

Southeast Asia  
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**The Sultanate of Brunei Darussalam, located on the island of Borneo, has a small but diverse population. The majority of the population adheres to Islam, which is manifest at many levels of Brunei society. Indeed, this monarchy is founded upon the teachings of Islam and the state supports the institutional development of the faith. A third of the population, however, belongs to various non-Muslim faiths, with their own religious institutions and organizations, particularly among the ethnic Chinese community.**

The Sultanate of Brunei Darussalam has a population of 323,600. Slightly over two-thirds of this number comprise ethnic Malays, the majority of which are Sunni Muslims who follow the Shaf'fi *madhab*. Other ethnic Malay groups include, amongst others, the Muruts and Dusuns, most of whom practice animism and shamanism – although a few have converted to Christianity and Islam. Ethnic Chinese account for 15% of the population and generally adhere to Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, or to Christianity, a handful having converted to Islam.

The 1991 census indicated that 67% of the population of Brunei Darussalam identified themselves as Muslims, 13% Buddhists, 10% Christians, and the remaining 10% as 'other' (including free-thinkers, Hindus, Sikhs, Bahais, or undeclared.) Although Islam is the official religion, religious minorities have the right to observe their religious values and traditions. In this regard, the Constitution of the State of Brunei (1959) holds that 'the religion of the State shall be the Muslim religion, provided that all other religions may be practised in peace and harmony by the persons professing them in any part of the State.'

Islamic values, traditions and ethics have been incorporated and manifested within Brunei culture, society and politics. The concept of the MIB (*Melayu Islam Beraja* or Malay Muslim Monarchy) has been the cornerstone of the religio-political philosophy of Brunei, which stresses the importance of maintaining the Malay race, language, culture and Muslim religion of the nation.

The significance of the MIB concept was affirmed during the reign of Sultan Haji Omar Ali Saifuddin (1950-1967), when it became officially recognized in the 1959 Brunei Constitution, and even more so upon Brunei's declaration of independence on 1 January 1984. On this occasion, Sultan Haji Hassanal Bolkiah asserted that Brunei Darussalam would be 'forever a sovereign, democratic and independent Malay Muslim Monarchy [founded] upon the teaching of Islam according to *Ahli al-Sunnah wa al-Jamaah* and [...] the principle of liberty, trust and justice.'

**Omar Ali Saifuddin Mosque. Brunei, Darussalam.**



# Religious Life and Institutions in Brunei

## Religious institutions and organizations

Religious institutions for both Muslims and non-Muslims are scattered around the country. According to the Department of Mosque Affairs, there were 102 mosques and prayer-halls as of 1999, including two major state mosques, *Masjid Omar Ali Saifuddin* and *Jame' Asr Hassanal Bolkiah*, both of which are considered major tourist attractions. There are seven Christian churches, most of which are Catholic. There are also three Chinese temples and two small Indian temples. Although the small Sikh community in Brunei (approximately 500 people) has no official religious institutions, weekly services are held in member's homes.

The majority of Islamic organizations or departments in Brunei are established and maintained by the government. The Ministry of Religious Affairs, established in 1986, is comprised of five different departments, namely, Mosque, Hajj, Islamic Studies, Islamic Law, and Islamic Da'wah (propagation) Centre.

The Islamic Da'wah Centre is responsible for the propagation and expansion of Islamic teachings among both Muslims and non-Muslims in Brunei. It also undertakes research and studies on Islam-related subjects, publishes Islamic books, pamphlets, and periodicals and networks with other Muslim countries by exchanging information and organizing conferences, seminars and meetings on various Islamic issues. The Centre's Publication Control and Censor Unit censors books, periodicals, journals, and newspapers which contradict Islamic belief and teachings.

In recent years, a number of Islamic economic institutions have been established in Brunei, supervised by specialists in the sharia, Islamic economics and finance. Among these institutions are the Tabung Amanah Islam Brunei (TAIB), an Islamic trust fund founded in 1991, the Islamic Bank of Brunei (IBB) and Insurance Islam TAIB, both of which were established in 1993. The IBB provides a variety of financial and commercial services and transactions such as *al-wadiah* (savings deposit), and *al-mudharabah* (profit sharing), which function according to sharia principles. Insurance Islam TAIB provides and facilitates different kinds of Islamic insurance for individuals, families and groups, including coverage for accidents that may take place during Hajj and Umrah.

The government also established the Mulaut Abattoir in August 1990, under the auspices of the Agriculture Department. The Abattoir provides slaughtering facilities to local farmers and butchers to enable them to slaughter their livestock according to the requirements of Islamic law. The Abattoir also offers services for various Islamic rituals. Certification by the Abattoir guarantees that all meat products sold, bought, or cooked, fulfil Islamic requirements. Furthermore, the newly established Halaqah Food store markets all kinds of halal meat

products, while the Brunei Meat Company (BMC) maintains several branches in the country to sell halal meat to the public.

