

Weaponising Science: Malaysia's LGBTQ "Research"

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LGBTQ-focused research academics and organisations might sound like a good idea on the surface, but some of this work in Malaysia is actually about pushing homophobic messages disguised as scholarship.

In 2008, Seksualiti Merdeka, a sexual rights festival, was held in Kuala Lumpur. Frequently cited as the first major piece of activism for sexual rights in conservative Malaysia, the event boldly proclaimed: "If one of us ain't free, none of us are!" Although celebrated as a landmark moment for LGBTQ activism, the festival also marked the moment the government attitude towards LGBTQ issues took a turn for the worse. In 2011, the festival—which featured talks, workshops and performances by activists—was banned by the police for inciting public disorder.

Since then, the relationship between the state and the LGBTQ community has continued to be fraught. In recent years, homophobic attitudes have also sought the cover of academia and scholarly "research" in Malaysia.

Conflating queerness with illness

"It's important for us to acknowledge that LGBT bodies have always been medicalised, always been framed in some medical way—we are mentally ill, we need surgery," says Thilaga Sulathireh, a prominent LGBTQ activist working with the pro-trans NGO Justice for Sisters.

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) communities have long been treated as a serious public health issue by Malaysia's public authorities. In 2017, the Ministry of Health organised a video contest encouraging people to submit videos on topics such as gender dysphoria and ways LGBTQ individuals can "prevent, control and seek help"—implying that being queer was something undesirable that required treatment. The contest, worded in a way that framed sexual orientations and identities as public health concerns, incited huge public backlash.

Despite the outcry, Sulathireh believes that there still are "concerted and organised" efforts by both state-backed and independent organisations to stigmatise the LGBTQ community, portraying them as victims of mental illness and disease.

"There is a lot of panic about the global conversation around LGBTQ people," she says. "There is definitely a shift in people discussing gender and sexuality, and many countries have changed their policies and legislation so that there is better enjoyment of human rights for LGBTQ people, which I think is creating some panic and pushback around LGBTQ people."

Religious conservatives often draw connections between being LGBTQ and suffering from some form of illness or disease: a forum organised by the Ma'aruf Club of the International Islamic University Malaysia referred to the existence of queerness as the "chronic cancer of society", while the state's own religious authorities consider gay or transgender people as having "abnormal instincts."

The Ma'aruf Club's forum was relatively small, but Islamic authorities in Malaysia have become extremely influential in recent years, in large part thanks to the politicisation of religion by political elites. Religion has been used by the former Barisan Nasional government as a tool to delegitimise its multi-ethnic political rivals and clamp down on rising dissent. In the 2018 Budget, it was revealed that MYR1.03 billion (US\$252 million) had been allocated for "Islamic development", with the lion's share going to the controversial Islamic Development Department (JAKIM).

Although homosexuality was officially removed from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorder published by the American Psychiatric Association in the 1970s, it's still common in Malaysia—and the wider Southeast Asia—to encounter the belief that anything falling outside the cis-gendered, heterosexual "norm" is a form of mental illness.

"It's a way for authorities to consolidate power... [which] definitely has an Islamic dimension," says Dr Alicia Izharuddin, a gender studies scholar from Universiti Malaya. "People who are in between, those who are progressive or those who claim that this isn't true Islam—I'm just worried that these voices disappear and get shouted down because those on the polarising ends are getting louder."

State connections and power play

In 2016, it emerged that JAKIM—a federal office tasked with governing the implementation of Islam in public life—had been collaborating with the government, particularly the Ministry of Health (MoH), to produce [an action plan](#) (*link in Bahasa Malaysia*) to address LGBTQ individuals, building on the work of existing committees who focus on treatment and rehabilitation plans for LGBTQ people.

"The Ministry of Health works *very* closely with JAKIM," says Vee, a transwoman and community organiser based in Selangor. "We have a module called 'HIV in Islam' targeted at key populations, but it is very repentance focused. While the MoH programme does provide testing and condoms, that [particular] module is all about how these 'key populations' are sinful."

Instead of working to address issues such as poverty or a lack of public information—which have been shown to have an impact on HIV transmission—authorities are actively focusing their resources and attention on criminalising "key populations".

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"What we are seeing is that sexual transmission of HIV is high. So what is the government's response? Is it right to say that all LGBTQ people should be corrected? That approach is not only misguided, it increases harm to those people," says Vee.

Some of JAKIM's programmes have been compared to "conversion therapies" used by Christian evangelicals in the United States; the most well-known is the [mukhayyam](#) programme, which was designed as a form of outreach to the transgender community. Sulathireh notes that these conversion programmes commonly use "a very passive aggressive approach, using love and compassion in a toxic way with a community that already faces a lack of acceptance."

Vee relates how *mukhayyam* organisers never directly urge participants to conform to their assigned-at-birth gender, but instead rely on gaslighting tactics to "psycho your mind".

"It's bit by bit. [They will say,] 'Oh your hair is so nice, it's long—but why don't you cut it shorter, to your shoulder? You will look so good with shorter hair, you still look pretty! [Their approach] is not harsh, but we were so naïve," she says.

