

A brand to trust

MALAYSIA will, according to the minister responsible for Islamic affairs, have the first government halal laboratory in the world. The Malaysian Halal Institute Analysis Laboratory (MHIAL), which will be built in Bandar Enstek, Negri Sembilan, and ready by next year, will thus make the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (Jakim) the main reference point for halal certification in the country and, it is hoped, globally. After all, even without the MHIAL, Jakim, working with the laboratories in Universiti Putra Malaysia, has already built a respectable foreign clientele. The proposed laboratory will reinforce Malaysia's already strong credentials as an international halal hub.

Something like the MHIAL is needed given the absence of a global halal standard, especially for countries outside the Arab world. There, many already restrict imports to halal items and nothing *haram* (forbidden by the religion) can be retailed. Nevertheless, while the need is obvious, the obstacles to a universally applicable standard are also enormous given the nature of the Muslim world, which is not homogeneous and cannot claim to an orthodoxy received by all. The schism in Islam as practised varies from the almost implacable divide between Sunnism and Shiism and the more affable differences of the schools of law within them. This, however, does not mean that there cannot be a meeting of minds between them. If Al-Azhar and Rome can dialogue about abortion, why cannot Muslims, irrespective of denomination, come to an agreement about halal standards? Thus, as Jakim sets the benchmarks, there should also be movement towards common ground generally acceptable to all. Only then can the global halal market grow unimpeded to its purported multi-billion dollar potential.

Success here is not necessarily measured only in monetary terms. Indeed, there is a growing trend towards the forging of an Islamic economics. This is happening in tandem with a growing consumer lifestyle choice, catering to the spiritual demands of some two billion Muslims worldwide. There is, of course, money to be made in the exploitation of this market. Towards this end, producers of both products and services will need a centrally located credible halal certifying body. What is more credible than a government-supervised and controlled body such as Jakim? Malaysia has an intricate modern Islamic institutional, legal and intellectual infrastructure to support a modern Muslim lifestyle. For halal is no longer simply a matter of food and food products. It has now expanded to a way of life. Consequently, MHIAL is an institution waiting for the green light to add value to Malaysia's desire to become a leader in Islamic moderation.