

Jumuah

FRIDAY PRAYER NETWORK

BRUNEI



Reaching Muslims in Asia: Brunei The Wealthy Sultanate of Absolute Control

There is a little gap on the wall of every office, restaurant, reception area, hotel lobby, shop – even in the humblest of the living rooms – which serves as a formidable metaphor for the vicissitudes of power, prestige and privilege in Brunei. The gap used to hold an arabesque picture of Hajjah Mariam. A steward on the Sultan's personal aircraft, Hajjah Mariam had the world at her feet when Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah made her his second queen. As per Brunei's unwritten law and tradition, her officially sanctioned photograph graced every public and private enclosure, along with those of the Sultan and his first wife. But then suddenly she fell from favour...

The message is loud and clear: in Brunei anything can happen to anyone any time. The Sultan's word is law. Dissent is out of the question. Through the concept of the Malay Islamic Monarchy, the Sultan has bestowed upon himself carte blanche to rule the country as he deems fit. The royal family – with a yearly budget of over three billion dollars for day-to-day expenses – is well ensconced in stunning palaces protected by Britain's Gurkha regiment and local intelligence agencies.



But Brunei is no Saudi Arabia. It is a very peaceful country, and there is a good reason for it: everyone has a furnished house, posh cars, latest mobiles, Indonesian maids, credit cards and free medical care. Every student is paid a stipend to go to school (they do not have to pass). The Sultan's bevy of cars needs no introduction. His personal coffers have swollen hugely after the recent repeated hikes in the price of oil. There are elements of freedom too. More women are seen working in offices than men. They do most of the things that men do. In the evening, married and unmarried couples can be seen sauntering about in the shopping malls and the beaches. No wonder Brunei's full (official) name is Brunei Darussalam: 'the Abode of Peace'.

Which brings us back to the gap. There is peace because no-one wants to upset anyone else. Behind the high per-capita income lies a vital political-economic fact: in order to have everything, Bruneians end up taking big loans from the Government. These loans are given on soft terms so one keeps repaying ad infinitum. If you know the Malay culture, you will understand that economic indebtedness brings about obeisance and hence little political protest or fuss.

Alcohol, homosexuality, democracy, public accountability and human rights forums are all banned in Brunei. The dreaded Internal Security Department can pick up anyone suspected of anti-Government activities and keep them in custody without trial as long as is deemed desirable. There is a formidable Aqidah Control Bureau which makes sure that only the Shafi version of Islam is practised in the country. Although health and education are free, their quality is poor, yet no-one dares complain explicitly – and the high-ups fly to Singapore for treatment.

Beyond football, people are largely ignorant of the world's pressing issues. The majority Malays are the special recipients of privileges; government departments are brimming with them, yet it takes a very long time for one file to move from one table to another. It is Brunei's Chinese who dominate the business sector. There is a large expatriate community: Indians, Pakistanis, Filipinos, Indonesians, Thais and Europeans work as doctors, teachers, construction labourers and janitors.

Brunei has been half-seriously dubbed a 'Shell-fare state' for its total dependence on oil. A better label would be 'oilgarchy' because a small élite headed by the Sultan is in control of oil. Brunei will remain as it is now for at least two reasons: one, Bruneians are happy with a status quo that brings them a life of comfort and little hard work; and two, the Sultan is a very loyal friend to Britain and the US.¹

Difficult for Christians

Islamic Shari'a law in Brunei supersedes civil law and it regulates all of life. The national constitution states, "The religion of Brunei Darussalam shall be the Muslim religion." Life is difficult for Christians in Brunei. Some have lost their jobs without any notice. Christians seeking opportunities for higher education must leave the country to access universities. Evangelism is strictly forbidden and some local Christians have been arrested and detained for planning outreach to the population. Christian based (expatriate) schools must give instruction in Islam to all students and are not allowed to teach Christianity. Recently a foreign English teacher simply prayed for blessings on a Malay family during the Eid al-Fitr celebrations (at the end of Ramadan) was given 48 hours to leave the country.

A number of Brunei Malays have believed over the years, but the very strict, conservative Islamic

environment in Brunei is hardly conducive to any Muslim-background believer being open about their commitment. Indonesian Christian broadcasting is easily heard and understood in Brunei. Christian literature for personal purposes (not resale or distribution quantities) can be carried in from neighbouring Malaysia. It is not possible to buy Bibles or Christian books in Brunei. Two recognised churches exist. Both are closely watched by police with spies in nearly every meeting.²



Pray for the Sultan who rules as supreme leader with an iron fist.

References: ¹ The New Internationalist.com, <http://www.newint.org/columns/country/2008/03/01/brunei/>
² <http://www.30-days.net/muslims/muslims-in/asia-east/brunei>

Prayer Points for Brunei:

- Pray for expatriate brothers and sisters who are serving in Brunei. Their situation is very sensitive. May their lives provide an example of Christ to those within their circle of influence.
- Pray for the Church throughout Brunei, that Christians will be a light to those within their immediate community. May the congregations welcome the presence of God in their worship and prayers. May they offer encouragement to all local believers while the Lord helps them to build meaningful relationships for the sake of the Kingdom.
- Pray for a stirring in the hearts among the people. May Jesus reveal Himself through dreams and visions. May God work in ways that only he can do to draw the people to himself.
- Pray for the royal family and their influence at every level: the Sultan's 'second' wife, Azrinaz Makar Hakim, from Malaysia; Crown Prince Billah and his wife, Sarah. [Acts 16:31] The parliament is beginning to meet again after being closed for 20 years.

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