



**Anvar MUSTAFOYEV<sup>a</sup>** 

<sup>a</sup>*Religious Composition and Historical*

*Ethno-Religious Factors in Malaysia*

*Tashkent State University of Oriental Studies*

*Independent Researcher*

## RELIGIOUS COMPOSITION AND HISTORICAL ETHNO-RELIGIOUS FACTORS IN MALAYSIA

**Abstract.** *This article examines the religious composition of Malaysia and the historical ethno-religious factors that have shaped its social and political development. It analyzes the relationship between ethnic diversity and religious affiliation, focusing particularly on Malays, Chinese, Indians, and indigenous communities. The study explores the historical development of Malaysia's multicultural society, the constitutional framework governing ethnic and religious relations, and the political tensions that culminated in the May 13, 1969 ethnic riots. Particular attention is given to the New Economic Policy, its socioeconomic consequences, and the subsequent growth of Islamic movements and Islamization policies. The article argues that Malaysia's experience demonstrates the complex interaction between religion, ethnicity, political identity, socioeconomic inequality, and national unity. It also highlights the government's efforts to promote moderate Islam and institutionalize religious values while maintaining a multicultural social framework.*

**Keywords:** *Malaysia, religious composition, ethno-religious diversity, Islam, ethnic relations, multiculturalism, New Economic Policy, Islamic movements, Islamization, national identity.*

## INTRODUCTION

Malaysia's religious composition constitutes a multilayered social system shaped by ethno-religious factors. According to the 2023 reports on international religious freedom, the country has approximately 34.2 million inhabitants, of whom 63.5 percent profess Islam. Buddhists account for 18.7 percent, Christians for 9.1 percent, Hindus

for 6.1 percent, and atheists for 1.8 percent; the remaining 0.9 percent belong to communities practicing Confucianism, Taoism, Sikhism, and other traditional beliefs (U.S. Department of State, 2023). These figures confirm the existence of religious pluralism in Malaysia, although this pluralism is closely connected to its ethnic composition.

Under Malaysia's Constitution, ethnic Malays are designated as Muslims from birth and account for approximately 55 percent of the total population. Islam has developed into an integral component of political and national identity as well as religious identity. The overwhelming majority of the country's Muslims follow the Shafi'i school of Sunni Islam, which represents the official religious doctrine supported by the state. Ethnic Chinese primarily practice Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism, although some are Christians or Muslims. They mainly reside in the industrialized states of West Malaysia. Ethnic Indians predominantly practice Hinduism, but their communities also include followers of Islam, Christianity, and Sikhism. The proportion of Christians is considerably higher in the East Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak, where two-thirds of the country's Christians live.

Religious composition plays an important role in governance. Following the 2022 general election, the growing influence of Islamic political forces, particularly PAS, further intensified the politicization of religion (USCIRF, 2025). This is reflected in policies aimed at expanding Sharia law and religious education.

## MAIN PART

Geographically, Malaysia consists of two parts separated by the South China Sea. West Malaysia (Malaya) occupies the southern part of the Malay Peninsula. East Malaysia, traditionally referred to as Sabah and Sarawak, lies in the northern part of Borneo. The country's ethno-religious composition is exceptionally diverse.

Malaysia's population comprises 183 ethnic groups (Joshua Project, n.d.). Most of the population consists of indigenous people, or bumiputera ("sons of the soil"), including Malays and non-Malay bumiputera in Sabah and Sarawak. According to Malaysia's Constitution, Malays are persons who profess Islam and observe Malay customs and traditions, regardless of racial affiliation. Non-Malay bumiputera groups account for more than half of Sarawak's population, with the Iban accounting for

30 percent, and approximately 60 percent of Sabah's population, including Kadazan-Dusun at 18 percent and Bajau at 17 percent (CIA, n.d.). Indigenous ethnic groups known as Orang Asli ("original people") inhabit the Malay Peninsula. Sociologically, the Orang Asli are divided into three main groups: the Semang (Negritos), the Senoi, and the Proto-Malays. These are further divided into 18 subethnic groups. The languages of the indigenous peoples belong to the Austroasiatic and Austronesian language families (Eberhard, Simons, & Robinson, 2026).

Malaysia is also home to immigrants and their descendants from the Middle East, Thailand, and Indonesia. Some Europeans, particularly British people, have lived in the country since the colonial period. The Malacca region has an ethnic community known as the Kristang, a Malay Creole community that emerged through marriages and other relationships between Portuguese and Malays. Small populations from Cambodia and Vietnam have also lived in Malaysia since the Vietnam War.

