

# Malaysia

## *Ethnicity in Malaysia*

### *Historical overview*

Independence: August 31, 1957. Malaya, which is now peninsular Malaysia, became independent in 1957. In September 1963, Malaya, Sabah, Sarawak, and Singapore formed Malaysia. Despite opposition by a significant proportion of its population, Sarawak became an autonomous state of the federation of Malaysia in 1963. Because of the very large size of the Iban minority, between 1948 and 1963 its language was the lingua franca between the ethnic communities. It was also the language of government for official purposes, including in court, and was taught as a school subject. As in Sabah, the integration of Sarawak into Malaysia in 1963 only occurred after a high level of autonomy for the state and a number of special laws secured the protection of the very large indigenous populations. From the 1970s, much of these legal protections were to be increasingly eroded – despite occasional victories in court – as the exploitation of the region's natural resources expanded, particularly logging, plantations, oil and gas. The last decades have also seen the incremental transfer of Dayak customary land by the government for logging and plantation activities through various means.

Singapore became an independent country in 1965 and Singapore's departure ensured that Malays were a majority in the remaining Federation of Malaysia. Ethnic tensions remained high in the early years of independence, as resentment over the Chinese minority's control over parts of the economy was deeply felt by some Malays.

Malaysia's predominant political party, the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), has held power in coalition with other parties continuously since independence in 1957. Malaysia has a constitution which protects a number of basic human rights yet entrenches the 'special' position and rights of the Malay population and Islam as the country's official religion. The UMNO coalition's share of the vote declined in national elections held in May 1969. Demonstrations following strong electoral gains by political opposition parties associated with Indians and Chinese minorities led to what are known as the 13 May race riots, in which almost 200 people were killed, most of whom were Chinese. This official figure is deemed too low by some observers. The government declared a state of emergency and suspended all parliamentary activities. The race

riots were seen as occurring partly because of the economic disempowerment felt by the Malay majority. As a result, the Malaysian government adopted an ‘affirmative action programme’ – the New Economic Policy – launched in 1971 and designed to increase the share of control of the economy by the Bumiputeras (‘sons of the Earth’). In the context of Malaysia, this is generally understood to mean ethnic Malays and indigenous groups. The government identified intercommunal harmony as one of its official goals. The previous alliance of communally based parties was replaced with a broader coalition—the Barisan Nasional (BN) or National Front—beginning with the 1974 elections, although the main players in the BN represent ethnic-based parties. In the 2008 general elections, the dominance of the incumbent coalition was challenged by opposition parties, which prevented the BN from obtaining its customary greater than two-thirds majority in the lower house of parliament thereby preventing it from altering the constitution at will. In five of eleven state elections in peninsular Malaysia, the BN failed to reach a simple majority. These electoral results reflected a shift in voting behaviour by non-Malays away from traditional ethnic parties.

### *Group selection*

Group sizes:

Ethnic groups: Malay 53.3%, Chinese 26.0%, indigenous 11.8%, Indian 7.7%, others 1.2% (total population: 23,266,000).

Ethnic groups (2010 Census): Malay 54.6%, Chinese 24.6%, Indigenous (other Bumiputera) 12.8%, Indian 7.3%, others 0.7% (total population: 26,013,356).

Main minority groups: Chinese 7 million (US State Department, 2006), Indians 1.8 million, Dayak-Iban 600,000, Kadazan-Dusun 490,000, Bajau 450,000, Bidayuh 167,000, Orang Asli 130,000 (National Census of Malaysia, 2000); Chinese 6,392,636, Indians 1,907,827 (Source: National Census of Malaysia, 2010).

Malaysia’s multi-racial society contains many ethnic groups. Malays comprise a majority of just over 50%. By constitutional definition, all Malays are Muslim. About a quarter of the population is ethnic Chinese, a group which historically played an important role in trade and business. Malaysians of Indian descent comprise about 7% of the population and include Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists, and Christians. Non-Malay indigenous groups combine to make up approximately 11% of the population. Population density is highest in peninsular Malaysia, home to some 20 million of the country’s 28 million inhabitants. The rest live on the Malaysian portion of the island of Borneo in the large but less densely-populated states of Sabah and Sarawak. More than half of Sarawak’s residents and about two-thirds of Sabah’s are from indigenous groups, the largest of which are the Dayaks and Kadazans.

