of British common law inherently establishes a strong secular precedent that any post-independence Malaysia's endeavour to reintegrate Islamic principles back into the public governance comes with significant resistance.²⁵

Despite this, Malaysia was endowed with an extensive constitutional framework regarding Islam and the protection of Malay Muslim. The constitutional supremacy of Islam and Malay special privileges are both enshrined under the Article 3(1) of the Federal Constitution (FC) and the Article 153 respectively. These provisions were designed to uplift the Malay community post-colonialism but, rather than restoring the vibrant Islamic identity to encapsulate the governance once more, the architecture has inadvertently entrenched into a power imbalance resting primarily on the Malay's shoulder.²⁶ This dominance fosters perceptions among non-Malay communities of "Islamisation" or ethnic favouritism due to the preferential privileges given.²⁷

On the contrary, the non-Malay communities particularly the Chinese, have long dominated the nation's economic sphere. The demographic-political-economic power imbalance creates tensions whereby non-Malays may resist policies perceive as promoting Malay-Muslim interests as they fearing the policy may erode their economic standing or secular rights. This resistance, while sometimes rooted in legitimate demands for equality and meritocracy, can at times be inferred through prejudice views against Islamic institutions or practices.²⁸ To some extent, Islamic features is seen as shield to protect the Malay-Muslims and culture; a direct attack against the non-Malaysia culture

²⁴ Hatem Bazian, "‘Religion Building’ and Foreign Policy", in *Islamophobia in Muslim Majority Societies*, ed. by Enes Bayraklı and Farid Hafez (London and New York: Routledge, 2019), pp. 45-58.

²⁵ Farid Sufian Shuaib, "Administration of Islamic Law and Human Rights: The Basis and Its Trajectory in Malaysia", *Al-Jāmi'ab: Journal of Islamic Studies*, vol. 56, no. 2 (2018), pp. 281-304.

²⁶ Shad Saleem Faruqi, "Legal Pluralism in Malaysia: Navigating the Civil and Shariah Systems", *ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute Perspective*, no. 27 (2025), pp. 1-12.

²⁷ Thameem Ushama and Abdul Rashid Moten, "Non-Muslim Views about Islam and Muslims in Malaysia: An Empirical Study", *Intellectual Discourse*, vol. 14, no. 2 (2006), pp. 203-15.

²⁸ James Chin, "Racism towards the Chinese Minority in Malaysia: Political Islam and Institutional Barriers", *The Political Quarterly*, vol. 93, no. 3 (2022), pp. 451-9. *Al-Jāmi'ab*, Vol. 63, No. 1, 2025 M/1447 H

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and economic interest.²⁹

In essence, with Malaysia's pluralistic society comprises of distinct ethnic and religious groups living in close proximity, inevitably experiences frictions. These frictions often amplified by political rhetoric mutate into absolute hatred when discussions about national identity, resource allocation or religious freedom become contentious. This discord raises the question of whether these growing resentments should be viewed as manifestations of Islamophobia or simply as internal conflicts. In the following section, this article explores the complex manifestations of Islamophobia in Malaysia particularly from liberal Muslim groups and non-Muslim communities. This analysis examines the socio-political dynamics that fuel these tensions and their broader implications.

C. Manifestations of Islamophobia in Malaysia?

Islamophobia in Malaysia is not monolithic; it emerges from a complex interplay of internal critiques within the Muslim community and external resistance from non-Muslim groups. These manifestations are often amplified by the pervasive reach of social media.³⁰ Crucially, understanding these dynamics requires not just identifying instances Islamophobia outcry, but also engaging with the motivations and visions of the stakeholders, thus providing a more balance and dialectical analysis.

1. *Liberal Muslim Perspectives and Critiques*

A significant internal source of what is known as Islamophobia stems from perspectives within the Muslim community itself, particularly from "liberal Muslim" intellectuals and activists. This phenomenon as observes by Mazlan Ibrahim and Faiz Hadi Sanadi in global context, can be traced back to the desire to reconcile religious practices with the expectations of worldwide secular indoctrination. This is not limited to secular governance but also about adapting Islamic teachings in ways that align with modern and liberal values, such as individual autonomy and rationality.³¹ Furthermore, the colonial indoctrination had already instilled

²⁹ Pusat KOMAS, *Malaysia Racism Report* (Petaling Jaya: Pusat KOMAS Malaysia, 2024).