The Chinese constitute Malaysia's second-largest ethnic community. The history of their emergence dates back to the precolonial period, when merchants from China settled in Indochina, Malacca, and the islands of the Malay Archipelago. Most Chinese immigrants came from southern China, especially Fujian and Guangdong provinces. Mass Chinese migration to Malaya began in the nineteenth century and included both labor migrants and entrepreneurs. Although many initially viewed the region as a temporary refuge, by the early twentieth century the Chinese community had become a major socioeconomic force, occupying a position immediately below the British in Malaya's ethnic hierarchy. Initially, the Chinese lived separately from both indigenous inhabitants and Western colonizers, participated little in sociopolitical life, and mainly engaged in crafts and trade. Strong associations based on regional origins developed among Malaysian Chinese, maintaining ties with China. Today, most Chinese are concentrated along Malaysia's west coast, particularly in Penang, Perak, Selangor, and Johor, as well as the capital, Kuala Lumpur (Chee-Beng, 1997: 103–116).

Most Malaysian Indians are descendants of immigrants who moved from southern India to Malaya during British colonial rule (Rajeswary, 1981). Much earlier, in the eleventh century, Tamil merchants had appeared in the Malay Archipelago and exerted a significant cultural and economic influence on the development of its islands and Malacca. In the seventeenth century, the Dutch East India Company used Tamils as intermediaries

in its relations with the inhabitants of the Malay Archipelago (Arokiaswamy, 2000: 37). In 1947, the overwhelming majority of migrants from India—almost 99 percent—were Tamils and other people from southern India. Punjabis, Bengalis, Gujaratis, and Sindhis from northern India were relatively few, settled mainly in towns, and rapidly established business communities. Although Tamils form the majority of the Indian community, it also includes Malayalis, Punjabis, and Gujaratis.

Malaysia is a state based on religious pluralism. As Zawawi Ibrahim emphasizes, Article 153 of the Constitution is “of paramount legal significance and constitutes the principal legal instrument establishing the fundamental guiding principles for the nation-state in managing ethnic processes and the formation of national identity.” Like Article 152, which establishes Malay as the national language, this article was designed as an “ethnic bargain” intended to express a spirit of mutual tolerance and respect and to protect Malaysia’s distinctive ethnic (*bangsa*) and racial (*kaum*) diversity from the violence experienced in other multinational states. Article 153 reflected not only mutual tolerance and respect among Malaysia’s ethnic groups but also a model of multicultural society embedded in public consciousness throughout the country’s historical development. It also provided a legal foundation for implementing multiculturalism policies (Ibrahim, 2004).

Nevertheless, the agreement among the three political organizations requires analysis. First, the United Malays National Organisation was reluctant to grant equal citizenship status to non-Malay communities, fearing that economically and socially advantaged Chinese and Indians might deprive Malays of their sovereign rights. Malays argued that British colonial policies had strengthened the position of Chinese and Indian immigrants, thereby disrupting traditional ways of life and a peaceful social environment. In their view, the disintegration of the traditional order enabled Chinese and Indians to use the country’s resources to gain an advantage over Malays (Singh, 1995: 187–205). At the same time, the United Malays National Organisation needed Chinese and Indian support to govern the country through a united political front. In its early years, financial assistance from the wealthy Chinese community was also necessary to support poor Malay farmers. Chinese and Indians, for their part, had little choice but to accept a model of “differentiated citizenship.” Following strong opposition to the idea of a “Malay Council,” granting fully equal citizenship to non-Malays had become politically almost impossible for Malay leaders (Singh, 1998: 241–254).

Against a background of intensifying social tensions, opposition parties gradually grew stronger. Particularly prominent were the widely supported left-wing Democratic Action Party (DAP), the moderate, predominantly Chinese Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia, and the right-wing Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party, known as PAS from 1971. PAS slogans enjoyed especially strong support among poorer Malays. Opposition forces put forward concrete proposals to transform the existing status quo and redirect national development. While the Democratic Action Party opposed special Malay privileges, the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party demanded a stronger political and social position for Islam. The policies of the United Malays National Organisation leadership had ceased to serve the interests of much of the population, including Malays. Malays were dissatisfied with a persistent decline in living standards and concerned about the large Chinese and Indian populations and Chinese political activism. Chinese and Indians, meanwhile, believed that Malay privileges should be temporary and that all citizens should enjoy equal rights (Ongkili, 1985: 77). By the late 1960s, growing discontent developed into a political crisis following the United Malays National Organisation's electoral defeat. On May 13, 1969, opposition parties organized a rally in Kuala Lumpur to celebrate their electoral victory. The demonstration ended in mass unrest (National Operations Council, 1969: 29–33).

Socioeconomic inequality was a principal cause of ethnic violence and mass unrest. Approximately 6,000 Kuala Lumpur residents, most of them Chinese, lost their homes and property. During the riots, 178 people, predominantly Chinese, were killed, although nongovernmental sources reported a substantially higher civilian death toll. The situation became relatively stable within four days, but sporadic violence continued for another two months (Heng, 1998: 65). The ethnic clashes of May 13 exposed the fundamental problems confronting the young multinational state. These concerned Malaysia's formation of a national identity and the integration of its diverse peoples into a single political community.

