

World Watch Research

Malaysia: Background Information

September 2024



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September 2024

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World Watch Research has divided up the previously named Full Country Dossier into two separate documents:

- Background country information (published annually in summer)
- Persecution dynamics (published annually in January).

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Map of country



Malaysia: Population (UN estimate for 2024)	Christians	Chr%
34,672,000	3,449,000	9.9

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

Recent history

Since the November 2022 elections, the new government coalition of Pakatan Harapan (PH) and right-wing Barisan Nasional (BN), has come to an agreement on a governing formula, with the support of the Sarawak Parties Alliance (GPS) to create a parliament majority, calling its policy "Madani", meaning "civil". The king had urged that a government of national unity should be formed. While it seems in 2024 that the ruling coalition is losing support (with opposition party, Islamist PAS, enjoying increased popularity - [The Straits Times, 28 July 2024](#)), it remains to be seen if this government is able to end the recent tumultuous course of Malaysian politics, which is described below.

It all started with a ground-breaking election on 9 May 2018, where the ruling UMNO party, which had been in charge of the country since independence in 1957, was defeated by the voters who overwhelmingly chose opposition coalition Pakatan Harapan (PH). When the PH government collapsed in February 2020 (see below: *Political and legal landscape*) a new Perikatan Nasional (PN) government took over with a very thin majority. Race, ethnicity and religion became again important topics to win over voters and to distract them from the economic fallout following the COVID-19 crisis and the hardships it brought.

After 2020 proved to be a turbulent year for politics in Malaysia, 2021 was both tumultuous and 'peaceful' in one. The government of Perikatan Nasional managed to survive until the end of August 2021, when a [new government](#) led by Ismail Sabri Yaakob was sworn in, which did not have deputy prime ministers (Coconuts, 27 August 2021). The COVID-19 state of emergency (SOE) started in January 2021 which meant banning all meetings of the national as well as the state assemblies, so that they were effectively suspended from meeting since December 2020.

Malaysia's king has a largely ceremonial role, but he has the authority to entrust any politician in parliament whom he thinks is commanding the majority with building the government. He had originally agreed not just to the new government being installed, but also for the SOE to be declared, after the government had urged him to it. After consulting with political leaders from all parties and his fellow sultans (the Council of Rulers), the king stated publicly that he was in favor of ending the SOE when it expired on 1 August 2021 and wished to call back parliament as soon as possible. In fact, the last two governments had not been elected; their prime ministers were nominated by the king.

In the November 2022 snap elections, PAS (Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party), which has a ruling majority in several states in the federation, emerged as the largest single party. It won [49 seats](#), representing 22% of the parliamentary seats, more than doubling its 18 seats won in 2018 (The Star, 19 November 2022). The situation of a hung parliament was totally new to Malaysia and the country's king finally named reformist opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim as the country's 10th Prime Minister, ending days of uncertainty. With many parties uncertain about Anwar's view on the Malay supremacy, he reassured the public that he would uphold Islam as the religion of the federation and protect Malay and Bumiputera rights as enshrined in the Federal Constitution (see below: *Political and legal landscape*). He also pledged to safeguard the rights of Malaysians, regardless of race or religion. Malay supremacy will be upheld by Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, UMNO's president, who has been appointed as one of the two deputy prime ministers. Zahid frequently warned the Malays against threats to their Malay rights and assured them that the authorities would not hesitate to use the Sedition Act on those who would question the inherent rights and privileges of the Malay people. Therefore, one thing seems certain: The policy of Malay supremacy is here to stay, especially since the struggle for economic recovery makes it easy and tempting to instill an "us-versus-them" narrative, both for the opposition and the government.

In summary:

- The PH government under PM Mahathir Mohamad was in power in the period May 2018 - February 2020.
- The PN government under PM Muhyiddin Yassin was in power in the period February 2020 - August 2021.
- The UMNO-led government under PM Ismail Saabri Yaakob was in power in the period August 2021 - November 2022.
- Elections took place on 19 November 2022 and a new government under Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim was formed. It proved its [parliamentary majority](#) on 19 December 2022 (Channel News Asia, 19 December 2022).
- In the August 2023 elections, apart from successfully defending the three states of Kedah, Kelantan and Terengganu, PN made inroads into Penang, Selangor and Negeri Sembilan. Meanwhile, the largest opposition party, PAS, strengthened its political position:

Political and legal landscape

UMNO and ex-Prime Minister Najib Razak

As stated above, the tumultuous phase in Malay politics began with the general elections of 2018. Malay-majority party UMNO hit an all-time low in their popularity polls in 2016, which may have served as an early warning signal but the administration wanted to remain in power, despite Najib

Razak being entangled in one of the largest cases of corruption worldwide. He was sentenced in July 2020 to [twelve years in prison](#) on seven counts, among them corruption (Malay Mail, 28 July 2020). The sentence was upheld in the Court of Appeal, where the judge called the whole issue a "[national embarrassment](#)" (Reuters, 8 December 2021). On 23 August 2022, the Federal Court of Malaysia [upheld](#) the 12-year-sentence of former Prime Minister Najib Razak on corruption-related charges, ending proceedings that had continued for more than four years (Reuters, 23 August 2022). Rosmah Mansor, Najib Razak's wife, was [sentenced to 10 years](#) in prison on charges of bribery (Malay Mail, 1 September 2022). Former Prime Minister Najib Razak enjoyed an act of royal clemency by having [his sentence](#) for corruption cut in half to six years (Reuters, 2 February 2024). Immediately after this was announced, he has been allowed to spend the remainder of his sentence under [house arrest](#). If these decisions appeal to a majority of voters remains to be seen (RSIS, 22 April 2024).

