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# The changing social landscape of Malaysia



By Grace Segrán

**Like many societies, Malaysia is in a period of transition from one generation to a new one and with that comes many issues. After 51 years of independence, the question of who they are as a nation is one that plays a lot on people's minds these days.**

Inseparable from that is the issue of race, specifically whether the old way of categorising Malaysians by race is relevant or even desirable anymore, says **Marina Mahathir**, Malaysian author and activist.



Having not been able to talk about this openly and frankly for so long means “we are out of practise in debating this in an appropriate manner and so everyone is grappling with it and making many blunders along the way.”

But the trend is irreversible. “Our young people are more exposed to universal ideas of justice and equality and so they don't quite buy the old arguments anymore. The major issue now is how does one handle issues that arise from our differences, particularly from our economic status and from our diverse faiths. How do we trust each other enough in order to find solutions that are agreeable to all?”

It's work in progress and requires patience and sincerity on all sides, says Mahathir, the daughter of former prime minister, Mahathir Mohamad. Unfortunately these things are not best handled in a time of economic crisis, she says, because people are either distracted or seeing things through very jaundiced lens. That is, they sometimes see economic hardship as a result of discrimination, rather than that everyone is suffering because of a global situation.

Marina Mahathir writes about issues related to women, health, local politics, human rights and education, and actively campaigns on the issues of Muslim women's rights and HIV/AIDS.

## **A champion of women's rights**

Well known for speaking out against political, economic and cultural policies which put women at a disadvantage, she has often expressed views opposite to those of her father, who was Malaysia's prime minister for 22 years.

She was brought up in Kedah by parents who taught her “not to think of women as inferior and less able than men to do anything.”

As an adult, she hung out with friends who not only shared her views but actively worked for women's rights – people such as Ivy Josiah, Executive Director of Women’s Aid Organisation, a non-governmental organisation which confronts violence against women; and Zainah Anwar, the then-executive director of Sisters in Islam, who is an advocate of Muslim women’s rights in the country.

“But I guess I truly understood gender politics when I read 'The Women's Room' by Marilyn French when it came out,” Marina Mahathir told INSEAD Knowledge. “It really brought home to me the power dynamics between men and women, and how women are often at the losing end. And that was about a Western society – so imagine our more traditional societies.”

## Fatal Confluences?

Of all her work, Mahathir has been defined by her role as an activist for HIV/AIDS awareness. She became an outspoken critic of policies that make certain populations especially vulnerable to HIV infection during her leadership of the Malaysian AIDS Council, which was established to coordinate the work of non-governmental organisations fighting AIDS in Malaysia.

As a Muslim, she is particularly interested in the relationship between gender, religion and the general welfare of women. In 2006 she was invited to give a lecture at Princeton University on that relationship, and called it “Fatal Confluences?”

It was based on a case study of the conservative state of Kelantan in northeast Malaysia, where religious mores play an important role. “Much of religious dogma comes from patriarchal interpretations of religious texts because, for the most part, men have dominated religious life and had the sole right to interpret (the texts),” she argues.

It was 'Fatal Confluences?' with a question mark because “I wouldn't want to suggest that just because you're Muslim, you're doomed to get HIV and die.”

She says she couldn't quite figure out how to approach the issue until she met Kecia Ali, an American academic who had studied the Muslim marriage contract. It then occurred to her that the contract was the problem, because women are deemed to grant sexual access in return for security.

She was very nervous about presenting the paper “because it's very controversial” but so far she hasn't seen any real reaction to it. The paper was published in a book called *'Islam and AIDS'* earlier this year.

## Reconciling Islam and modernity

Malaysia is regarded as a moderate, modern Muslim country. According to Mahathir, there are no barriers in the country to girls and women becoming educated and working outside the home. Malaysians take for granted now that girls should be educated and go to university and go to out to work; very few people would argue with that these days.

Muslim woman reading a book with a little girl, both are wearing head scarf's  
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Muslim women in Malaysia have achieved much – the Governor of the Central Bank, the Head of the Securities Commission, various Director-Generals and Ministers are Muslim women, she adds. “The idea that Muslim women can't drive or vote, as in some Muslim countries, is laughable in Malaysia.”

But in the area of personal life – in marriage, divorce, inheritance, and custody – Muslim women still lag behind because “men insist on interpreting the Koran regarding these matters as if we still lived in the sixth century.”

Back then, women were totally dependent on men and few had their own means of living. “For instance, the so-called polygamy rights come in a chapter which is actually about orphans of war and how we should take care

of them and not take their inheritance away. One of the means to provide protection was marriage, but polygamy was not something encouraged; in fact the Koran says that having just one wife is best," she explains. "Moreover, we don't live in the sixth century context anymore."

"The Koran talks a lot about justice so we should be striving towards justice in our times and not some ancient cultural environment which makes no sense at all today," she adds. "This is an issue that crops up, not just in Malaysia but all over the Muslim world: how to reconcile Islam and modernity. And I don't believe it is incompatible."

She would like to see Malaysian society evolve into one that is more open, more progressive, that lets people, especially the young, be what they want to be and fulfil their potential.

"To do that we need to be able to speak our minds safely and be allowed to make mistakes because that's the only way to learn. Basically we need to let people breathe!"

'*Fatal Confluences?*' has been published in a book called '*Islam and AIDS*' edited by Farid Esack and Sarah Chiddy (OneWorld Publications).

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