³⁰ Mohd Shaiful Hj Zainudin, et al., "The Powerful of Social Media Usage towards Islamophobia Understanding among Malaysian Netizens", *Journal of Media and Information Warfare*, vol. 14, no. 2 (2021), pp. 15–30.

³¹ Mazlan Ibrahim and Faiz Hadi Sanadi, "Liberal Muslim Interpretation of Islamic Shari'a: An Analysis", *Akademika*, vol. 94, no. 1 (2024), pp. 14–25.

scepticism among educated elites regarding traditional Islamic thought and practices. Both conditions lead to a subconscious internalization of the “anti-Islamic modernity” trope, where Islamic norms were perceived as obstacles to progress and development.³² Building on this theme, I identify key groups and individuals embody this critique as below:

The *first* is G25, a group of prominent Malaysians faces criticism from conservative Muslim factions for their positions; questioning the jurisdiction of Shariah courts, advocating for human rights (including implicit rights for apostates), and decriminalizing *kebahwat* (close proximity between unmarried couples).³³ Moreover, their critiques of institutions like JAKIM are seen by some as undermining religious authority and promoting Western secular values at the expense of Islam.³⁴ In contrast, G25 posits herself as a moderate voice guided by Islamic principles of *Wasatiyah* (moderation) and *Maqasid Syariah* (objectives of Islamic law) emphasises justice, compassion and equity. G25 refuse to identify herself as secular as she only advocates for reforms that align Islamic law with the FC, rights for all citizens and better governance.³⁵

The *second* is SIS advocates for a progressive interpretation of Islam by challenging the patriarchal understandings of fiqh and gender particularly for women. Their opposition to discriminatory laws such as polygamy and child marriage has led to being labelled “deviant” or “liberal” by religious authorities, although this fatwa was currently overturn by the civil court in Malaysia.³⁶ In sum, their stance often alleged as anti-Islamic fuelling the belief that Islam is incompatible with modern justice.³⁷ Contrary to the critics’ belief, SIS founded in 1993 advocates

³² Schirin Amir-Moazami, “Liberal-Secular Power and The Traps of Muslim Integration in Western Europe”, *The British Journal of Sociology*, vol. 73, no. 3 (2022), pp. 607–22.

³³ G25 Malaysia, *Administration of Matters Pertaining Islam* (Bukit Damansara: G25 Malaysia, 2020).

³⁴ Muhammad Rashidi Wahab et al., “Kritikan Liberalisme Terhadap Institusi Islam Dalam Wacana Negara Sekular: Satu Penelitian Awal (Criticism of Liberalism Towards Islamic Institutions in Secular State Discourse: A Preliminary Study)”, *Jurnal Al-Ummah*, vol. 1 (2019), pp. 37–99.

³⁵ G25 Malaysia, “G25 Malaysia: About Us and Mission”, *G25 Malaysia*, <https://www.g25malaysia.com/about-us-1>.

³⁶ FC Malaysia, *SIS Forum (Malaysia) & Anor v Jawatankuasa Fatwa Negeri Selangor & Others*, vol. 5 (2025).

³⁷ Norzulaili Mohd Ghazali et al., “An Analysis of Sisters in Islam’s (SIS) Misinterpretation of the Gender Equality in the Quran”, *Journal of Ma’ālim al-Qur’ān wa al-Sunnah*, vol. 16, no. 2 (2020), pp. 31–47.

for gender equality and human rights within an Islamic context. Initially focused on challenging discriminatory Islamic family laws in Malaysia, their work concurrently extends to reinterpret Islamic texts to promote justice, mercy and a more egalitarian view of women's roles in society.³⁸