There are, however, a number of non-halal restaurants in the country that cater to non-Muslims. In addition, most supermarkets have a partitioned section for non-halal meat and food products.

## Non-governmental organizations

There are only a few non-governmental Islamic religious organizations in the country. These include the National Association of Qur'anic Reciters and Memorizers (IQRA), which trains and assists members in reading and memorizing the Qur'an, the New (Muslim) Converts Association and the Ikhwan al-Muslimeen, based in the district of Kuala Belait. Of these groups, only the first two are genuinely active.

In addition to the above organizations, Sufi groups or *tariqahs* (mystical orders), particularly al-Ahmadiyyah and al-Naqshabandiyyah have also established themselves in the country. Some of these *tariqahs* trace their roots directly to the Middle East, while others entered Brunei via neighboring countries such as Indonesia and Malaysia. Many of these groups engage in Mawlid Dhikr, a socio-religious ceremony in which religious poems are read and chanted.

Non-governmental organizations are more numerous amongst non-Muslim communities: more than 40 socio-religious and cultural Chinese associations have been established in Brunei. These include dialect locality groups, trade-occupational, cultural-recreational, mutual help/benevolent, religious and community-wide associations. The primary Christian association in Brunei is the Borneo Evangelical Society, which is an umbrella organization operating on behalf of Christians on the Island of Borneo (i.e. including the East Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak). In addition, there are two Indian-related associations in Brunei. The oldest is the 50-year-old Hindu Welfare Board, which functions as a Hindu religious organization with approximately 3000 members. The second major Indian organization is the 43-year-old Indian Association, which is a social organization for the Indian community and has 300 registered members.

## Religious education

The 20<sup>th</sup> century witnessed the growth and development of Islamic religious education in Brunei. In 1956, seven full-time Islamic schools were officially opened. Since then, the number of religious schools has increased to 115 (1999 figures).

Religious (*ugama*) classes are also taught in the public schools. The majority of students have four hours a week of Islamic studies at the elementary level and three hours at the secondary level. Under the 'new system', which is presently in operation in fifteen schools in the country, Islamic instruction has been increased to eight hours per week for elementary students and six at the secondary level.

Islamic education is also promoted in schools and colleges affiliated with the Ministry of Religious Affairs where traditional Islamic subjects are taught in both Malay and Arabic. Some of the more renowned religious institutes in the country are the Sultan Haji Hassanal Bolkiah Tahfiz al-Qur'an Institute, the Brunei College of Islamic Studies (Ma'had)

and the Religious Teachers Training College (Maktab Perguruan Ugama). The Sultan Haji Hassanal Bolkiah Tahfiz al-Qur'an Institute, located in the heart of the capital of Brunei, operates under the Ministry of Education, and presently accommodates 105 male and 40 female students. The Institute was established to produce Qur'anic prodigies who could further their studies in academic institutions overseas, particularly Arab countries.

The Brunei College of Islamic Studies (Ma'had) in Tutong and the Religious Teachers Training College (Maktab Perguruan Ugama) operate under the auspices of the Ministry of Religious Affairs. The Ma'had is an Islamic secondary school which accommodates approximately 500 students, who study for a duration of five years. The Maktab offers a three-year training programme for more than 400 students in an effort to qualify them to teach in religious schools around the country. At the tertiary level, the Sultan Haji Omar Ali Saifuddin Institute of Islamic Studies at the University of Brunei Darussalam (UBD) provides three different areas of specialization – Islamic Law, Theology and Propagation, and Arabic Language. Presently, more than 300 students are registered in its undergraduate and postgraduate programmes.

A number of Christian-based schools, established during the colonial period, are still in operation today. Such schools include St. George's and St. Andrew's in BSB, and St. Michel's and St. Angela's school in Seria. There are eight Chinese schools in Brunei managed by the Chinese community, including the well-known Chung Hwa Middle School in the country's capital. It should be noted that non-Muslim students at St. George's, St. Andrew's, and Chung Hwa, have recently been required to take a Kefahaman Islam (Islamic understanding) course, on a trial basis.

## Media

Islam is well represented in the local print and electronic media. For example, Radio-Television Brunei (RTB) devotes more than 20 hours a week to religious or religious-related television programming. Religious input includes a short Qur'anic recitation to begin and close broadcasting every day, daily broadcasts of the *Azan* (call to prayer), coverage of the weekly Friday *khutbahs* or religious sermons, congregational prayers, lectures and forums, the annual Qur'an competition, Islamic entertainment shows and songs, and Muslim festivals and celebrations.

The government also funds Nurul-Islam (Light of Islam) radio station and the National Radio Station (Rangkaian Nasional). Both stations broadcast Qur'anic recitations, the call to prayer, Friday prayers, and other ceremonies and activities.

Islamic values, traditions and ethics continue to be incorporated and manifested within Brunei culture, society and politics in the modern period. Although the government has played a significant role in creating and developing Islamic religious, educational and financial institutions, as well as supporting Islamic programmes in the media, religious minorities have maintained the right to observe their own religious values and traditions. ♦

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