Razak is the son of Malaysia's second prime minister and a member of the political elite in the country, which has been largely untouchable. Just a week before the initial sentencing, on 22 July 2020, another court ruled that he had to pay [400 million USD](#) in outstanding taxes, showing that the days of being untouchable may well have ended (SCMP, 22 July 2020). The sight of seeing Najib Razak going to prison and his limited ability to campaign from behind bars may have helped in swinging additional votes away from UMNO.

All the political bickering over the previous two years led to a view becoming more widespread - especially among the younger generation - that Malaysia needed something different and a fresh start away from the corruption-tinged UMNO. Whether this will mean politics serving Malay and non-Malay alike or including ethnic and religious minorities in government policies, remains to be seen, but seems doubtful, when the strong outcome for PAS in November 2022 and state elections in August 2023 are taken into account.

PAS and the Islamizing of politics

The hardline Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) was already successful in the 2018 elections and managed to regain government control over a further federal state (Terengganu), bringing the number of states it governed to three (Terengganu, Kedah and Kelantan). It was also in a coalition government in Pahang, Perak and Perlis. PAS has been in federal government since 2020 and most of the swing votes from people fed up with UMNO decided to vote for PAS, which for the first time ever became the single largest party in parliament. PAS aligned itself with PN, which wanted to position itself as an alternative to UMNO and regarded PAS as the 'lesser of two evils'. Extensive [campaigning experience](#) and active social media engagement, including TikTok, were the electoral tactics to win young and indecisive voters (South China Morning Post, 27 November 2022). Additionally, its grassroots work in influencing teaching in countless rural schools paid off, as the voting age for the first time was lowered to 18, adding six million fresh voters, of whom a large number voted for PAS. It may be premature to speak of a 'Green (i.e., Islamic) wave' hitting Malaysia; however, how the government reacts to those changes will be decisive for the further shape of the country. A simple [crackdown](#) using sedition laws and other means may not be the best option (The Diplomat, 10 January 2024).

PAS had already made headlines when a PAS functionary congratulated the Taliban on their successful take-over of power in Kabul on 15 August 2021. The government's special envoy for the Middle East, PAS leader Abdul Hadi Awang, then caused confusion when he [met with a Taliban envoy](#) in Doha (Benar

News, 8 February 2022). A few days later, the Deputy Minister for Women, Family and Community Development came under fire from opposition lawmakers and civil society when she claimed that men are allowed to use a ‘[gentle but firm physical touch](#)’ against recalcitrant wives (Benar News, 14 February 2022). In both instances, the government remained silent, showing the growing leeway PAS enjoys. Kelantan [amended](#) its Sharia Criminal Code and made, among other things, proselytization and conversion from Islam to another religion punishable by law (The Star MY, 2 November 2021). A PAS member of parliament publicly called the Bible a “[distorted book](#)” in August 2020 and refused to retract this statement or apologize for it (Malay Mail, 3 September 2020).

The growing polarization has also become visible in the political arena. Christian Minister for Youth and Sports, Hannah Yeoh, was [accused](#) on social media and by a PAS MP of using a state-sponsored program promoting harmony and tolerance for converting Muslim youth to Christianity (UCA News, 15 March 2023). While these and similar earlier accusations lack any factual basis, they can nevertheless fan the flames of racial and religious hatred and deepen the polarization Malaysia is facing. Indeed, PAS did particularly well in the August 2023 [state elections](#), even in the more urban and comparably more diverse state of Selangor (Channel News Asia, 13 August 2023). However, on a positive note, a major Malaysian interfaith council [backed the program](#) and "urged the government and Islamic authorities to refrain from imposing a possible ban on Muslims from visiting worship places of other faith" (UCA News, 23 March 2023). The strong reactions to the Federal Court’s decision on Sharia law (see above: *Brief description of the persecution situation*) also shows how PAS and other conservative Islamic groups have become emboldened in recent years.

With policies continuing to favor Bumiputra, all non-Bumiputra citizens face explicit disadvantages in employment and other areas

Malaysian politics has been fraught with underlying issues of race and religion for a long time already. A large-scale [demonstration](#) just two days ahead of the international human rights day in December 2018, involving around 55,000 protesters and organized by Malay-Muslim parties PAS and UMNO to protest against the country’s planned accession to ICERD (the UN’s International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination), was an illustration of the challenges the (now defunct) PH government faced (Malay Mail, 8 December 2018). Calls for the [special protection of Malay privileges](#) are nothing new and are in fact in line with Malaysia’s Constitution (Benar News, 3 December 2018).

The age-old practice of discriminating against non-Malay ethnic minorities continues unabated by giving priority to the Bumiputra - i.e. the Malay population or literally: "People of the soil". With policies continuing to favor Bumiputra, all non-Malay citizens face explicit disadvantages in employment and other areas. This is particularly the case in: i) public offices (i.e. state ministries and administration right down to the local level), ii) state bureaucracy, iii) state-owned enterprises (such as large oil companies) and iv) the armed forces. But even with these affirmative action policies, many Malay people struggle to make ends meet. Calling for the protection of the Malay majority is often just a simple call for power and a means of self-enrichment; Najib Razak is just one example of this, even if the most blatant.