Individual acts by Muslims that are perceived to insult conventional Islamic norms often provoke public outrage and reinforce Islamophobic stereotypes. For instance, a hijab-wearing comedian was fined RM8,000 after a video of her indecent stand-up performance went viral.³⁹ In another case, a food delivery rider faced RM50,000 fine for insulting the Prophet Muhammad on his YouTube channel.⁴⁰ Notably, both were prosecuted because they openly oppose to Islamic practises and belief. This leads to authorities' intervention and immediate enforcement under the law. Divergently, when Muslims openly abandon Islamic practices, such as removing the hijab or refuse to prayer, no authorities intervention as personal choice does not involve belittling Islam entirely. In response, I suggest that this complex dynamic suggests two possibilities; Muslims who publicly oppose Islamic teachings may be viewed as self-hating or even Islamophobic; and liberal Muslims might argue that Islam imposes restrictions and hypocrisy that conflict with individual freedoms in personal spaces. Either way, these reactions highlight the sensitive and high stakes surrounding public expressions related to Islam.

In a nutshell, is the core issue here lies in the complex nature of modernists movements and individual reactions in public. While some actions may be acknowledged as genuine dissent or calls for reform, others aggressively reinforce negative Islamophobia stereotypes against the target group. These behaviours occupy a delicate boundary best define as a form of "subtle Islamophobia" where legitimate criticism and prejudice intersect. Recognising this subtle distinction is crucial for developing a balance and nuance responses in against the Islamophobia expression.⁴¹

³⁸ Zuraidah Kamaruddin et al., "The History of Sisters in Islam", *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, vol. 8, no. 11 (2018), pp. 551-8.

³⁹ Rahmat Khairulrijal, "Siti Nuramira fined RM8,000 for uttering words to hurt feelings of others", *New Straits Times* (17 Apr 2023), <https://www.nst.com.my/news/crime-courts/2023/04/900402/siti-nuramira-fined-rm8000-uttering-words-hurt-feelings-others>.

⁴⁰ Sinar Daily, "Food rider fined RM50,000 for insulting Islam", *Sinar Daily* (21 Jul 2022), <https://www.sinardaily.my/article/176940/focus/national/food-rider-fined-rm50000-for-insulting-islam>.

⁴¹ Tamir Moustafa, "Liberal Rights versus Islamic Law? The Construction of a Binary in Malaysian Politics", *Law & Society Review*, vol. 47, no. 4 (2013), pp. 771–802.

2. *Non-Muslim Fears of “Islamisation”*

A second major source of what is perceived as Islamophobia in Malaysia arises from the non-Muslim communities who constitute a significant minority. Their resistance often framed around fears of “Islamisation”, a concern that Islamic elements are being increasingly imposed upon the public sphere, potentially erode the Malaysia’s secular identity or the rights of non-Muslims. The Democratic Action Party (DAP) is often accused by conservative Malay-Muslim groups particularly PAS of being anti-Malay and anti-Muslim. These accusations stem from DAP’s calls for a secular FC, disrespect Malay rulers, and criticism of Islamic institutions like JAKIM, the azan and Friday sermons.⁴² As a matter of fact, DAP is a secular and multi-racial party that views religion as a private matter. Leaders like Lim Kit Siang has consistently emphasised that DAP is an inclusive and non-religious stance with members from various faiths or none. Their critiques of Islamic policies are focused on upholding constitutional rights and secular governance, advocating for public policies that serve all citizens equally and ensuring a pluralistic Malaysia where no religion dominates public life.⁴³

Similarly, Hindu Rights Action Force (HINDRAF)’s advocacy for the Indian community in Malaysia always revolve around the focus of welfare and rights of the Malaysian Indian community. Their concerns surround the issues of freedom for minorities, the abolition of Indian poverty, Indian identity and religious protection. The movement inadvertently intersects with the sensitivities of Malay-Muslim groups especially in the context of religious freedom and abolition of the Bumiputera policy.⁴⁴ At some point, HINDRAF was considered as a national threat to public security and order. This is happened as HINDRAF falsely accused the government of carrying out ethnic cleansing against the Indian community in Malaysia.⁴⁵ Despite government denials and

⁴² FMT Reporters, “PAS lists 10 reasons why DAP is anti-Malay, anti-Muslim”, *Free Malaysia Today* (30 Sep 2022), <https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2022/09/30/pas-lists-10-reasons-why-dap-is-anti-malay-anti-muslim>.