### *Power relations*

*Malay:* Ethnic Malays hold the most powerful senior leadership positions. In 2006, non-Malays filled 10 of the 33 ministerial posts and 21 of 35 deputy minister positions and in 2009, non-Malays filled 10 of the 32 ministerial posts and 18 of the 40 deputy minister positions. The Malays are therefore coded as "senior partner".

*Chinese:* The Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) was formed in the early 1950s to represent the interests of the Chinese population. It has historically been part of the country's governing coalition under the Barisan Nasional. Chinese activists and politicians who protested against the NEP and the erosion of non-Malay culture and education were arrested, as late as 1988, and detained without trial under the Internal Security Act (ISA). Although the Chinese are represented in the government, they are marginalized in the key policy decision-making process. In successive elections, the majority of Chinese votes have gone to Chinese-based opposition political parties. This was particularly evident in the 2008 polls. Resentment over the privileges given to Bumiputeras remains high among members of this minority, though the Chinese have also benefited from the country's relatively good economic performance of recent decades. Overall, the Chinese have been a "junior partner".

*Indians:* Most 'Indians' live in peninsular Malaysia and are mainly Tamils (around 80%); others include Malayalees, Punjabis, Gujaratis and Sindhis. Indian Muslims have a high rate of intermarriage with the Malay community. Their economic situation has tended to deteriorate since independence in 1957 and the closure of many rubber plantations, and they are excluded from the Bumiputera policies. Although the Malaysian Indian Congress has been part of the ruling Barisan Nasional, Indians do not have the demographic weight to be able to exercise any large degree of political power. They continue to face significant poverty and relatively low levels of education as compared to the Chinese minority.

In November 2007 the ethnic Indian community staged its biggest ever anti-government street protest in Kuala Lumpur when more than 10,000 protesters faced riot police to voice complaints of racial discrimination. On December 13, police arrested five Hindu Rights Action Force (HINDRAF) leaders and organizers of the protest—P. Uthayakumar, M. Manoharan, R. Kenghadharan, Ganabatirau, and T. Vasantha Kumar—under the Internal Security Act and indicated they would be held without trial for a period of two years. Local and international NGOs and civil society groups condemned the detention under the ISA and appealed to the government to charge the five in an open court. HINDRAF leaders subsequently urged ethnic Indians to withdraw their support for the BN.

*Kadazun-Dusun (located primarily in Sabah):* The Kadazun-Dusun traditionally lived in longhouses and planted rice on the fertile hills and plains of Sabah, as well as conducting some nomadic slash-and-burn agriculture. In the 2010 census, these groups constituted 24.5% of Sabah's population. A majority of Kadazun-Dusun are now Catholics or animists, and some have converted to Islam, but some of their ancestral animistic beliefs are maintained. The demographic weight of the indigenous peoples allowed them to exert significant political and legal roles soon after independence, with one political party associated with the Kadazan-Dusun, the United Pasok-Momogun Kadazan Organization, governing Sabah from 1963 to 1967, and another, the Parti Bersatu Sabah, also able to rule from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s. This in turn ensured that these minorities have had extensive legal and constitutional provisions to guarantee – at least to some degree – traditional land rights and customary law. The relative strength of the indigenous peoples began to weaken from the 1980s due partially to internal divisions within and between the various indigenous groupings.

*Dayaks (located primarily in Sarawak):* Non-Muslim indigenous groups are collectively called Dayaks – most of whom are Christians or practise animist beliefs – and they account for about 40 per cent of Sarawak's inhabitants. The two biggest ethnic groups within the Dayak community are the Iban (also known as Sea Dayaks), who constitute just over 30 per cent of the population, and the Bidayuh; others include the Kenyah, Kayan, Kedayan, Murut, Punan, Bisayah, Kelabit, Berawan and Penan. The Murut also bring together a number of other ethnic groups and speak 15 distinct languages which belong to the Murutic branch of the Austronesian family of languages. They tend to be concentrated in the southwest interior of Sabah and, as the term murut indicates, they are traditionally 'hill people'. Many Murut have converted to Christianity, though some have more recently converted also to Islam, and occupy various official and prominent professional posts. Political parties representing Dayak interests succeeded in gaining a substantial number of seats in the Sarawak Assembly in the 1980s, but have since then have weakened dramatically, partially as a result of their deregistration – under sometimes dubious grounds – and of internal divisions.