While initial hopes were that the Anwar Ibrahim government would work towards a more balanced policy, including the needs of ethnic and religious minorities, shortly after its inauguration at the end

of 2022 it rolled out its program called "[Malaysia Madani](#)" (Murray Hunter Blog, 19 January 2023). Although the terms vary slightly, it is basically a re-packaging of supremacy politics for Malay Muslims. However, it seems unlikely that the government will be able to outdo PAS in its perceived role of defending Malays and Islam. The election results from August 2023 seem to suggest that voters preferred to vote for the original PAS brand.

Prominent lawyer and activist for Orang Asli rights, Si Kasim, was [attacked](#) when an IED was found strapped under her car in July 2023 (Straits Times, 21 July 2023). Although neither the motives nor the perpetrators are known, this shows an increasingly polarized mindset within society.

The monarchy rotates among nine regional sultans

It should be noted that Malaysia is a unique parliamentary monarchy: The monarchy is not based on one royal person but is an office which rotates every five years among nine regional sultans. These Islamic rulers hold a powerful position. In principle they are to abide by electoral bodies' decisions, but in fact they can influence all decision-making, since in questions concerning Islam they also have veto power. So far, they have chosen a moderate position in most cases and have opposed demands for more Islamization. But they are coming increasingly under pressure from Islamic groups and parties like PAS. The monarchy was also forced to become more active in politics, due to the tumultuous period of the last few years.

Gender perspective

The Malaysian legal landscape has long been restrictive towards women and girls. Whilst it ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1995, it maintained a reservation to Article 16 ([Suhakam, 2016, p.3](#)), which provides for the elimination of discrimination against women as they enter or exit a marriage. Christians from a Muslim background are particularly vulnerable as the legal rights of Muslim women and girls are undermined by provisions that make exceptions for Sharia law – particularly their rights in relation to marriage, divorce, inheritance and child custody. According to [USCIRF Country update: Malaysia, November 2021](#), women from indigenous communities who are automatically registered as Muslims are also impacted by this legal bifurcation.

Family law matters are governed by a combination of civil law, Islamic laws and customary laws. Under Islamic law, Muslim women need the authority of their male guardian (*wali*) to marry and whereas a husband can divorce his wife by *talaq*, she must file for divorce through the courts. Whilst there is legislation prohibiting domestic violence (the Domestic Violence Act, 1994), it fails to comprehensively define all forms of domestic violence. The Penal Code criminalizes rape, although marital rape is not considered a criminal offence. There is no publicly available data on child marriage rates, making it difficult to establish the scale of this issue in Malaysia.

The Malaysian government in August of 2022 overturned a ruling by the High Court that granted automatic citizenship to children born abroad to Malaysian mothers and foreign fathers — children born abroad to Malaysian fathers are entitled to citizenship by law ([HRW 2023 Malaysia country chapter](#)).

Religious landscape

Malaysia: Religious context	Number of adherents	%
Christians	3,449,000	9.9
Muslim	19,026,000	54.9
Hindu	2,334,000	6.7
Buddhist	1,824,000	5.3
Ethnic religionist	1,156,000	3.3
Jewish	110	0.0
Bahai	83,800	0.2
Atheist	41,500	0.1
Agnostic	142,000	0.4
Other	6,616,300	19.1
<i>OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.</i>		

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

The [Malaysian Constitution](#) defines “Malay” as a follower of Islam. Every citizen of Malay ethnicity is, therefore, understood to be a Muslim.

Although the state is secular per definition, Islam has a strong influence on everyday life. Malaysia's legal system and its political institutions are strongly influenced by Islam and this influence is growing, much to the disadvantage of the large non-Muslim minority. The nobility are Muslim and are expected to take up the role of protecting Islam. They have had a moderating influence against radical Islamic voices and have defended the country's multi-ethnicity and religiosity. All Malay children in state-run nurseries are required to attend Islamic education. In state schools, only Muslim pupils are required to attend Islamic classes. But even for "neutral" subjects the influence of Islam is strongly felt. At the university level, there is a compulsory subject for all students called "Islamic and Asian Civilization" which is felt by many to be a government instrument for furthering Islamization.

The Islamization of society is increasing, although that does not necessarily mean that this is being directly transferred into the political arena as well. The elections in 2018 showed that voters were more interested in economic improvement and were disgusted with the levels of corruption within UMNO circles. However, the developments afterwards showed that the fear of Malay Muslims losing privileges continues to be an excellent platform to rally people and run politics on. In everyday life, however, there is a mindset of restricting everything seen as un-Islamic, which naturally affects all non-Muslims. One example of this mindset is the Oktoberfest, which has been held in Kuala Lumpur for many years. The religious affairs minister warned that such an event could compromise the ["safety of](#)

[the community](#)", if it is open to the public (Malay Mail, 28 July 2022). At the same time, there are frequent warnings from Muslim-Malay organizations and politicians against a supposed agenda of Christianization. An [e-book](#) with the title "Exposing the Christian Agenda" was published in Malaysia in 2021 (UCA News, 4 May 2021) and as it was originally published in paper format back in 2014, one may suspect that the time seemed opportune to shore up sentiments against the Christian minority again. The text simply repeats the old accusations that Christians have a hidden missionary agenda. According to this book, which was published under the auspices of the Selangor Islamic Religious Council, Christians should never be befriended because they are "enemies of Islam who always have malicious intentions and are the bearers of lies". The Christian church is portrayed as a highly cunning and organized movement. At the same time as this e-book was published, the Archbishop of Kuala Lumpur and a Christian politician were accused of "Christianization". The Islamic opposition party, PAS, is continuing to whip up its support by [demonizing Christians](#) (UCA News, 16 May 2023).

