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SINGAPORE— Blurring lines between religion and nationalism, weak rule of law and the politicisation of religion are primary factors fuelling religious persecution in member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and across the region, concluded a study commissioned by the Human Rights Resource Centre for ASEAN.

Based on research conducted in all 10 member states between February and December last year, *Keeping the Faith: A Study of Freedom of Thought, Conscience and Religion* found varying degrees of overt religious persecution in eight ASEAN countries, with the exception of Singapore and Brunei.

However, it noted that the apparent absence of religious conflict in Brunei might be attributed to a general lack of political and civic space within the country, which is the only monarchy in ASEAN.

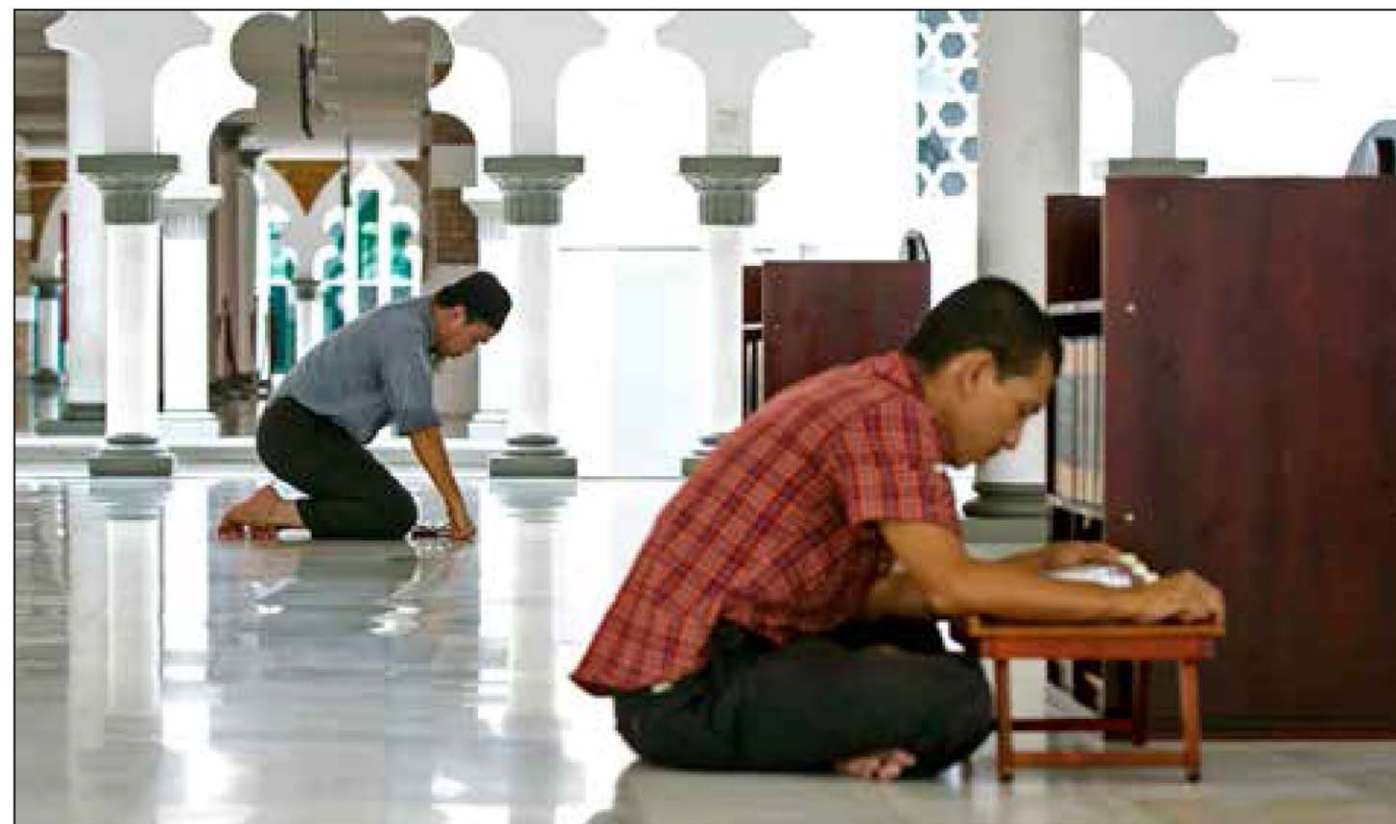
The report noted that violent religious conflicts had been documented in Malaysia, Myanmar and Indonesia, where persecution often manifests in the form of bodily attacks, forced conversions and arbitrary detention.

Sharing key findings at a seminar yesterday, lead researcher Jaclyn Neo, an assistant professor at the National University of Singapore's law faculty, noted that the conflation of national identity with one religion in certain states had reinforced political animosity towards minority groups, who are then seen as "national traitors" or people "outside the nation".

In Malaysia, for instance, coercive practices have been used against religious minorities on the basis of protecting Islam. For example, the Court of Appeal has upheld the government's decision to prohibit the use of the word

GROWING INTOLERANCE OF MINORITIES 'A WORRYING TREND'

Overt religious persecution in 8 of 10 ASEAN states: Study



Muslim men at a mosque in Kuala Lumpur. Coercive practices have been used in Malaysia against religious minorities on the basis of protecting Islam.
PHOTO: AP

"Allah" in Christian publications. Hindu temples in the country have also been demolished on the basis that they were illegally built on state land.

"This ... ignores the fact that some of these temples have been there for decades, centuries, and pre-dates the Malaysian state," said Asst Prof Neo.

In Myanmar, the Buddhist nationalist movement led by the Ma-Ba-Tha is responsible for promoting legislation against religious conversion, while in Indonesia, democratisation and corresponding weakening of the state have been exploited by religious majorities

to exert violence against minorities.

The study also highlighted the growing intolerance of minorities within religions as a "worrying trend". In Malaysia, individuals from non-orthodox Islamic groups, such as the Ahmadiyah and Shiite Muslims, have been detained without trial. In Indonesia, which houses the world's largest Muslim population, calls to ban Shiite Islam have also increased.

Religious conflicts in an ASEAN member state have the potential of destabilising the region if left unchecked, said Asst Prof Neo, adding

that conflict in one country could lead to retaliation in another.

An example of such a risk emerged when the Indonesian police foiled a planned bomb attack against the Myanmar Embassy in Jakarta. The suspects later confessed that they had been retaliating against the treatment of Muslims in Myanmar by its Buddhists.

However, Asst Prof Neo highlighted that groups of the same faith in different states could also be a constructive influence on governments to improve religious freedom.

For instance, Muslim-majority Malaysia has been key in brokering peace talks between the Philippine government and the Muslim separatist movement in the southern Philippines.

While lauding the ASEAN Human Rights Declaration as a step towards regional peace and security, Asst Prof Neo stressed that there are gaps within the declaration that remain to be addressed, such as different definitions of human rights among member states.

"How can we claim to commit to human rights when we all have different conceptions ... and they are all equally legitimate," she said.

As a region, ASEAN must guard against "exceptional claims" and opposing concepts of human rights to provide a coherent response to instances of religious intolerance, she stressed.