The *mukhyyam* programme—whose format has now been replicated by other religious groups such as state religious councils—is an indication of the religious community’s position on LGBTQ issues: that homosexuality or transgenderism is a personal choice or a mental defect, and those afflicted must “*balik ke pangkal jalan* (return to the path)”.

Following the wide influence of JAKIM’s tactics, a cohort of scientists, researchers and ostensible scholars are now bringing anti-LGBTQ discourse and rhetoric into the realm of science and academic research, causing a subtle but notable shift in public discourse.

Academia takes a stand

In late March 2018, Universiti Sains Malaysia’s (USM) alumni club organised a forum entitled “Back to the Fitrah: *Menyantuni LGBT Kembali ke Jalan Allah*”, which loosely translates into “Back to human nature: Returning LGBT [people] to God’s path”.

The forum sparked protests from pro-LGBTQ groups; a coalition of LGBTQ advocacy groups, including Justice for Sisters, Pelangi, Sisters in Islam, and Women’s Aid Organisation released a [press statement](#) in response: “Despite claims of ‘*menyantuni*’ or ‘politely approaching’ LGBTQ persons, many documented cases have shown that such attempts resulted in an invasion of privacy, increase of lack of personal security and safety, increase of targeting and harassment of persons based on gender expression and actual or perceived sexual orientation and gender identity, increase of isolation, all of which can have severe long term impact on the student’s academic performance, health and well-being.”

Tensions were further heightened after Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM) announced the establishment of an “LGBTQ research academy” to study the LGBTQ community through the lens of medical and scientific research. The academy is small, currently consisting of five individuals, and is led by Dr Rafidah Hanim Mokhtar, whose actual area of medical expertise is in cardiovascular biology.

Dr Rafidah’s lack of concrete experience in sexuality or gender research, while worrying, is simply par for the course in Malaysia where many academics commenting on LGBTQ issues tend to lack the relevant credentials. For example, Dr Ahmad Jailani, invited to represent the academic point of view at the “Back to the Fitrah” event, has a PhD in Islamic finance.

The research academy is governed by USIM’s World Fatwa Management and Research Institute (INFAD), formed as a “research and consultation institution [and] information centre on fatwa,” academy director Dr Irwan Mohd Subri tells *New Naratif*. INFAD has close ties with JAKIM and various state-backed Islamic scholars or muftis. Although these people have no authority to issue fatwas—a non-binding but authoritative pronouncement on Islamic law—they are regularly consulted in relation to such decisions.

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Both Dr Irwan and Dr Rafidah say that Islamic tenets could bring real benefits to scientific research, especially in issues of public health and medicine. “It is very important for Islamic scholars today to do field or academic research rather than referring to traditional textbooks,” Dr Irwan says. “Islamic scholars today have to contribute to new things but still within an Islamic, or syariah, framework and [in line with] general Islamic principles.”

Dr Rafidah points to Western publications on issues of science and religion, such as the *Journal of*

Religion & Health and Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science, but the academy's work also follows a long-established practice in Malaysia of religion exerting influence over public health policies and studies. For instance, the Health Ministry turned to the National Fatwa Committee in 2009 to adjudicate on issues around [female genital mutilation \(FGM\)](#) despite opposition to the practice by the World Health Organisation, which [classifies](#) the practice as having no medical benefits.

Dr Rafidah says that her goal is to integrate religion in a way that “is acceptable to the scientific community”, but also states that there are no-go zones in which science cannot enquire—such as *aqidah* (belief in God).

Old sentiments in new clothes

Dr Rafidah's research academy forms only a part of INFAD's research, but stands at the centre of the debate between religious parties and pro-LGBT groups. Dr Rafidah herself seems an odd choice to lead the academy; a medical practitioner by training, her focus area up until around 2015 was cardiovascular physiology.

She explains that her close relationships with colleagues at USIM were a major influence in her interest in “the underlying factors which [lead to the] embrace [of] this lifestyle.”

“For the first time, I was able to see health issues from a social perspective and the university gave me a platform for that,” she tells *New Naratif*. “It was also partly a public interest issue, and I've always been curious to learn about [the] phenomenon of LGBTQ people.”

Dr Rafidah's characterisation of being queer as a “phenomenon” and a “lifestyle” is a common refrain often heard amongst anti-LGBTQ groups in Malaysia and beyond. Such framing has been [criticised](#) for delegitimising queer identities, implying that they are reversible choices.

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International study suggests otherwise: despite years of research, scientists have been unable to “conclude that sexual orientation is determined by any particular factor or factors,” says the American Psychological Association. The group adds that “most people experience little or no sense of choice about their sexual orientation.”

To date, Rafidah and her five-person team have only published one article related to healthcare for LGBTQ people: a 2017 paper entitled [“Addressing Muslim Transgenders' Health Issues Using Religious Approach in the Malaysian Setting”](#)—published in *Advanced Science Letters*—based on a two-year research project that assessed JAKIM's “religious approach”; essentially, the *mukhayyam* programme.