While there is a federal department tasked with promoting religious harmony and protecting the rights of religious minorities, a comparison of the different budgets is telling. As the US State Department stated on page 14 of [IRFR 2021 Malaysia](#):

- "Many faith-based organizations, however, continued to state they believed that no entity had the power and influence of those that regulated Islamic affairs, and they cited the large footprint and budget for JAKIM [the Department of Islamic Development in Malaysia] compared to the more limited funding for the Department of National Unity and Integration. The latter department's annual budget was approximately 343 million ringgit (\$82.16 million), while 1.5 billion ringgit (\$359.28 million) was designated for the development of Islam under JAKIM."

[IRFR 2023 Malaysia](#) did not compare different government budgets, so more recent numbers are not available.

One point of contention for religious minorities is the question of claiming custody in divorce cases in religiously mixed marriages. In order to claim custody successfully, the partner most likely to lose custody (almost always the husband) can quickly convert to Islam and file an application with the Sharia courts, which then grant custody to the Muslim spouse. In theory the civil courts are above Sharia courts, but in practice divorce cases are frequently not decided by the civil courts but by Sharia courts (if one parent converts to Islam) since the police prefer the easier implementation of a Sharia decision. The PH government promised to find a solution to this problem but failed to deliver. Court cases on the question of custody are continuing and claimants have started to challenge individual state laws.

As the US State Department reports in the opening paragraph of [IRFR 2023 Malaysia](#):

- "The relationship between sharia and civil law remains unresolved in the legal system, with state governments having responsibility for sharia law. The majority of citizens are Muslim, with Buddhism, Christianity, and Hinduism as other major religions practiced."

Economic landscape

According to [UNDP Human Development Report Malaysia](#) (data updates as of 13 March 2024):

- **Gross National Income per capita:** 27,295 USD (2017 USD PPP)
- **Rate of multidimensional poverty:** No data is available, except for an estimated 6.2% of people living below the national poverty line (2021).
- **Remittances:** 0.4% of the total GDP

According to the [World Bank Malaysia data](#) (accessed 27 August 2024):

- Malaysia is classified as an upper middle-income economy and may become a high income economy between 2024 and 2028.
- **GDP per capita (PPP, constant 2017 international USD):** 28,384
- **GDP per capita growth rate:** 7.5% (2.1% in 2021 and -6.6% in 2020)
- **Poverty gap at 6.85 USD a day (2017 PPP):** not available

In terms of the economy, Malaysia has been known as one of the "Asian Tigers" and was a fast growing and modernizing state. It still is one of the economically and politically most stable countries in Southeast Asia, but the COVID-19 crisis stopped much of the progress and brought major difficulties in its wake. The large 6.6% fall in GDP in 2020 testified to this. However, economic recovery is well underway after the country weathered the pandemic comparably well.

The World Bank states in its [Malaysia country overview](#) (last updated April 2024):

- "Since gaining independence in 1957, Malaysia has undergone a profound economic transformation, transitioning from a predominantly agricultural and commodity-based economy to a robust manufacturing and service sector. This evolution has positioned Malaysia as a leading exporter of electrical appliances, parts, and components, driving remarkable growth that elevated the nation from low- to upper-middle-income status within a single generation. Key indicators, such as Gross National Income (GNI) per capita, have demonstrated impressive growth, averaging 6.9% annually between 1960 and 2017. Moreover, Malaysia has achieved notable success in poverty reduction, with less than 1% of its population living below the international extreme poverty line of US\$1.90 a day and only 2.7% below the average poverty line among its upper-middle-income peers at US\$5.50. Additionally, the country boasts extensive global trade connections, engaging with 90% of countries worldwide, surpassing many of its regional counterparts."
- However, this development comes at a price. The World Bank overview continues: "The current economic landscape is marked by slower growth, heightened inequality, and a lower proportion of high-skilled employment compared to its peers. Indicators such as labor compensation, tax collection, social spending, environmental management, and corruption control are areas that require attention, as they fall short of benchmarks set by high-income OECD countries. Domestically, there is a growing sense that the middle class's aspirations are not being adequately met, with concerns over job quality and equitable wealth distribution. These challenges are crucial to understand as Malaysia prepares for its high-income transition."

Malaysia's strong commodity production has its own challenges as well: Forced labor is still a major problem in the industry and the US State Department put Malaysia in its Tier 2 category in its 2024 Trafficking in Persons report, however noting that the government is making [significant efforts](#) to eliminate it (US State Department, TIP Report Malaysia, 2024).

Malaysia has vast resources which include rubber and oil. Significant oil and gas reserves have been found in the waters around East Malaysia, especially Sarawak, and it remains to be seen how the revenue will be shared out. Malaysia's state oil company Petronas made some payments, starting in 2020. Sarawak is the only state with a Christian majority population. Another commodity Sarawak and Sabah states are exporting is timber, a business riddled with corruption, environmental devastation and harm to indigenous people. The late Chief Minister of Sarawak, Taib Mahmud, who died on 21 February 2024, despite having a rather modest official salary, managed to accumulate assets worth an estimated 46 billion RM. After Indonesia, Malaysia is the world's second largest exporter of palm oil and has been significantly challenged by European efforts to reduce and potentially ban the commodity's use because of environmental issues. This dispute is due to be [reviewed by the World Trade Organization](#) (The Diplomat, 8 June 2021).

