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Malaysia: 18 Books banned for disrupting peace and harmony

ARTICLE 19 strongly condemns the Malaysian authorities' banning of 18 books over the last month on the grounds that they may 'disrupt peace and harmony'. Six of these books were printed in English and the rest in Malay

"More than 45 books have been banned by the Malaysian authorities since 2003 in a pattern of attacks on freedom of expression which seriously undermines the commitment made by Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's to democratic reforms" said Dr. Agnes Callamard, Executive Director of ARTICLE 19.

The banned books include works of noted Islam scholars, such as John Esposito's *"What Everyone Needs to Know about Islam"* and Karen Armstrong's *"The Battle for God: Fundamentalism in Judaism, Christianity and Islam"*, a New York Times bestseller. In 1999, the Islamic Centre of Southern California honored Karen Armstrong for "promoting understanding among faiths."

The books have been banned by the Internal Security Ministry of Malaysia which, under the Printing Presses and Publications Act 1984,¹ has extremely broad discretion in granting a license for all publications. The Act regulates the press as well as books, pamphlets and the import of publications. It is widely considered to constitute an oppressive tool used to curb freedom of expression and create a climate of fear, resulting in self-censorship amongst Malaysian media, writers and artists.² The possible reasons for a ban are extensive and ill-defined. Under the Act section 9(1), the Internal Security Ministry may ban any publications, article, caricature, photograph, report, notes, writing, sound, music, statement or any other expression which it considers:

- To be prejudicial to public order, morality, security, the relationship with any other country;
- To alarm public opinion or be contrary to any law; or
- Is otherwise prejudicial to public interest or national interest.

¹ The Act was first introduced by the British Colonial government as the Printing Ordinance of 1948, and revised in 1971 (after the 1969 race riot) and in 1984.

² For further reading on the Printing Presses and Publications Act, see *Freedom of Expression and the Media in Malaysia*, ARTICLE 19, 2005 <http://www.article19.org/pdfs/publications/malaysia-baseline-study.pdf>

This provision is in gross violation of international standards governing the right to freedom of expression. Any restriction on freedom of expression must be the least restrictive means possible to protect a legitimate interest, and must be carefully tailored to effectively protect that interest.

Malaysia is one of the few countries around the world which has not signed the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which under Article 19 guarantees freedom of expression and access to information. As a member of the Commonwealth, however, Malaysia has affirmed its commitment to the protection of human rights and specifically to the right to freedom of expression through statements issued by the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting.

The Malaysian government has recently released the Media Council Bill (2006) which seeks to ameliorate some of the worst excesses of the Printing Presses and Publications Act 1984 in regard to the local media. It constitutes a step forward in terms of press freedom³ but further measures are urgently required to address the large-scale censorship of literature, both Malaysian and foreign.

ARTICLE 19 calls on the Malaysian authorities to:

- **Urgently lift the ban on these books;**
- **Amend the Printing Presses and Publications Act 1984, with a view to abolishing censorship and eradicating the registration regime imposed on printing presses and publications.**

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ARTICLE 19 is an independent non-profit organisation that works around the world to protect and promote the right to freedom of expression. It takes its name from Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which guarantees free speech.

BACKGROUND

List of books recently banned by Malaysian authorities:

1. Mona Johulan, *The Bargaining for Israel: In the Shadow of Armageddon* (Bridge-Logos Publishers, United States)
2. Mathew S Gordon, *Islam* (Oxford University Press)
3. Trudie Crawford, *Lifting the Veil* (Apple of Gold, United States)
4. Bobby S Sayyid, *A Fundamental Fear of Eurocentrism and the Emergence of Islamism* (Zed Books Ltd, United Kingdom)
5. Dr Anis A Shorosh, *Islam Revealed - A Christian Arab's View of Islam* (Thomas Nelson Publishers, USA)
6. John L Esposito, *What Everyone Needs to Know About Islam* (Oxford University Press)
7. Christine Mallouhi, *Mini Skirts Mothers & Muslims* (Monarch Books)
8. Karen Armstrong, *The Battle for God: Fundamentalism in Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (Harper Collins, UK)

³ ARTICLE 19 is currently preparing a legal analysis of the Media Council Bill. Forthcoming, July 2007.

9. Ravindra Kumar, *Kundalini For Beginners* (Health Harmony, B Jain Publishers (P) Ltd, India)
10. Epiphanius Wilson, J-Jeiley, *Sacred Books of the East* (Asian Educational Services, India)
11. Akbidayah Akbar Abdul-Haqq, *Sharing Your Faith with A Muslim* (Bethany House Publishers, USA)
12. Kenneth Bon, *Cults, World Religions and The Occult* (Chariot Victor Publishings, UK)
13. Awang Mohd Yahya, *Petua dan Doa Pendinding, Penawar, Penyembuh Penyakit* (Unsie Publisher, Kuala Lumpur)
14. Abu Nashr Al-Hamdanly, *Hakikat & Hikmah 7 Hari Dalam Seminggu* (Pustaka Ilmi, Batu Caves, Selangor)
15. Abu Muhammad, *Pemuda Bani Tamim Perintis Jalan Imam Mahdi* (Penerbit Giliran Timor)
16. Kassim Ahmad, *Kontroversi Hukum Hudud* (Forum Iqra Berhad, Penang)
17. Kassim Ahmad, *Risalah No.2 Dilema Umat Islam-Antara Hadis dan Quran* (Forum Iqra Berhad, Penang)
18. Ustaz Rasul bin Dahri, *Siri 7 Amalan-Amalan Bid'ah Pada Bulan Syaban* (Percetakan Putrajaya Sdn Bhd)