“We studied their knowledge, attitude and practice before they embarked on the classes and the three-day *mukhayyam*, or *ibadat* (behaviour) camp,” she says. “My study covers those transgenders who have already started religious classes, including reading the Quran and prayers. Our study assesses the before and after [effect] of the programmes.”

Dr Rafidah explains that the central question of her research was an inquiry into whether the “religious approach would be able to tackle health issues [in LGBTQ communities]” through the prevention of “high-risk behaviour” such as “having multiple sexual partners” and drug-taking, activities often associated with the LGBT community.

“[It's] just the same as we approach a normal person to embrace religion so as to change their

lifestyle, in the same way that we seek to correct other bad habits like smoking,” she says.

The peer-reviewed paper concludes that transgender individuals suffer from medical issues such as HIV and “debilitating mental health conditions”, and that “Islamic preachings” could have a major impact in reducing its risk factors. There is little in the way of recommendations and actionable solutions, but the paper does include a brief rundown of “integration programmes” gleaned from JAKIM’s *mukkhayyam* structure.

Legitimising forces

The emergence of research like Dr Rafidah’s signals a shift in tactics on the part of conservative groups, where higher education institutes are used to legitimise their efforts. Since publishing her paper, Dr Rafidah has made the rounds in local media, penning op-eds that arouse anger or support, and using her scientific and academic backgrounds to position herself as an authority on the subject.

One such piece, entitled [“The regressive left: Human rights extortionists”](#) and co-written with Azril Mohd Amin, implied that “gay-rights activists and left-wingers” were fascists and argued that homosexuality is a “chosen behaviour” that should be “subject to laws that regulate public behaviour.”

In another piece, entitled [“No room for secular Malaysia”](#), she stated that “[t]he accorded human rights to gays, bisexuals and transgenders not to be discriminated against, abused or harmed should not be mixed with our duties and obligations to ensure the health of the population is taken care of”, going on to point out that men who have sex with men and transgender individuals are among the populations most affected by HIV/AIDS in Malaysia.

In doing so, Dr Rafidah brings attitudes that have often been dismissed as quaint rural ignorance into the authoritative spaces of academia. “[Dr Rafidah is] using her background in medicine as a legitimiser of her research, as well as her statements about LGBTQ people,” Dr Izharuddin says.

Such output isn’t limited to USIM’s LGBTQ research academy. In February 2018, [an article](#) (*link in Bahasa Malaysia*) in a prominent Malay daily featured a list of [“ciri-ciri LGBTQ \(LGBTQ characteristics\)”](#) (*link in Bahasa Malaysia*) written by the prominent evangelical Muslim, Hanafiah Abdul Malek, as a series of markers to identify and study LGBTQ people. He also provided a guide for identifying dominant genitalia for intersex people.

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According to Sulathireh, such arguments aren’t just based on bad science that ignores globally accepted standards; they’re actively harmful because they perpetuate a mindset that views non-binary and sexually diverse bodies as being in need of medical intervention. “[Sex normalising surgeries] create more trauma for people and they are embedded in a very patriarchal ideation that our bodies must be either a male or female cisgender body,” she says, referring to surgical medical interventions for intersex individuals.

Yet the establishment continues to endorse and legitimise such attitudes, using the veneer of respectability accorded by scholars and academia to further influence mainstream mindsets.

Hope for change?

The result of the 9 May general election has given progressive advocacy groups cause to hope for

reforms to counteract the regressive policies of the last few years. But while Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad and his Cabinet have made significant commitments to review and perhaps even abolish oppressive laws like the Peaceful Assembly Act, the Anti-Fake News Act and the mandatory death penalty, there's unlikely to be significant movement in the realm of LGBTQ rights.

The new government has so far declined to clarify what lies ahead for JAKIM, and also all the other organisations under its umbrella. Mahathir has said that the organisation will come under review but those hoping for extensive reform will likely be disappointed. After all, an Islamist party is still a significant member of the new ruling coalition.

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Homophobia is also still alive and well in the "new Malaysia". When Numan Afif Saadan began working as the interim press officer for Syed Saddiq, Minister for Youth and Sports, it sparked a fierce backlash, with detractors insisting that a "champion of LGBTQ causes" couldn't serve as a government officer. Numan has since [quit](#) as press officer.

"Trust me, we have never felt [that] any government of Malaysia [has] ever been encouraging for LGBTQ people here," says Pang Khee Teik, a prominent LGBT activist, in a [widely disseminated](#) social media post debunking claims that a "*Gabungan Gay* (Gay Coalition)" was protesting outside Syed's offices. Pang speculated that the false claim might have been an attempt by "anti-Pakatan Harapan parties" to "make it appear that the government is encouraging LGBT people to be bolder."

However, many still see the new government as its best chance for change. Members of Parliament, such as Charles Santiago and Lim Yi Wei, have spoken up for LGBTQ rights, giving voice to a community that has long lacked champions in the House. Meanwhile, Malaysian LGBTQ allies and advocates continue to push on; as long as they are around, there will always be voices to counter homophobia presented as science.

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