



Anvar MUSTAFAYEV<sup>a</sup> 

<sup>a</sup>Chief Specialist Department of Religious Studies

Expertise Committee for Religious Affairs

E-mail: [anvarmustafayev@gmail.com](mailto:anvarmustafayev@gmail.com)

## INSTITUTIONAL MECHANISMS OF RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE POLICY IN MALAYSIA

**Abstract.** *Malaysia is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious federal state characterized by a complex interaction between Islam as the religion of the Federation and constitutionally guaranteed freedom of religion for non-Muslims. This article examines the institutional mechanisms underlying Malaysia's policy of religious tolerance, focusing on constitutional provisions, governmental institutions, legal frameworks, educational policies, and interfaith dialogue initiatives. The study analyzes how these mechanisms function in practice, evaluates their effectiveness, and identifies key challenges related to legal pluralism, political instrumentalization of religion, and societal change. The article concludes that Malaysia's experience demonstrates both the potential and the limitations of institutional approaches to managing religious diversity in pluralistic societies.*

**Keywords:** *Malaysia, religious tolerance, institutional mechanisms, interfaith relations, constitutional law, legal pluralism.*

## INTRODUCTION

Religious tolerance has become a critical issue in the context of globalization, migration, and increasing cultural diversity. In multi-religious societies, the ability of the state to manage religious differences through effective institutions is essential for maintaining social stability and political legitimacy. Malaysia represents a particularly important case study due to its distinctive constitutional and institutional arrangements governing religion.

## MAIN PART

Malaysia's population consists of multiple ethnic and religious groups, including Malay Muslims, Chinese Buddhists and Christians, Indian Hindus, and indigenous communities with diverse belief systems. Islam occupies a central position in the political and cultural life of the country, while religious minorities enjoy constitutionally protected rights. This dual structure creates both opportunities and tensions in the implementation of religious tolerance policies.

The purpose of this article is to analyze the institutional mechanisms that shape Malaysia's policy of religious tolerance. The research focuses on the constitutional framework, governmental and religious institutions, legal systems, educational policies, and the role of civil society. By examining these mechanisms, the article seeks to assess how Malaysia balances religious diversity with political stability and national identity.

### Conceptual Framework: Religious Tolerance and Institutionalism

Religious tolerance can be understood as a set of legal, political, and social practices that allow individuals and groups to freely practice their religion while respecting the rights of others. In political science, institutionalism emphasizes the role of formal rules, organizations, and norms in shaping behavior and managing social conflicts.

From an institutional perspective, religious tolerance is not merely a matter of personal attitudes but a product of structured governance mechanisms. These include constitutions, laws, administrative bodies, courts, educational systems, and dialogue platforms. Institutions provide predictability, legitimacy, and mechanisms for conflict resolution.

In the Malaysian context, religious tolerance is institutionalized through a combination of constitutional provisions, administrative control of religious affairs, and policy-driven initiatives aimed at social cohesion. Understanding these mechanisms requires an examination of both formal institutions and informal practices.

### Constitutional Foundations of Religious Tolerance in Malaysia

The Federal Constitution of Malaysia serves as the primary legal framework regulating religious relations. Article 3 declares Islam as the religion of the Federation while allowing other religions to be practiced "in peace and harmony." This formulation reflects a constitutional compromise between the symbolic status of Islam and the protection of religious diversity.

Article 11 guarantees freedom of religion, including the right to profess and practice one's faith. However, it also allows state and federal authorities to restrict the propagation of non-Islamic religions among Muslims. This constitutional limitation is a defining feature of Malaysia's model of religious tolerance, emphasizing coexistence rather than complete religious equality.

The Constitution also allocates authority over Islamic affairs to state governments, reinforcing the federal nature of religious governance. This decentralization allows for regional variation but can also lead to inconsistencies in policy implementation.

Overall, the Constitution functions as a foundational institutional mechanism that sets the parameters of religious tolerance while embedding Islam within the state structure.

#### Governmental Institutions and Religious Administration

Malaysia's system of religious administration is characterized by a dual structure. Islamic affairs are managed by specialized institutions, while non-Islamic religions operate largely within the framework of civil law.

