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## Women's Empowerment in Religious Contexts: Competitive Modernity and the Feminized Public Sphere in Malaysia

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### Summary

The Malaysian public sphere has provided an effective communication structure for the espousal of group positions. The empowerment of the country's women in the religious context can only be properly understood when examined within this social framework. However, the feminization of the public sphere in Malaysia has been complicated by the existence of multiple understandings of modernity, ones which are both competitive and dependent on a highly politicized and clearly demarcated sphere of contestation. In these circumstances, the common good has been interpreted differently, leading to the drawing of distinct battle lines in terms of political competition. In this article I identify the women's movements in which Malay-Muslim women participate as being categorizable as pragmatist, communitarian-oriented, and liberal-feminist in nature. Additionally, they operate within a state or market sphere and display agency that is the outcome of either formally organized or of unorganized action. This multiplicitous nature of modernity in the country engenders a worldview that is reinterpreted and reconstituted to suit both local and translocal contexts. The overarching goal of gender equality is seemingly muted, although women can still be empowered within these movements. This study shows that while the gender equality agenda may not be a pervasive dynamic engulfing all cultures and nation-states, the existence of competitive modernity has nevertheless enhanced the public participation and empowerment of women within the religious context in Malaysia.

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### Introduction

Malaysia is home to some 16 million Muslims, out of a total population of some 27 million people of various religious affiliations and ethnic groups. On the country's streets it is common to see women dressed in an assortment of veiled styles — from dull-colored, full-face coverings to chic high fashion — jostling with other women clad in more skimpy forms of clothing. Beyond these outward manifestations of

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