⁴³ Khairil Izamin Ahmad, “A ‘Secular’ Malaysia? Toward An Alternative Democratic Ethos”, *Intellectual Discourse*, vol. 21, no. 2 (2013), pp. 147–69.

⁴⁴ Andrew C. Willford, with the collaboration of S. Nagarajan, *Tamils and the Haunting of Justice: History and Recognition in Malaysia’s Plantations* (Honolulu: University Hawai’s Press, 2014).

⁴⁵ Lai Fong Yang and Md Sidin Ahmad Ishak, “Framing Interethnic Conflict in Malaysia: A Comparative Analysis of Newspaper Coverage on the Hindu Rights Action Force (Hindraf)”, *International Journal of Communication*, vol. 6 (2012), pp. 166–89.

attempts at compromise, HINDRAF leaders persistently asserted that Malaysia gradually cleanses the Indian community, even raising this issue with the United Kingdom. Today, HINDRAF leaders have transitioned into politics, working towards improving the welfare and rights of the Indian community.⁴⁶

Most of the anti-Islamic resistance comes from the fear of Islamisation especially in the education. Dong Zong fiercely oppose a Jawi module in vernacular schools viewing the subject as an attempt to “Islamise” non-Muslim students leading to the erosion of cultural identity and curriculum autonomy.⁴⁷ Similar concerns arose over the proposal to teach Imam Nawawi’s 40 Hadith in religious schools, as non-Muslim groups feared the indoctrination might spread Islamic “extremism” despite the curriculum focuses only Muslim students.⁴⁸ Lastly, the mandatory TITAS course on Islamic and Asian civilisations in universities faced backlash from non-Muslim students who felt it promoted Islamic superiority and religious propaganda.⁴⁹ Consequently, this group called for a more balance approach that treats all civilisations equally in a secular academic setting.

This resistance often heatedly debated on social media, demonstrate Saul Takahashi’s observation that Western-influenced fears of religious fundamentalism can easily spill into non-Western societies.⁵⁰ In Malaysia, these fears become intertwine with ethnic politics and fear of Islam. Hindraf’s efforts focus on equality, welfare and minority rights. Inherently, their movement calls for justice not Islamophobia. On the other hand, groups like DAP and some Chinese communities display clearer signs of Islamophobia. They openly challenge Islamic policies and institutions by stirring fears of Islamisation thus deepen religious tensions between

⁴⁶ Arunajeet Kaur, “The Hindu Rights Action Force and the Malaysian Indian minority after the 2018 General Election in Malaysia”, *RISIS Working Paper*, no. 319 (2018), pp. 1–18.

⁴⁷ Elijah Hee, “Dispelling public ignorance about Jawi | FMT”, *Free Malaysia Today* (3 Aug 2019), <https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/opinion/2019/08/03/dispelling-public-ignorance-about-jawi>.

⁴⁸ Vanitha Nadaraj, “Malaysian education sinks deeper into Islamization”, *Union of Catholic Asian News* (30 Aug 2023), <https://www.ucanews.com/news/malaysian-education-sinks-deeper-into-islamization/102426>.

⁴⁹ Editor The Edge, “Highlight: Titas is not to convert non-Muslim students, assures DPM”, *The Edge Malaysia* (19 Jul 2013), <https://theedgemaalaysia.com/article/highlight-titas-not-convert-non-muslim-students-assures-dpm-0>.

⁵⁰ Saul J. Takahashi, “Islamophobia in Japan: A Country at a Crossroads”, *Islamophobia Studies Journal*, vol. 6, no. 2 (2021), pp. 167–81.

the Malay Muslims and the non-Muslims. Unlike subtle critiques, their opposition is more direct and hostile. A fair academic view recognises this distinction between calls for equality and outright prejudice against Islam.