The May 13 ethnic riots fundamentally transformed Malaysia's socioeconomic policies. The establishment of the Ministry of National Unity signaled a new direction in state policy. The ministry developed a new ideology called "Rukunegara" ("a pledge of loyalty to the state"). The government embarked on long-term reforms aimed at restructuring society, uniting all ethnic communities, and creating a "new Malaysian"

identity by 1990. The New Economic Policy (NEP) was adopted as a means of achieving these objectives (National Operations Council, 1969: 29–33). In 1974, the Barisan Nasional (National Front) coalition was formed, bringing together most of the country's political parties.

The new government under Tun Abdul Razak announced the implementation of the New Economic Policy, primarily intended to reduce poverty among Malays. According to Michael Peletz, an anthropologist specializing in Southeast Asia, the NEP was “a policy aimed at restructuring society that, on the one hand, reshaped traditional material and symbolic relations among ethnic communities and, on the other, altered their economic positions” (Peletz, 2005: 240–272). This restructuring policy incorporated elements of ethnic and racial politics, granting Malays special opportunities. In Peletz's view, the government thereby “sought to enable the predominantly rural Malays to catch up with Chinese and Indians.” Government loans, subsidies, and other opportunities—including university quotas, licenses, credit, and additional privileges—were directed mainly toward Malays. Consequently, the policy also heightened awareness of differences between Malays and non-Malays (Ganguly, 1976).

Government policy aimed to expand the Malay middle class. Although the Chinese community opposed this policy, it lacked substantial means of exerting political pressure and was compelled to accept the government's actions. Chinese entrepreneurs consequently began cooperating more actively with Malays and expanding their economic ties with them. These relationships were humorously described as “Ali-Baba partnerships.” Malays learned the skills of trade and business management from Chinese entrepreneurs, while Chinese businesspeople expanded their enterprises through cooperation with Malays (Peletz, 2005: 240–272).

The achievements of the New Economic Policy became increasingly evident. Educational attainment among Malays improved considerably. From the 1970s to 1993, the proportion of middle-class Malays rose from 18 to 28 percent, while the share living in rural areas declined from 65.2 to 33.5 percent (Hefner, 2001: 30). Despite the NEP's substantial achievements, many Malays remained dissatisfied. Its benefits were distributed unevenly, dividing Malay society into those who benefited from the NEP and those who did not. Its principal shortcomings included widespread corruption and government patronage of particular companies and business groups. This phenomenon

is described in international political vocabulary as “crony capitalism”—capitalism for friends, insiders, or personal connections. It was widespread not only in Malaysia but also in other Southeast Asian countries (Baryshnikova, 1996: 164–166).

Malay dissatisfaction with the New Economic Policy contributed to the strengthening of Islamic movements in Malaysia. The sharp intensification of this Islamic revival occurred in the 1970s. Its roots, however, lay in the 1920s and 1930s, when it emerged as a vehicle for spreading Islamic nationalism aimed at reforming society according to Muslim values. The growth of Malaysia’s Islamic revival coincided with the increasing activity of Islamic movements in the Philippines, Indonesia, Egypt, Libya, and Pakistan. One such group was the Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia (ABIM—Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia), led by the young Anwar Ibrahim. He later served as Malaysia’s finance minister and deputy prime minister. However, he was removed from office and imprisoned on sodomy charges. Mahathir Mohamad initiated his dismissal and arrest, blaming Anwar Ibrahim for the severe consequences of the 1997 Asian financial crisis for Malaysia. The Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) was also influential and campaigned to transform Malaysia into an Islamic state (Ibrahim, 2004).

Scholars describe Malaysia’s Islamic movement (da‘wah) as “a powerful means of expressing moral opposition to government development policies, traditional and emerging class structures, other ethnic groups, and similar phenomena.” Initially, the movement sought “to revitalize local Islam and the Muslim community and to cultivate a more Islamic way of life by actively promoting the study of the Qur’an and hadith” (Peletz, 2005: 240–272). It opposed not only the NEP’s adverse consequences but also Malaysia’s capitalist modernization, which its supporters regarded as imitation of the West. The movement therefore became a serious source of concern for the Malaysian government, as the emerging Muslim middle class might embrace the Islamic revival.

Islamism also contributed to growing hostility between Malays and non-Malays during the New Economic Policy period. Non-Malay communities became concerned not only about their socioeconomic position but also about their right to religious freedom. As Robert Hefner observes, “because the government did not regard the Islamic movement as a serious threat and did not take decisive measures against it, the divide between Malays and non-Malays in society continued to widen. The movement’s

ideological slogans intensified ethnic chauvinism and increased social distance in interethnic and interreligious relations” (Hefner, 2001: 51).

