

Table of Contents

- ***A "heretic" sentenced to 6 months in prison and a fine***
-

A "heretic" sentenced to 6 months in prison and a fine

His wife and his daughter were taken into custody. Human Rights Without Frontiers calls for the release of the whole family.

By Willy Fautré, director of Human Rights Without Frontiers

HRWF (25.10.2024) - On 22 October 2024, the Sharia High Court in Negeri Sembilan handed down a six-month prison sentence and a fine of RM4,500 (about \$1040) to Zolekafeli Bin Abd Ghani, a 60-year-old retired firefighter, for allegedly teaching "false religious doctrines."

Zolekafeli is a member of a Shia-derivative new religious movement founded in 1999, the [Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light](#). This Muslim community is not to be confused with the Ahmadiyya Community founded in the 19th century by Mirza Ghulam Ahmad within a Sunni context.

The prosecution

Zolekafeli was charged for proclaiming his belief in Aba Al-Sadiq, the leader of the faith, and for stating that the message of the Quran had been distorted over the centuries. Despite pleas for leniency due to his age, health, and family obligations, the court justified its sentence by saying that this community was posing risks of "apostasy and disbelief."

Following a raid on their home in Seremban, Negeri Sembilan, conducted by the Department of Islamic Religious Affairs and local police, the wife and daughter of Zolekafeli Bin Abd Ghani have also been detained, bringing the total number of family members in custody to three. Authorities claim that a five-month investigation uncovered evidence of the family's active engagement with the Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light online, which led to the 22 October operation.

The raid, triggered by complaints from close relatives opposing the family's decision to join the Ahmadi faith earlier this year, resulted in the confiscation of religious documents, including "The Mahdi's Manifesto." authored by the leader of the faith. The arrest warrants, issued under Section 52 of the Syariah Criminal Enactment (Negeri Sembilan) 1992, accused the family of spreading "wrong acts and deviant teachings." Notably, the wife, initially excluded from the operation, was later detained after a search of the family's mobile devices revealed further evidence of her involvement with the faith.

The Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light views these actions as an appalling assault on the fundamental right to freedom of conscience, freedom of thought and freedom of belief. The community has long been subjected to discrimination and persecution in Malaysia, where it has been officially declared deviant by religious authorities. This latest incident has sparked widespread outrage within the Ahmadi community and beyond.

Noteworthy is that Malaysia has yet to ratify the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights ([ICCPR](#)) which in Article 18 guarantees freedom of religion or belief.

Malaysia's human rights record reviewed by the UN in 2024

On 25 January 2024, Malaysia's human rights record was reviewed by the UN Human Rights Council. During its Universal Periodic Review (UPR) 348 recommendations were made by 130 States. Some of them proposed by [Gambia, Lebanon, India, Israel and the United States](#) concerned religious minorities and freedom of religion or belief.

Lebanon recommended that Malaysia "pursue efforts aiming at ensuring the inclusion and respect of rights of all religious communities in a spirit of peaceful coexistence."

The recommendations of Israel asking to protect individuals at risk of discrimination on the ground of religion or belief and the United States asking to repeal or amend laws that undermine human rights, including the rights to freedom of expression and freedom of religion or belief were only "noted" by Malaysia, "not supported."

Outrage about media coverage

Harian Metro, a local news channel, aired footage of the arresting officers displaying the warrants for the detained family members. The video, titled "Three Family Members Believed to be Followers of the Ahmadi Teachings Detained," is currently circulating online, drawing significant attention to the case.

A further video released by Buletin TV3, a local television channel, showing Zolekafeli Bin Abd Ghani being escorted by police officers at the court has sparked outrage within the Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light community, for portraying innocent members of the faith as criminals and fuelling the risk of vigilante violence against the community.

A call to the international community

The persecution of the Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light has been repeatedly denounced by international NGOs such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch as well as by the United Nations.

On July 4, 2023, three United Nations Special Rapporteurs, together with other United Nations officials, published a joint statement on the persecution of members of the faith.

The United States Department of State in its 2023 Malaysia country report on religious freedom highlighted the persecution of members of the faith in Malaysia, mentioning the arrests of their members and local Islamic Department investigation of their followers for unspecified sharia offenses.

The Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light is calling on international human rights organizations and the international community to strongly condemn these actions, to demand the release of Zolekafeli Bin Abd Ghani, his wife and their daughter and to advocate for the protection of religious freedoms in Malaysia.

The religious community whose international headquarters are located in the United Kingdom remains steadfast in its commitment to supporting its members and challenging the ongoing persecution of those who wish to peacefully practice their faith.