Malaysia has a '[political economy](#)', as one observer termed it (New Mandala, 6 March 2020). Such an economy promotes the Malay majority and religion has its place in economic thinking as well, as can be seen by the use of [Islamic banking](#) as an ethno-political tool (Hideki Kitamura, Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs, Volume 40, Issue 2, August 2021, pp. 245-265). With the inclusion not of economic experts but of [religious scholars](#) in decision making bodies, one observer suggests that Malaysia is heading in the direction of forming a theocracy (Murray Hunter Blog, 13 June 2023). This is indeed bad news for Malaysia's ethnic and religious minorities, including Christians, as it means that all the reform efforts to include minorities made by the PH government after 2018 have now been brushed aside.

Another challenge to deal with, apart from the external headwinds caused by the Russia/Ukraine war, is the regionally very unequal economic growth and recovery. As the World Bank wrote in its [Economic Monitor published in June 2022](#), there are Malaysian states lagging behind, such as Kedah, Perlis, Sabah and Sarawak. The [Economic Monitor published in April 2024](#) highlighted disparities in achieving the goal of "zero hardcore poverty" :

- "The government's target of zero hardcore poverty has been reached in some states, but the incidence of absolute poverty in Malaysia remained higher than the pre-pandemic level. The latest official estimates from 2022 showed that the incidence of hardcore poor in Malaysia was only 0.2 percent. Some states, including the Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur, Labuan and Putrajaya, have recorded zero hardcore poverty in 2022. However, some other states still reported hardcore poverty rates above the national average, including Sabah (1.2 percent), Kelantan (0.8 percent) and Sarawak (0.4 percent). Meanwhile, the incidence of absolute poverty in 2022 was at 6.2 percent, higher than the pre-pandemic level (2019: 5.6 percent). This implies that nearly 490,000 Malaysian households still lived below the average national poverty line with monthly household income of RM2,589. Against this backdrop, a broader view and more ambitious target of poverty eradication that is commensurate with Malaysia's aspirations and level of development beyond the current national hardcore poverty is needed."

These disparities include access to and quality of healthcare as well as access and quality of schooling. Since especially citizens in East Malaysia are affected, this also includes a disproportionate number of Christians.

Corruption

The seemingly never-ending corruption scandal surrounding the 1MDB development fund (initiated by news portal Sarawak Report and a July 2015 article in the Washington Post) took on a very personal dimension. It is not just that around 700 million USD had been [transferred](#) to the prime minister's private account on behalf of the 1MDB state fund accused of corruption (Reuters, 3 July 2015), Najib Razak also managed to effectively end all domestic investigations. Nevertheless, international investigations in Switzerland and other countries continued (and in the case of Switzerland are still ongoing in 2024) and the now defunct PH government decided to take up the case again and within a few weeks brought a case together against Najib Razak and his wife. Valuables worth approximately [273 million USD](#) were found at various properties belonging to Razak, when they were searched for evidence in June 2018 (OCCRP, 28 June 2018). Najib Razak was found guilty of all seven charges in the so called SRC trial, on 28 July 2020. This court case was widely seen as a (high level) litmus test of how seriously Malaysia is fighting corruption. The political fallout is considerable, with UMNO thoroughly reduced in numbers after the last elections. For further details, see above: Political and legal landscape.

Gender perspective

Women are, in general, more economically vulnerable than men. Whilst Malaysia has achieved gender parity in regard to education access, men remain the primary breadwinners; 51.2% of women are in the labor force, compared to 77.6% of men ([UNDP Human Development Report, 2021/2022, p. 292](#)). Many women and girls are regularly deprived of their [inheritance](#) rights too (World Bank: Women, Business and The Law, 2022). This occurs typically after the demise of their parents and when the Sharia law is neglected at the individual/family level ([Hague et al, 2020](#)). Under Sharia rules of inheritance, daughters inherit half that of a son.

Social and cultural landscape

According to [UNDP Human Development Report Malaysia](#) (data updates as of 13 March 2024) and the [World Factbook Malaysia](#) (accessed 27 August 2024):

- **Main ethnic groups:** Bumiputera 63.8% (Malays and indigenous peoples, including Orang Asli, Dayak, Anak Negeri 11%), Chinese 20.6%, Indian 6%, other 0.6%, non-citizens 9% (2023 est.)
- **Main languages:** Bahasa Malaysia (official), English, Chinese (Cantonese, Mandarin, Hokkien, Hakka, Hainan, Foochow), Iban, Dusun, Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, Panjabi, Thai
- **Urbanization rate:** 78.7%
- **Literacy rate:** 95% (of all adults age 15 and higher)
- **Mean years of schooling:** 10.7 years
- **Health and education indicators:** Malaysia has 15.4 physicians and 19 hospital beds per 10,000 people, the pupil teacher ratio in elementary school is 12:1. The rate of child malnutrition and stunting (% under the age of 5) was 21.8% in 2019, a rate surprising for such a high developed country.

