

# Malaysia: Why target us? Transgender activist questions minister

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**Transgender activist Nisha Ayub has questioned why religious authorities are once again targeting the transgender community.**

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## Transgender activist questions minister

In a public statement yesterday, she urged Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Zulkifli Mohamad Al-Bakri, who is in charge of religious affairs, to explain what he meant by saying the Federal Territories Islamic Religious Department (Jawi) now had "[full license](#)" to act against the community.

"Such statements (from the minister) can cause more harm and fear towards the transgender (community) and will create an unsafe environment for the community," she said on her Facebook page.

Nisha questioned why the government was threatening to trample on people's rights to identify and express themselves as transgender when they posed no harm to the country or others.

"So now we are not allowed to even walk in public being who we are? Are we now being denied our rights as human beings and citizens of Malaysia?"

"What happened to our rights based on the Federal Constitution of Malaysia? Rights to personal liberty, equality, expression, movement, religion and so on? Why target us the minorities? Why?" she asked.

This was especially when many from her community were trying their best to recover economically from the Covid-19 pandemic, she added.

Earlier yesterday, Zulkifli announced on Facebook that he was empowering Jawi to arrest transgender persons and "educate" them so that they "return to the right path".

This comes amidst the online furore over revealing photographs cosmetics entrepreneur Nur Sajat posted of herself on her personal Instagram account.

This led calls for the Perikatan Nasional (PN) government to take action on the transgender

businessperson.

Back in 2018, then religious affairs minister Mujahid Yusof Rawa had called upon the public to [stop discriminating](#) against transgender people to prevent members of the community from resorting to sex work.

Following a meeting with Nisha, he had also urged transgender people to be given respect and equal access to health, education and houses of worship.

## **Minister gives 'full licence' for authorities to act against transgenders**

The Minister in the Prime Minister's Department in charge of religious affairs Zulkifli Mohamad Al-Bakri has given "full licence" to the Federal Territories Islamic Religious Department (Jawi) to take action against the transgender community.

He said it is not just about arrests, but also to provide religious education so that the transgender community will "return to the right path".

"I have given all Jawi authorities full licence to carry out its enforcement actions, as well as they can, in the Federal Territories.

"With the condition that they must comply with the standard operating procedures (SOPs) which have been put in place," Zulkifli said in a Facebook post today.

Previously, cosmetic entrepreneur Nur Sajat, who is transgender, went viral among netizens again for her controversial posts on social media where she allegedly wore inappropriate outfits.

Sajat's posts have incited netizens who urged the authorities to take action against her.

Pencetus Ummah (PU) member Syed Bakri al-Yahya was one of those who urged the Perikatan Nasional (PN) government to take strict action on this issue.

He urged PAS leaders, ministers, and religious officers to take immediate action against Nur Sajat who he described as becoming "more daring" as she had posted pictures of herself wearing a bikini on social media.

"I remember under Pakatan Harapan's minister in charge of religious affairs Mujahid Yusof Rawa, when he was friendly towards the LGBT community, we criticised him for not being firm on this issue. Now we hope the PN minister in charge will explain this issue.

"If during Harapan's time, we said the minister was not performing and so on, we hope the minister now, under PN, will carry out his duties, that the officers will carry out their duties, and the religious department responsible will take action.

"Please convey to the minister in charge and PAS, for example, what we need to do or what the NGOs stand is, to prevent what is happening," Syed said on social media.

Zulkifli had said that Islam is a religion that seeks to educate and it is the authorities' responsibility to mentor those who have strayed from the path so that they will change.

"We do not want to just arrest them, but what is most important is tarbiah (educate) them wisely so that they (transgender community) will come back to the right path.

“Islam is a religion that seeks to educate. This requires coordinated efforts from all agencies under the religious affairs department in the prime minister’s department,” he said.

## **LETTER | LGBTQ+ Malaysians still deserve a better future**

In 2018, I wrote a [letter](#), which *Malaysiakini* published, titled *LGBTQ Malaysians deserve a better future*, in which I demanded that the incoming Malaysian government stop the criminalisation, persecution and discrimination against members of the LGBTQ+ community.

Two years later, LGBTQ+ Malaysians continue to be discriminated against and marginalised, and worse, violently attacked, arrested, caned, or imprisoned under the order of the Malaysian government.

Muhyiddin Yassin, the current prime minister of Malaysia, dedicated government funding to promote homophobia and told a national counselling conference in 2012 that “the symptoms of sexual orientation disorder like LGBT, which was previously faced by the Western society, are now faced in our society, and that the profession was needed to curb the spread of LGBT groups”.

This directly contradicts expert medical opinion. For example, in 1990, the World Health Organization declassified homosexuality as a mental disorder. Unfortunately, after decades of progress made by many countries around the world, Malaysia continues to criminalise same-sex relations.