Islamophobia manifests in complex ways among different groups. Liberal groups advocate secularism and reform, often causing tension through their critiques of Islamic institutions. Meanwhile, some non-Muslim express overt hostility by stoking fears of Islamisation and deepening religious divides. This range, from subtleties to overt hostility, demands extensive academic attention and balance responses to foster unity, respect and genuine pluralism in Malaysia's multicultural fabric.

D. Social Media: Spreading Islamophobia in Malaysia

The digital landscape plays an exceptionally critical and detrimental role in the proliferation of Islamophobia. The online characteristics — instantaneous reach, anonymity, algorithmic influence and the formation of echo chambers — provide fertile ground for the spread of prejudice narratives. Malaysia with 34.9 million internet users and 25.1 million active social media users as of early 2025, is particularly susceptible to these dynamics.⁵¹ Malaysian social media has been rife with examples illustrating its role in Islamophobia.

In November 2018, a land dispute over the relocation of the Seafeld Sri Maha Mariamman Temple in Subang Jaya led to a violent riot, during which fireman Muhammad Adib Mohd Kassim was critically injured and later died. The incident fueled Islamophobic sentiment as non-Muslims believed the demolition of the Hindu temple as an attack by a Muslim-majority country on Hindu beliefs. Social media exacerbated the situation, spreading racial tensions and depicting the violence in a way that inflamed further division between Malay Muslims and the Indian Hindu community.⁵² Another case, the Tourism Malaysia gala dinner sparked controversy when alcohol was served at an event attended by Muslim guests, violating government regulations that ban alcohol at state-sponsored events.⁵³ Many saw this as an Islamophobic act, undermine

⁵¹ Imran Awan (ed.), *Islamophobia in Cyberspace: Hate Crimes Go Viral*, 1st edition (Oxon: Routledge, 2016).

⁵² Nurul Hidayah Watimin et al., "Religious and Racial Tension Breakout: An Online Pre-Crisis Detection Strategy Via Sentiment Analysis for Riot Crime Prevention", *Social Network Analysis and Mining*, vol. 13, no. 1 (2023), pp. 1–17.

⁵³ Bernama, "Alcohol controversy: Tourism minister says it's his mistake for not announcing earlier gala dinner had become private function", *The Edge Malaysia* (9 Oct *Al-Jāmi'ah*, Vol. 63, No. 1, 2025 M/1447 H

Malaysia's Muslim identity and Islam. The situation worsens when DAP representatives condoned the act, intensifying the perception that Islamic values were being disregarded and marginalised Muslim in favour of a more secular agenda.

Islamophobia against PAS stems from fears that PAS seek to establish an Islamic state and implementing Sharia law could marginalize non-Muslims. Examples include PAS's push for hudud laws a.k.a. Islamic criminal punishments and their calls for the mandatory use of Jawi script in education, seen as attempt to Islamise public life. These policies are viewed by critics as incompatible with Malaysia's multicultural identity, fueling concerns that non-Muslims' rights and freedoms would be restricted.⁵⁴ PAS is often criticized for embodying a more conservative, hard-line interpretation of Islam as similar as to the Taliban's ideology. Critics fear that PAS's policies could lead to an environment of religious extremism and promoting an authoritarian theocratic vision that is out of step with Malaysia's pluralistic society. These views contribute to concerns that PAS's influence could foster a negative, oppressive interpretation of Islam similar to the Taliban's rule.⁵⁵

The "Allah socks" controversy is worthy of attention. It erupted in March 2024 when KK Super Mart sold socks with the word "Allah" on them, sparking outrage in the Muslim community. Many considered it as highly disrespectful, as associating Allah's name with feet is viewed as sacrilegious in Islam. Despite apologies from the store and supplier, the controversy escalated with the Malaysian king condemning the act and fines imposed on the responsible parties. The incident led to a rise in calls for a boycott of KK Super Mart and some of its outlets were targeted in Molotov cocktail attacks, highlighting growing religious tensions and Islamophobic sentiments in Malaysia.⁵⁶

There have been numerous instances where individuals both Muslim and non-Muslim, have posted comments or images deemed insulting to Prophet Muhammad, the Quran or other Islamic symbols. These incidents invariably go viral, triggering widespread condemnation

2025), <https://theedgemalaysia.com/node/773382>.