In 1969, the country lived through serious ethnic clashes against the Chinese minority, which are still vividly remembered. Most ethnic Malays are Muslim and - together with the indigenous people (who often lack education and live in East Malaysia) - they benefit from the government's "affirmative action policy" which gives ethnic Malay advantages in decisions concerning quotas, grants, loans and tax benefits. Indigenous people are also found in Peninsula Malaysia where they are known as Orang Asli.

According to the [World Bank Malaysia data](#) (accessed 27 August 2024):

- **Population/Age:** 23.1% of the population are 14 years old or younger, 7.6% are 65 or above
- **Education:** the completion rate of primary school students is 95%, the primary enrollment rate is 98%
- **Unemployment:** The unemployment rate is 3.6%; the rate of vulnerable employment is 21.8% (2022; modeled ILO estimate)
- **IDPs/Refugees:** According to the UN's [IOM](#), drawing on numbers from the Ministry of Home Affairs, as of July 2023 the country was home to an estimated 3 million migrants. Earlier estimates said that the country is one of the largest target country for working migrants in Southeast Asia, drawing between 1.4 and 2 million registered (and an estimated 1.2 to 3.5 million unregistered) migrant workers to the country, mainly from South and Southeast Asia, but also from the Middle East and Africa. Additionally, there are more than 180,000 refugees registered with the UNHCR, 88% from Myanmar.

According to [UNDP Human Development Report Malaysia](#) (data updates as of 13 March 2024):

- **HDI score and ranking:** With a score of 0.807, Malaysia ranks 63rd of 193 countries, in the range of "Very high human development". The country's progress has been impressive, but has slowed down in recent years and has stagnated at a high level.
- **Life expectancy:** The life expectancy is 76.3 years.
- **Median age:** 31.4
- **GINI coefficient:** 41.0
- **Gender inequality:** With a score of 0.202, Malaysia ranks 52nd of 166 countries in the Gender Inequality Index
- **Unemployment:** The unemployment rate is 3.3%, the vulnerable employment rate is 21.8%, youth (between 15 and 24) not in employment or school are 12.1%

Poverty

The statistics surrounding the issue of poverty in Malaysia were for a long time a matter of debate. There was a [dispute](#) in August 2019 when the UN Special Rapporteur stated that the poverty level was closer to 16-20% rather than 0.4% as claimed by the government (Benar News, 23 August 2019). Almost a year after that, the (outgoing) Special Rapporteur [re-emphasized](#) his criticism by stating that, according to revised government figures, a family of four would still need to survive on 8 USD a day, which is virtually impossible, especially in the cities (Benar News, 6 July 2020). This serves as a reminder how much statistics depend upon definitions and can be easily politicized. In reaction to this, the government [adapted](#) its criteria (and thus raised the poverty rate from 0.4% to 5.6%) shortly afterwards (Malay Mail, 11 July 2020). The rates published now seem to conform to international standards (see World Bank reports quoted above in: Economic landscape). However, a study called

"[Living on the edge](#)", published by UNICEF in May 2024, found that the level of poverty stood at 41% in October 2023 and that especially children were affected, with 4 of 10 children living in poor households, even though numbers were slightly recovering from pandemic levels.

It should also be noted that parts of the COVID-19 support and recovery programs to alleviate poverty consisted of allowing people to [withdraw money](#) from their Employee's Providence fund. Millions did so and all in all more than 24 billion USD were withdrawn, meaning that the problem has simply been shifted to the future, when citizens reach retirement age (Channel News Asia, 17 February 2022).

It is not surprising that Malaysia has the third-highest GINI coefficient (measuring the inequality of income) after the Philippines and Papua New Guinea, according to World Bank data. There is also a surprisingly high rate of malnourished and stunted children. By far the majority of them are ethnic Bumiputera living in East Malaysia. World Bank concludes in its [Malaysia country overview](#) (last updated April 2024):

- "To address these challenges and compete effectively on the global stage, Malaysia must shift its focus toward broader economic development, emphasizing the quality over quantity of growth. Income inequality remains a significant issue, albeit gradually declining, and targeted measures, such as cash transfers to low-income households, are being implemented to alleviate poverty and support vulnerable populations."

The Investment, Trade and Industry Minister of Malaysia estimated that the country might achieve high-income status [by 2030](#), indicating a longer timeline than international observers thought (New Straits Times, 15 April 2024).

In possibly one of the best illustrations of what the COVID-19 crisis and lockdowns have done to many people, a social media [movement](#) started in June 2021, called "Raising the White Flag" (Channel News Asia, 4 July 2021). It proposed that people in need should put a white flag in a visible place where they live and called upon others to help those people. Subsequently, hundreds and thousands of flags were raised and countless stories of lost jobs, depleted savings and shortcomings of official help emerged. While this movement was criticized by government politicians as being politicized and bad practice, it seems to have been initiated by civil society and had nothing to do with political parties or the opposition.

Gender perspective

Within Malaysia's society, men and women are generally expected to assume traditional gender roles. Under civil and Sharia laws, a husband is legally bound to maintain his wife and lead the household. Women on the other hand are expected to assume responsibility for child-raising and domestic duties. Temporarily altering traditional duties, only men were initially allowed to do the shopping during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, as the 'head of the household' ([BBC News, 26 March 2020](#)). Also making headlines, Malaysia's government came under criticism for circulating posters asking for women to help in the crisis by 'not nagging their husbands' ([NPR, 1 April 2020](#)). These examples exemplify the lower status of women in Malaysian society. Most concerning, the COVID-19 measures have also been linked to an increase in domestic violence levels ([Center for Global Development, 12 April 2021](#)).