These two indigenous groups are coded with regional autonomy. Other indigenous groups (like the Bidayuh, Orang Asli, Bajau) cannot be considered as politically relevant in national politics.

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## *Political status of ethnic groups in Malaysia*

*From 1957 until 1963*

Group name	Proportional size	Political status
Malays	0.615	SENIOR PARTNER
Chinese	0.271	JUNIOR PARTNER
East Indians	0.077	JUNIOR PARTNER

*From 1964 until 2013*

Group name	Proportional size	Political status
Malays	0.577	SENIOR PARTNER
Chinese	0.254	JUNIOR PARTNER
East Indians	0.072	JUNIOR PARTNER
Dayaks	0.03	POWERLESS
Kadazans	0.029	POWERLESS



Figure 466: Political status of ethnic groups in Malaysia during 1957-1963.



Figure 467: Political status of ethnic groups in Malaysia during 1964-2013.

## Geographical coverage of ethnic groups in Malaysia

*From 1957 until 1963*

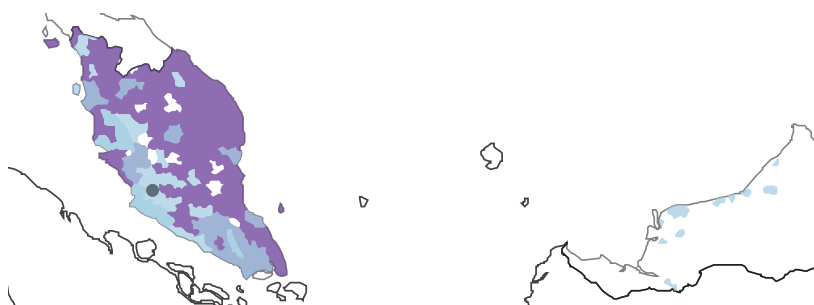


Figure 468: Map of ethnic groups in Malaysia during 1964-2013.

Group name	Area in km <sup>2</sup>	Type
Malays	103 694	Regional & urban
Chinese	48 258	Regional & urban
East Indians	9190	Regional & urban

Table 141: List of ethnic groups in Malaysia during 1957-1963.

*From 1964 until 2013*

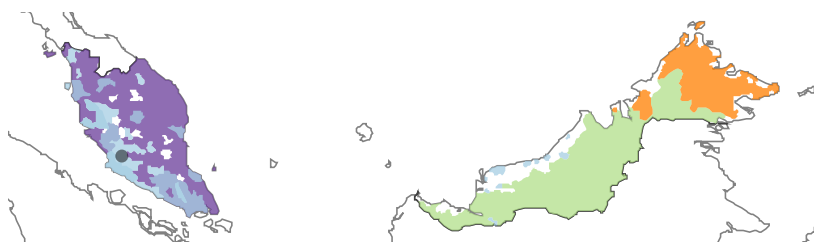


Figure 469: Map of ethnic groups in Malaysia during 1964-2013.



	Group name	Area in km <sup>2</sup>	Type
■	Dayaks	115 223	Regionally based
■	Malays	103 694	Regional & urban
■	Chinese	48 258	Regional & urban
■	Kadazans	45 987	Regionally based
■	East Indians	9190	Regional & urban

Table 142: List of ethnic groups in Malaysia during 1964-2013.

## *Conflicts in Malaysia*

*Starting on 1948-06-19*

Side A	Side B	Group name	Start	Claim	Recruitment	Support
Government of United Kingdom	CPM		1948-06-19			

*Starting on 1957-12-31*

Side A	Side B	Group name	Start	Claim	Recruitment	Support
Government of Malaysia	CPM		1957-12-31			

*Starting on 1962-12-08*

Side A	Side B	Group name	Start	Claim	Recruitment	Support
Government of Indonesia	Government of Malaysia		1962-12-08			

*Starting on 1963-12-31*

Side A	Side B	Group name	Start	Claim	Recruitment	Support
Government of Malaysia	CCO	Chinese	1963-12-31	No	Yes	Yes

*Starting on 2013-03-01*

Side A	Side B	Group name	Start	Claim	Recruitment	Support
Government of Malaysia	Sultanate of Sulu		2013-03-01			