Throughout his political career, the prime minister has demonstrated his absolute refusal to grant basic legal protections to LGBTQ+ citizens. This is the prime minister who compelled the police to investigate activists behind a rally defending LGBTQ+ rights. This is the prime minister who said that human rights advocates in Malaysia are ‘poisoning’ the minds of Muslims to accept ‘deviant practices’.

This is also the prime minister who greenlit government departments such as Jakim and MCMC to monitor LGBTQ+ activities online, creating privacy violations and safety concerns. Censorship laws enforced under this prime minister’s regime have been used to restrict LGBTQ+ people’s freedom of expression and make it impossible for them to organise, let alone protest for change.

Under this prime minister’s watch, a lesbian couple was publicly caned while five men were sentenced to jail, caned and fined for attempting gay sex. These government-sanctioned attacks against the LGBTQ+ community are homophobic, inhumane, and clear violations of basic human rights.

The backdoor appointment of Muhyiddin Yassin as the current prime minister, the return of the former ruling Barisan Nasional coalition, and the entry of the Islamist Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) into the government have led to the creation of an ultraconservative ‘Malay-first’ government that further suppresses democratic voices and ignores calls for equality for all Malaysians, including LGBTQ+ citizens.

This abrupt formation of a conservative, racist and homophobic government coalition with members from the corrupt BN regime and radical Islamic party PAS is unprecedented and runs foul of essential democratic values such as liberty and social justice.

Since Muhyiddin manoeuvred his way into the prime ministership, there have been calls by purported PAS members to push for an oppressive agenda that will turn Malaysia into an even more

conservative society. This regressive agenda promotes a stricter version of Islam that calls for Sajat, a local transgender entrepreneur, and other LGBTQ+ members, to be arrested and flogged.

Such homophobia and transphobia exhibited by religious bigots are deplorable. No one should have to fear for their safety and livelihood due to their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Section 377 of Malaysia's archaic penal code criminalising same-sex relations with fines, whippings, and up to 20 years of imprisonment has fostered fear among Malaysians who identify themselves as LGBTQ+. The rise of conservative religious groups has created a hostile environment that perpetrates homophobia and transphobia, pushing LGBTQ+ Malaysians deeper into the closet.

Freedom for all Malaysians requires freedom of LGBTQ+ individuals. The liberation of LGBTQ+ individuals will lead to a better Malaysia that finally holds the government accountable to respect Freedom of Speech, Expression, Press and Religion. Unfortunately, this future is not possible under the current regime that wrangled power through undemocratic, backdoor means with a prime minister known for his false, dangerous and racist ideology of Malay supremacy.

LGBTQ+ identities were celebrated around the world during the virtual [Global Pride](#) event at the end of June. As an openly gay Malaysian who celebrated Pride month, I call for a multiracial government coalition led by a new political leader who is committed to progressive change and social justice for all.

I call on the Malaysian government to take an active stance against homophobia and transphobia. I call on police officers to stop the violent policing, harassment, and arrests of transgender people. Transgender Malaysians have experienced disproportionate levels of police and gang violence and government-sanctioned imprisonment.

I call on Prime Minister Muhyiddin to immediately release all LGBTQ+ detainees who were arrested and imprisoned due to their sexual orientation or gender identity. I also call on the prime minister to ban conversion therapy and make it illegal for politicians, religious leaders and public institutions to endorse or promote anti-LGBTQ+ propaganda.

[Conversion therapy](#) is widely recognised by experts as an especially dangerous practice that forces many LGBTQ+ teenagers into depression and suicide. In 2018, Theresa May, the former prime minister of United Kingdom, [issued a public apology](#) for the UK's colonial anti-gay laws. It is time for the Malaysian prime minister to publicly apologise and acknowledge the severe trauma that has been inflicted upon the LGBTQ+ community and work towards repealing anti-LGBTQ+ laws so that no Malaysians will have to live their lives in fear of who they are and whom they love.

Transgender activists of colour who challenged the status quo through riots and bold resistance played a major role in the history of Pride. Their activism has shown that progressive change can occur if people are willing to be bold, speak up and challenge authority.

The current prime minister and corrupt members within his political circles sidestepped democratic electoral processes that all Malaysians have the right to exercise. This violation of democracy and faith in the political process should be publicly condemned; the current regime should surrender the governing power to a progressive, people-powered multiracial coalition that advocates for true equality for all Malaysians regardless of their race, religion, sexual orientation, or gender identity.

Until this happens, I will continue to be vocal in the fight for LGBTQ+ rights in Malaysia and spotlight human rights abuses and homophobic policies perpetrated (or maintained) by the current regime. I look forward to the day when LGBTQ+ Malaysians can live their life openly and proudly, without being persecuted. Pride month may be over, but the fight for LGBTQ+ equality continues.

Happy Pride.

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## **Malaysiakini**

**Hans How** is a Malaysian gay man and LGBTQ+ activist championing the continued fight for LGBTQ+ equality. You can find him on Twitter @HansHow00. He is also vice-president of [AsylumConnect](#), a tech non-profit providing the first resource website and mobile app for LGBTQ+ asylum.

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