Technological landscape

According to [DataReportal Digital 2024: Malaysia](#) (23 February 2024) / Survey date: January 2024:

- **Internet usage:** 97.4% penetration
- **Social media usage:** 83.1% of the total population: 44.3% female and 55.7% male.
- **Active cellular mobile connections:** 129.2% of the total population

According to Freedom House's [Freedom on the Net 2023 Malaysia](#) report:

- "Internet freedom improved in Malaysia during the coverage period. Access to high-speed internet service improved, while internet users suffered fewer prison terms and pretrial detention periods over online speech. However, criminal prosecutions and investigations for social media posts and other forms of online expression continue to threaten individuals. Though there are few formalized restraints on online media outlets, the government blocks websites and orders content removed over political or religious sensitivities. Users, particularly LGBT+ people, continue to face online and offline harassment for their online posts."
- Malaysia is rated as "partly free" and saw an improvement of two points compared to the preceding reporting period. According to government statistics, quoted by Freedom House in its 2023 report, the Internet Penetration Rate and average connection speeds continued to increase during the coverage period. According to the Department of Statistics, household internet access increased from 94.7 percent in 2021 to 96 percent in 2022 - with the rate in Sabah and Sarawak standing at only 43.3% and 51.8% respectively (2017). In general, 70% of all Internet users in Malaysia are living in urban areas.
- As an illustration of this situation, Freedom House gave an example: "COVID-19 highlighted the issue of affordability and accessibility of electronic devices to access the internet. Students in rural areas have reported that poor internet access affected their studies. In February 2022, a student in Sarawak trekked for two hours to attend his online university interview due to poor internet speed in his community."

Apart from the wide gap between East and West Malaysia, which is also an issue in many other aspects of economic and social life, the urban-rural gap has to be kept in mind, too. Especially in the east, there are remote areas with vast stretches of land and little infrastructure, but even in West Malaysia remote areas can also be found. As many Christians are living in East Malaysia, particularly in the state of Sarawak, their access to the Internet can be more limited or it may simply not be available at all. As an illustration, the story of an 18 year-old [high school student](#) in Sabah went viral: She climbed a tree to have better internet connection for taking an exam in 2020 (Soya Cincau, 25 July 2020).

However, apart from the question of how to distribute federal funds and proceeds from oil profits, it should be kept in mind that corruption in East Malaysia remains the main problem. East Malaysia also has special voting rights: If citizens move between West Malaysian states, they can update their residency and vote in their new resident state's elections. But if the same person moves to Sabah or Sarawak, they are regarded as being a visitor for 90 days, even though they are a Malaysian citizen. They cannot vote in Sabah or Sarawak elections, even if they have lived and worked there for years.

Malysiakini, one of the largest online news providers in Malaysia, has been [fined](#) for contempt of court over readers' comments (Malay Mail, 19 February 2021). The fine was paid by supporters via

crowdfunding in less than a day. The anti-fake news act was accompanied by a state-run fact checking website; research has shown that this website has not been used to spread propaganda, as had been feared (Schuldt, "[Official Truths in a war on fake news: government fact-checking in Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand](#), Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs, Volume 40, Issue 2, August 2021, pp. 340-371).

A study by Asia Centre published in January 2023 on Internet Freedoms in Malaysia [concluded](#):

- "This ecosystem of laws has resulted in blocked websites, the removal of online content, and the investigation and prosecution of individuals and organizations connected to online content questioning the traditional 3Rs (Race, Religion and Royalty, the author) narrative and holding a progressive view that included multiculturalism. At the same time, as a right-wing interpretation of the 3Rs emerged in response to the political weakening of UMNO, ultranationalist groups advocating for the primacy of the Malay community, Islam and the Monarchy have also flourished legally unhindered, resulting in online harassment and hate speech. Although PH's electoral campaigns in 2018 and 2022 were built upon a progressive 3Rs narrative with multiculturalism at its core, the inclusion of UMNO into an unity government has resulted in maintaining the existing ecosystem of laws that will continue to impact internet freedoms in Malaysia given the country's post-electoral realignment with the 3Rs."

Security situation

Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines: Weak monitoring from any one country has the potential to endanger all three countries

The grenade attack on a café in the State of Selangor in June 2016 has been the only successful attack by violent Islamic militants in the country so far. It showed the very real danger of the Islamic State group (IS) making inroads into Malaysia. Already in 2016, the country announced that it would take up joint patrols with Indonesia and the Philippines to counter the threat of Islamic militancy in the tri-border island region. The capture of the city of Marawi/Philippines by radical Islamic militants in May 2017, and the fact that Islamic militants were able to hold it for five months, shows the very real danger as well as the urgent need for cooperation in this region. As the whole region consists of islands and law enforcement often lacks local knowledge, it is hard to monitor the triangle between Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines and reportedly, IS stepped up [recruiting](#) there (Benar News, 23 September 2020). Weak monitoring from any one country has the potential to endanger all three countries.