⁵⁴ Joseph Chin Yong Liow, "Exigency or expediency? Contextualising political Islam and the PAS challenge in Malaysian politics", *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 25, no. 2 (2004), pp. 359–72.

⁵⁵ Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid, "The Islamic Opposition in Malaysia: New Trajectories and Directions?", *RSIS Working Paper*, no. 151 (2008).

⁵⁶ Cheryl Poo, "2024 Newsmakers: KK Mart sock drama", *The Edge Malaysia* (14 Jan 2025), <https://theedgemalaysia.com/node/739632>.

from Muslim groups, calls for police action, often leading to arrests and charges under various laws, but also further entrenching the “us vs. them” mentality. This growing wave of online hate against Islam with 61 arrests made between 2020 and 2024, reflects an increasing trend.⁵⁷ These actions are condemned as disrespectful to Islamic beliefs, reinforcing the division between Muslims and others in society. Similarly, the “KK Mart sandwich halal issue” erupted when a ham and cheese sandwich sold at KK Super Mart was found to bear a halal logo without proper certification. The supplier lacked official Malaysian Halal Certification, leading to public outrage. Although lab tests confirmed no pork DNA in the sandwich, the misuse of the halal logo sparked accusations of misleading Muslim consumers. This controversy fueled Islamophobic sentiments, as critics viewed the omission as a violation of Muslim trust and an example of disrespecting halal standards, furthering tensions over food labeling and religious sensitivities in Malaysia.⁵⁸

These various incidents collectively highlight how social media in Malaysia has become a potent catalyst in escalating mistrust and hostility between Muslim and non-Muslim communities. Muslim communities widely perceive these episodes and the broader social media environment as manifestations of Islamophobia, irrational fear, hostility, or disrespect targeted at Islam and Muslims, which they view as undermining their religious dignity, cultural values and social cohesion. The heightened visibility of such incidents online magnifies feelings of marginalization, fear and alienation among Muslims, who respond with calls for solidarity and protective legal or social measures.⁵⁹

Accordingly, these developments carry significant consequences for Malaysia’s pluralistic society. Escalating Islamophobia risks fracturing interfaith relations, deepening social divides as well as precipitating cycles of mistrust and retaliation. Nowadays, worldwide government and civil society face constant pressure between balancing freedom of expression and safeguarding religious sensitivities to foster peaceful

⁵⁷ Aslinda Nasir and Aiman Ali, “61 tangkapan babitkan hina agama Islam”, *Utusan Malaysia* (25 Feb 2025), https://www.utusan.com.my/nasional/2025/02/61-tangkapan-babitkan-hina-agama-islam-mohd-naim/#google_vignette.

⁵⁸ A’bidah Zaid Shirbeeni, “KK Mart caught in halal ham and cheese sandwich controversy”, *Marketing-Interactive* (14 Jan 2025), <https://www.marketing-interactive.com/kk-mart-caught-in-halal-ham-and-cheese-sandwich-controversy>.

⁵⁹ Edin Kozaric, “Are Muslim Experiences Taken Seriously in Theories of Islamophobia? A Literature Review of Muslim Experiences with Social Exclusion in The West”, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol. 47, no. 5 (2024), pp. 907–40.

coexistence. Because of that, Islamophobia issue requires effective strategies including proactive social media governance, inclusive dialogue across communities or awareness that dispels stereotypes while promoting respect for diversity. For this reason, I will look upon two alternatives to Islamophobia problem: 1) Islamophobia regulatory framework; and 2) Islamophobia education program.