At the federal level, the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM) plays a central role in coordinating Islamic policy, issuing religious guidelines, and overseeing Islamic education. At the state level, Islamic Religious Councils manage mosques, religious courts, and matters related to Islamic law.

An important institution promoting interreligious understanding is the Institute of Islamic Understanding Malaysia (IKIM). Operating under the Prime Minister's Department, IKIM conducts research, public education programs, and interfaith dialogue initiatives. Its activities aim to present Islam as compatible with pluralism and peaceful coexistence.

These institutions function as formal mechanisms through which the state seeks to regulate religious life while preventing interreligious conflict.

#### Legal Pluralism and the Dual Court System

One of the most distinctive institutional features of Malaysia's religious policy is its dual legal system. Civil courts have jurisdiction over criminal law and constitutional matters, while Sharia courts handle personal and family law cases involving Muslims.

This legal pluralism allows religious norms to be applied within specific domains, providing cultural legitimacy and social acceptance. At the same time, jurisdictional

overlaps between civil and Sharia courts have generated legal controversies, particularly in cases involving religious conversion, child custody, and burial rights.

Despite these challenges, the legal system provides structured procedures for dispute resolution, which helps to prevent conflicts from escalating into broader social tensions. The courts thus serve as institutional mechanisms for managing religious diversity through legal means.

#### Public Policy and National Unity Initiatives

The Malaysian government has implemented various policies aimed at promoting national unity and social cohesion. These policies emphasize shared values, respect for diversity, and loyalty to the Constitution.

National unity programs often highlight interreligious cooperation as a cornerstone of social stability. Government-sponsored forums, campaigns, and public messaging encourage mutual understanding among religious communities.

Such policies function as institutional mechanisms by shaping public discourse and reinforcing norms of peaceful coexistence. However, their effectiveness depends on consistent implementation and public trust in state institutions.

#### Education as an Institutional Mechanism of Tolerance

Education plays a crucial role in institutionalizing religious tolerance. The Malaysian education system incorporates subjects such as Moral Education, Civic Studies, and Islamic Studies, each tailored to different student populations.

Non-Muslim students receive Moral Education, which emphasizes ethical values, respect for diversity, and social responsibility. Muslim students study Islamic education, which includes teachings on coexistence and social harmony.

Higher education institutions contribute to tolerance through academic research, conferences, and interfaith programs. Universities often serve as spaces for dialogue and critical reflection on religious and cultural issues.

By embedding tolerance-oriented values within the education system, Malaysia seeks to cultivate long-term social cohesion.

#### Interfaith Dialogue and Civil Society Institutions

Civil society organizations play a significant role in complementing state-led initiatives. Interfaith councils, non-governmental organizations, and community groups provide platforms for dialogue and cooperation.

These organizations often act as mediators during periods of tension, facilitating communication between religious leaders and communities. Although civil society initiatives may face legal and political constraints, they contribute to social resilience and trust-building.

The interaction between state institutions and civil society represents an important informal mechanism supporting Malaysia's policy of religious tolerance.

#### Challenges and Structural Limitations

Despite the existence of multiple institutional mechanisms, Malaysia's model of religious tolerance faces several challenges. Legal restrictions on religious propagation, politicization of religion, and the growing influence of conservative movements can limit interfaith engagement.

Furthermore, asymmetries between majority and minority religious groups may affect perceptions of fairness and inclusion. These issues highlight the tension between stability-oriented governance and liberal conceptions of religious freedom.

Addressing these challenges requires continuous institutional adaptation and dialogue.

## CONCLUSION

Malaysia's policy of religious tolerance is supported by a complex network of institutional mechanisms, including constitutional provisions, governmental bodies, legal systems, educational policies, and civil society participation. These mechanisms have contributed to relative interreligious stability in a highly diverse society.

At the same time, inherent tensions within the system demonstrate the limits of institutional solutions. The Malaysian case illustrates that religious tolerance in pluralistic societies depends not only on legal guarantees but also on the effectiveness, legitimacy, and adaptability of institutions.

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