What may be complicating the situation is that the Philippines and Malaysia have now taken their [dispute over Sabah](#) in East Malaysia (on the island of Borneo) to the United Nations, even though the row may have been initiated for domestic political reasons in the first place (Benar News, 3 September 2020). This dispute took a surprising turn, when heirs of the Sultan of Sulu (in the Philippines) managed to get an [arbitration award](#) of around 14 billion USD from a French court and tried to arrest assets held by state-owned oil company Petronas in Luxemburg (The Diplomat, 29 July 2022). Although the Philippines is not involved in the legal proceedings, this award has the potential to turn into another headache for the government (see Murray Hunter's Blog, 27 July 2022, for a [legal analysis](#) by the former Malaysian AG Tommy Thomas). Public courts in several European countries have declined to recognize the arbitration award as legal.

An [attack](#) on a police station in Johor state, leaving two policemen dead, on 17 May 2024, shows that the long dormant Jemaah Islamiyah group is still active (Benar News, 24 May 2024). It is not clear why they sprung into action at this time, but the last activity attributed to them in Malaysia was over 20 years ago in 2001.

Malaysia's security situation remains complex and involves a variety of actors. For a comprehensive overview, see: [Murray Hunter Blog](#), 23 March 2022. Another risk which needs mentioning here is the possible escalation of hostility between the Philippines and China in the South Chinese Sea; this would have ripple effects for all countries in the region.

Gender perspective

In a 2018 report, the CEDAW concluded that whilst Malaysia had introduced positive policies to improve women's safety, several gaps remained. The report highlighted trafficking as a particular issue of concern, noting that it is "a destination country for trafficking of women and girls, including asylum-seeking and refugee women and girls, for purposes of sexual exploitation, begging, forced labor or forced marriage" ([CEDAW, 2018, p.18](#)). The US State Department's 2022 Trafficking report revealed that traffickers target vulnerable women and young girls primarily from Southeast Asia — more recently from West Africa — and smuggle them into Malaysia by the agency of corrupt government and immigration officials who profit from bribes and extortionary means ([US State Department, 2022 Trafficking in Persons Report: Malaysia](#)).

Christian origins

Nestorians and Persian traders introduced Christianity to the Malacca islands in the 7th century but Christianity only began to spread with the arrival of Portuguese Catholic missionaries in 1511. The British took over Malacca in 1795 and the London Missionary Society was based there from 1815 onwards. Churches were established mainly to serve British expatriates. By silent agreement between the British authorities and the ruling sultan, missionary work among Muslims was not allowed. Hence, mission work concentrated on animistic tribes. Due to a change in policy by the government, most missionaries had to leave the country by the late 1970s, but the Church continued to grow in numbers - especially in East Malaysia.

Church spectrum today

Malaysia: Church networks	Christians	%
Orthodox	4,600	0.1
Catholic	1,690,000	49.0
Protestant	1,248,000	36.2
Independent	307,000	8.9
Unaffiliated	214,000	6.2
Doubly-affiliated Christians	-14,200	-0.4
Total	3,449,400	100.0
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement	676,000	19.6
Pentecostal-Charismatic	687,000	19.9

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

Orthodox: Eastern (Chalcedonian), Oriental (Pre-Chalcedonian, Non-Chalcedonian, Monophysite), Nestorian (Assyrian), and non-historical Orthodox. **Roman Catholics:** All Christians in communion with the Church of Rome. **Protestants:** Christians in churches originating in or in communion with the Western world's 16th-century Protestant Reformation. Includes Anglicans, Lutherans and Baptists (any of whom may be Charismatic) and denominational Pentecostals, but not Independent traditions such as Independent Baptists nor independent Charismatics. **Independents:** Christians who do not identify with the major Christian traditions (Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant). **Unaffiliated Christians:** Persons professing publicly to be Christians but who are not affiliated to churches. **Doubly-affiliated Christians:** Persons affiliated to or claimed by 2 denominations at once. **Evangelical movement:** Churches, denominations, and individuals who identify themselves as evangelicals by membership in denominations linked to evangelical alliances (e.g., World Evangelical Alliance) or by self-identification in polls. **Pentecostal-Charismatic:** Church members involved in renewal in the Holy Spirit, sometimes known collectively as "Renewalists".

To better understand Christianity in Malaysia, an additional explanation is required at this point. For Malaysia, it can be helpful to make distinctions according to geographical distribution and origin. The majority of Christians come from a *Bumiputra* background, which literally means "sons of the soil", meaning that they belong to the country and come from the indigenous tribal population. From the government's perspective, they qualify for "affirmative action" benefits such as subsidized housing, scholarships etc., but in practice this only applies as long as the *Bumiputra* are not Christians. If they become Christians, their privileges are quickly withdrawn. Non-*Bumiputra* Christians come mainly from the Chinese and Indian ethnic minorities and are divided up into a plethora of different Christian denominations, ranging in size from small house-churches to mega-churches.

The geographical distribution is important as well. Most *Bumiputra* Christians reside in the states of Sabah and Sarawak; the latter still has a Christian majority. These states make up East Malaysia and are situated on the island of Borneo (which is shared with Brunei and Indonesia). To complicate the situation, many *Bumiputra* are migrating to West Malaysia for educational or economic reasons where it is especially hard for them to stay true to their Christian faith.

Converts from a Muslim-Malay background complete the picture of the Malaysian Church. These Christians face a high level of persecution as they have not only left their Islamic faith; their conversion is seen as acting against their very ethnicity and nation as well.

Further useful reports

A selection of in-depth reports and smaller articles are available on the Research & Reports pages of the Open Doors website:

- <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/>.

These are also available on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom):

- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=Malaysia>
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