E. Granular Review of Legal and Policy Frameworks: Efficacy and Limitations

Malaysia's legal and policy landscape offers a patchwork of provisions that touch upon religious harmony and freedom of expression, but often fall short of directly and comprehensively addressing contemporary Islamophobia. While the intent is to maintain social order, the existing framework is largely reactive only intervening after harm has occurred. Sometimes, the current framework lacks the specific authority and capability required to tackle subtle and pervasive online prejudices.⁶⁰

Malaysia's legal system addresses religious offenses primarily through general laws such as the SA, PC and CMA. But in reality, these laws lack specific provisions to combat Islamophobia. These laws including Sections 298 and 298A of the PC criminalise actions that insult religious sentiments including Islam. However, they are often used reactively after incidents occur rather than proactively addressing systemic Islamophobic sentiments.⁶¹ On the other hand, while the SA criminalizes speech that incites hatred, the systematic application of SA has led to concerns about the act overreach; stifling freedom of expression and misused to silence legitimate criticism of government policies rather than curbing hate speech.⁶²

In addition, both the SA and the CMA do not specifically target Islamophobia as a unique issue, limiting their effectiveness in addressing the structural and systemic nature of Islamophobia. Instead, convictions under these laws focus on protecting public security and order to avoid any possible larger racial tensions. This approach is problematic because

⁶⁰ Norazlina Abdul Aziz et al., "Dear Influencer! Speak Freely but Ethically and Legally", *Environment-Behaviour Proceedings Journal*, vol. 10, no. SI30 (2025), pp. 165–9.

⁶¹ Ian Gough, "Understanding prevention policy: A theoretical approach", *LSE Research Online* (2013), pp. 1–24.

⁶² Murni Wan Mohd Nor et al., "Realising Accepted UPR Recommendations: Challenges and Realities in Malaysia's Commitment to Enforce Freedom of Expression", *Journal of Strategic Studies & International Affairs*, vol. 3, no. SI1 (2023), pp. 66–81.

it allows religious bias and tensions to persist unaddressed. Consequently, Islamophobia remains entrenched. Achieving genuine religious harmony and mutual understanding becomes difficult when religion is continually used as a political tool.

Further complicating enforcement is the jurisdictional overlap between civil and Syariah courts, which can lead to conflicting interpretations and inconsistent solutions. The Syariah law caters hate speech committed by Muslims only as the law is not applicable to non-Muslim offenders. While the Syariah framework may offer rehabilitation or awareness counseling as a part of Islamophobia solutions,⁶³ this option absents in conventional legal frameworks. However, as Syariah framework is subordinate to the civil system, the flexibility offered by Syariah architecture is often overlook. In contrast, Syariah courts have limited power with fine and jail term being minimal, undermining the deterrence effect. This issue highlight misses potentials for cooperation between both systems in effectively addressing the root causes of Islamophobia.

Though the CMA addresses online insults, the act is way too obsolete to address the algorithmic complexities of online harms and Islamophobia. The newly introduced Online Safety Act 2025 (OSA) holds promise as a game changer, potentially revolutionizing the fight against Islamophobia. By imposing stricter obligations on online platforms, the act aims to enhance online safety and curb harmful content. The MCMC can now issue directives to permanently block “priority harmful” or “harmful content” with service providers required to notify both MCMC and the user about actions taken. However, the law remains untested and critics argue that the act is another regulation in disguise aims to stifle freedom of expression in Malaysia.

Therefore, there is a significant gap in Malaysia’s legal framework with the lack of a dedicated anti-Islamophobia law or an Islamophobia-counter-attack design. To better address Islamophobia, Malaysia could dive into a dedicated monitoring mechanisms and distinctive legal frameworks to address online hate. While OSA could provide a more comprehensive approach to content moderation as a preventive approach to Islamophobia, anti-Islamophobia law should complement the enforcement through clear definitions and parameter to avoid misused for political repression. This would clarify the boundary between lawful criticism and unlawful prejudice. The anti-Islamophobia law might also bring key reforms. Firstly, it should encourage cooperation between

⁶³ Parliament of Malaysia, *Syariah Criminal Offences (Federal Territories) Act 1997*.

civil and Syariah systems to address Islamophobia at its root rather than merely focus on deterrence. This could include Syariah-based one-on-one counseling for Muslim offenders and expanded religious respect awareness programs. Secondly, punishments should go beyond fines and imprisonment to incorporate alternatives such as community service and compulsory national service. These rehabilitative approaches aim not just to deter but to nurture mutual respect for diverse religions and cultures.