Increasing inequality and tension among ethnic communities weakened the reform policies of the 1970s and 1980s. The goal of creating a “new Malaysian” identity by uniting all ethnic groups by 1990 appeared increasingly distant. In the government’s view, transforming multiple cultures into a single, harmoniously developing nation required bringing the entire Malaysian population together around the idea of national unity. In practice, however, other ethnic groups perceived the government’s policy of creating a “new Malaysian” as an attempt to assimilate them into the “melting pot” of a Malay-Muslim social system.

## CONCLUSION

In 1981, Mahathir Mohamad became Malaysia’s prime minister. Under his leadership, the government implemented measures to bring the Islamic movement under control. It used its own “Islamization” programs as one instrument for countering Islamism. The essence of this policy was to defend and promote moderate Islam within a framework of multiculturalism (Embong, 2001: 64). The government also began institutionalizing Islam. An Islamic banking system was established, Islamic values were introduced into public administration, and the International Islamic University Malaysia was opened. Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (ABIM), meanwhile, joined the United Malays National Organisation and lost its role as an independent and powerful ally of the Islamic opposition. Supported by strong economic growth, these government efforts helped stabilize Malaysia’s domestic situation. At the same time, the importance of government policies aimed at strengthening national unity gradually came to be recognized across the Malaysian population, regardless of race or religion (Pogadaev, 2001:66).

## REFERENCES

1. Arokiaswamy, C. W. M. (2000). Tamil influences in Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines (p. 37). Manila
2. Baryshnikova, O. G. (1996). Kak delat dengi. Delovaya elita Filippin [How to make money: The business elite of the Philippines]. Progress, pp. 164–166.
3. Chee-Beng, T. (1997). Chinese Identities in Malaysia. Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science, 25(2), 103–116.

4. CIA – The World Factbook – Malaysia <https://user.iiasa.ac.at/~marek/fbook/01/geos/my.html>
5. Eberhard, D. M., Simons, G. F., & Robinson, A. J. (Eds.). (2026). *Ethnologue: Languages of the world* (29th ed.). SIL Global – Malaysia <https://www.ethnologue.com/country/MY/>
6. Embong, A. R. (2001). The culture and practice of pluralism in postcolonial Malaysia. In R. W. Hefner (Ed.), *The politics of multiculturalism*. University of Hawaii Press, p. 64.
7. Ganguly, S. (1976). *Ethnic politics and political questions in Malaysia and Singapore*. Hodder and Stoughton.
8. Hefner, R. W. (2001). Introduction: Multiculturalism and citizenship in Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia. In *The politics of multiculturalism*. University of Hawaii Press, p. 30.
9. Hefner, R. W. (2001). Introduction: Multiculturalism and citizenship in Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia. In *The politics of multiculturalism*. University of Hawaii Press, p. 51.
10. Heng, P. K. (1998). Chinese responses to Malay hegemony in Peninsular Malaysia (1957–1996). In Z. Ibrahim (Ed.), *Cultural contestations: Mediating identities in a changing Malaysian society*. Asean Academic Press, p.65.
11. Ibrahim, Z. (2004). *Globalization and national identity: Managing ethnicity and cultural pluralism in Malaysia*. Asia Pacific Center for Security Studies.
12. All countries – Malaysia | JoshuaProject <https://joshuaproject.net/global/countries>
13. *The May 13 tragedy: A report by the National Operations Council*. (1969). Governmental Press of Malaysia, pp.29-33.
14. Ongkili, J. P. (1985). *Nation-building in Malaysia, 1946–1974*. Oxford University Press, p.77.
15. Peletz, M. G. (2005). Islam and the cultural politics of legitimacy: Malaysia in the aftermath of September 11. In R. W. Hefner (Ed.), *Remaking Muslim politics: Pluralism, contestation, democratization*. Princeton University Press, pp. 240–272.
16. Pogadaev, V. (2001). Fenomen lichnosti Makhatkhira. Politicheskiy portret [The phenomenon of Mahathir's personality: A political portrait]. *Aziya i Afrika segodnya* [Asia and Africa Today], (5), 66–[end page not supplied].
17. Rajeswary, A. (1981). *The Indian minority and political change in Malaya 1945–1957*. Oxford University Press
18. Singh, H. (1995). UMNO Leaders and Malay Rulers: The Erosion of a Special Relationship. *Pacific Affairs*, 68(2), 187–205.
19. Singh, H. (1998). Tradition, UMNO and Political Succession in Malaysia. *Third World Quarterly*, 19(2), 241–254.
20. 2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Malaysia <https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-report-on-international-religious-freedom/malaysia/>
21. 2025 USCIRF Annual Report: Malaysia <https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/2124282/Malaysia+2025+USCIRF+Annual+Report.pdf>