In response to this proposal, I assume that Chinese community will be outraged as Islamophobia law might persist as another “Islamisation” of the minority community. To counter-intuitive with this predicament, I believe that talk and discussion must be done where all stakeholders sit down and negotiate on the content of the Islamophobia law. While the outcome might not satisfy everyone, it is important to note that this proposed law is distinctive; as it takes into consideration on all structures of society. Following this, the next section will explore on education designed to support these initiatives.

F. Multi-stakeholder Education Effect?

Primarily, education plays a vital role in countering islamophobia. This involves the duty to understand the sources of Islamophobia because through the identification of the root cause, Madihah Mohd Razamin et al. believe that we can effectively address and counter the prejudice faced by Muslims.⁶⁴ For this reason, constant research on cause and effect as well as the extent of Islamophobia across different sectors of society such as education, media, politics and employment must be done. This also includes data collection through surveys and public opinion research to capture the Islamophobic attitudes and demography. Finally, the progress on the effectiveness of anti-Islamophobia program must be carefully measured and indexed.

Next, the interfaith dialogue and program initiatives play a crucial role in fostering mutual understanding and cooperation across different faiths. Instances like the Selangor Inter-Religious Dialogue Convention are key in finding common ground and addressing shared practical

⁶⁴ Madihah Mohd Razamin et al., “Students’ Views of the Contributing Factors, Effects and Ways to Overcome Islamophobia in Malaysia and the West”, *International Journal of Academic Research in Progressive Education and Development*, vol. 12, no. 2 (2023), pp. 555-69.

issues between religious and cultural entities.⁶⁵ Despite past challenges,⁶⁶ there is a need for an inclusive society where people of all faiths can live harmoniously. This can start with youth engagement and cultural exchanges to challenge stereotypes. Religious institutions like mosques, churches and temples should also be encouraged to organise joint community projects to build understanding and strengthen bonds across faiths. This also includes flexible punishments under the radar of the propose anti-Islamophobia law, a punishment to educate and be aware.

Finally, Malaysia must empower NGOs and civil society to combat prejudice and hate. By drawing inspiration from the European Union's model whereby all stakeholders, including companies, NGOs, and civil society, convene to negotiate their interests, this led to enactment of the one of the most comprehensive digital regulation structures. In essence, all parties collaborate to tackle online harms with multi-stakeholder engagement allows all parties to unite in addressing online harms particularly Islamophobia, ensuring a more inclusive, transparent and effective anti-Islamophobia regulatory framework. This feature will become a catalyst towards a better mutual cooperation that does not only cater on anti-Islamophobia issue, but also on the concerns of other races.

G. Concluding Remarks

Islamophobia in Malaysia remains a complex yet the legal and social responses are often unclear and inconsistent. The lack of a specific legal definition of Islamophobia leaves room for ambiguity with existing laws like SA and Penal Code being reactive and general. While these laws address hate speech, they often fail to adequately address the systemic, online and subtle forms of Islamophobia. To truly combat Islamophobia, Malaysia must establish an anti-Islamophobia architecture inspired from internationally recognize standards, dealing with that explicitly addresses Islamophobia and aligns with global human rights principles while balancing the protection of freedom of expression. The journey will face hurdles. Some liberal groups and non-Muslim communities may resist cooperation due to mistrust or fear of political manipulation.

⁶⁵ International Institute of Advanced Islamic Studies Malaysia, *Selangor Inter-Dialogue Convention* (Kuala Lumpur: International Institute of Advanced Islamic Studies Malaysia, 2022).

⁶⁶ Ahmad Redzuan Mohamad, et al., "Interfaith Commission Malaysia: Analisis Ke Atas Penubuhannya Dalam Merealisasikan Keharmonian Agama di Malaysia", *Journal of Islamic Social Sciences and Humanities*, vol. 11 (2017), pp. 77–93.

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Building trust requires transparent dialogue, inclusive policy making and assurance that protections will be equitable and the state desires on problem solution without suppressing legitimate concern. Only through sustainable engagement and clear safeguards can Malaysia hope to forge a united front against Islamophobia and nurture a truly harmonious multicultural society.

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