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2024

# Malaysia

LANDSINFORMATION

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I tjänst för världens förföljda **kristna**

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Research

## Malaysia: Full Country Dossier

January 2024



**OpenDoors**

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

Open Doors International / World Watch Research

January 2024

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# Introduction

## World Watch List 2024

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2024	Total Score WWL 2023	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020
1	North Korea	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	12.8	96	98	96	94	94
2	Somalia	16.5	16.7	16.6	16.6	16.6	10.6	93	92	91	92	92
3	Libya	15.9	16.0	15.9	16.1	16.4	10.2	91	88	91	92	90
4	Eritrea	14.6	14.9	15.5	15.9	15.7	12.8	89	89	88	88	87
5	Yemen	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	5.9	89	89	88	87	85
6	Nigeria	13.5	13.9	14.5	14.9	14.4	16.7	88	88	87	85	80
7	Pakistan	13.2	13.9	15.0	15.1	13.1	16.7	87	86	87	88	88
8	Sudan	14.1	14.2	14.9	14.9	15.5	13.3	87	83	79	79	85
9	Iran	15.0	14.6	13.5	15.8	16.5	10.9	86	86	85	86	85
10	Afghanistan	15.7	15.9	15.2	16.3	16.6	4.6	84	84	98	94	93
11	India	12.2	12.6	13.3	14.8	13.2	16.5	83	82	82	83	83
12	Syria	13.4	14.3	13.9	14.3	14.2	11.1	81	80	78	81	82
13	Saudi Arabia	15.2	15.3	14.8	15.7	16.6	3.3	81	80	81	78	79
14	Mali	11.1	10.1	14.7	12.8	15.1	15.6	79	76	70	67	66
15	Algeria	14.4	14.1	11.5	14.0	15.6	9.8	79	73	71	70	73
16	Iraq	14.2	14.4	14.0	14.8	13.9	7.8	79	76	78	82	76
17	Myanmar	12.2	10.6	13.4	13.7	13.0	16.1	79	80	79	74	73
18	Maldives	15.6	15.5	13.6	16.0	16.4	0.9	78	77	77	77	78
19	China	13.0	10.0	12.8	14.6	16.0	11.1	78	77	76	74	70
20	Burkina Faso	11.7	9.7	13.2	11.5	13.8	15.6	75	71	68	67	66
21	Laos	11.6	10.6	13.2	14.3	14.0	11.3	75	68	69	71	72
22	Cuba	13.2	8.7	13.8	13.3	15.1	8.7	73	70	66	62	52
23	Mauritania	14.6	14.2	13.8	14.2	14.2	1.3	72	72	70	71	68
24	Morocco	13.2	13.8	11.7	12.8	14.4	5.4	71	69	69	67	66
25	Uzbekistan	14.6	12.7	13.9	12.6	15.5	1.7	71	71	71	71	73
26	Bangladesh	12.4	10.6	12.5	10.8	10.4	14.1	71	69	68	67	63
27	Niger	9.4	9.6	14.5	7.7	13.1	15.9	70	70	68	62	60
28	CAR	10.3	8.6	13.9	9.6	12.2	15.6	70	70	68	66	68
29	Turkmenistan	14.2	12.3	13.6	13.9	15.5	0.6	70	70	69	70	70
30	Nicaragua	12.1	7.6	13.2	13.2	14.1	9.6	70	65	56	51	41
31	Oman	14.3	14.0	10.6	13.3	14.0	3.1	69	65	66	63	62
32	Ethiopia	9.9	9.7	12.6	10.4	12.1	14.4	69	66	66	65	63
33	Tunisia	12.3	13.2	10.2	12.4	13.8	6.9	69	67	66	67	64
34	Colombia	11.1	8.6	12.9	11.3	10.4	14.1	68	71	68	67	62
35	Vietnam	11.3	9.4	12.4	13.8	14.2	7.2	68	70	71	72	72
36	Bhutan	13.1	12.1	12.4	14.1	14.3	2.2	68	66	67	64	61
37	Mexico	11.5	8.5	12.5	11.1	10.6	14.1	68	67	65	64	60
38	Egypt	12.5	13.7	11.4	11.9	10.9	7.8	68	68	71	75	76
39	Mozambique	9.3	8.5	13.9	8.4	12.5	15.0	68	68	65	63	43
40	Qatar	14.2	14.2	10.5	13.2	14.4	0.6	67	68	74	67	66
41	DRC	8.0	7.9	12.6	9.7	13.0	15.9	67	67	66	64	56
42	Indonesia	10.9	12.3	11.5	10.2	9.7	11.5	66	68	68	63	60
43	Cameroon	8.8	7.6	12.6	8.0	13.1	15.9	66	65	65	64	60
44	Brunei	15.0	14.7	10.0	10.8	14.1	1.3	66	65	64	64	63
45	Comoros	12.7	14.0	11.2	12.4	14.2	1.1	66	66	63	62	57
46	Tajikistan	13.8	12.6	12.3	12.9	13.4	0.6	66	66	65	66	65
47	Kazakhstan	13.3	11.8	12.1	12.8	14.3	1.1	65	65	64	64	64
48	Jordan	12.9	14.2	10.5	12.4	12.8	2.2	65	65	66	64	64
49	Malaysia	13.0	14.1	11.5	12.2	11.1	2.4	64	66	63	63	62
50	Turkey	13.0	11.5	11.6	13.2	11.4	3.1	64	66	65	69	63

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2024	Total Score WWL 2023	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020
51	Kenya	10.3	9.2	11.4	8.0	11.5	12.4	63	64	63	62	61
52	Tanzania	9.3	10.8	10.3	8.6	8.7	14.4	62	63	61	58	55
53	Nepal	12.1	10.4	9.5	13.2	12.3	4.4	62	61	64	66	64
54	Kuwait	13.1	13.6	9.4	12.0	12.2	0.9	61	64	64	63	62
55	Djibouti	12.3	12.6	12.7	10.1	12.3	1.1	61	60	59	56	56
56	Chad	11.6	8.2	10.2	10.2	10.3	10.6	61	58	55	53	56
57	UAE	13.3	13.4	9.5	11.3	12.8	0.7	61	62	62	62	60
58	Sri Lanka	12.9	9.2	10.8	11.5	9.7	5.9	60	57	63	62	65
59	Azerbaijan	13.2	9.9	9.6	11.9	13.6	1.7	60	59	60	56	57
60	Palestinian Territories	13.1	13.3	9.7	10.7	12.1	0.9	60	60	59	58	60
61	Kyrgyzstan	13.2	10.3	11.3	10.5	12.2	1.3	59	59	58	58	57
62	Russian Federation	12.7	7.7	10.6	12.8	12.9	1.7	58	57	56	57	60
63	Rwanda	9.4	7.7	9.0	10.4	11.7	9.4	58	57	50	42	42
64	Burundi	7.6	7.8	9.4	9.8	9.7	12.8	57	55	52	48	48
65	Bahrain	12.0	13.2	8.6	11.3	8.5	1.1	55	55	57	56	55
66	Honduras	7.9	4.7	12.2	7.3	9.9	12.6	55	53	48	46	39
67	Venezuela	6.0	4.4	11.1	10.0	10.8	10.7	53	56	51	39	42
68	Togo	9.2	6.7	9.3	7.1	11.0	8.9	52	49	44	43	41
69	Guinea	10.3	7.5	8.3	8.3	10.5	7.2	52	48	43	47	45
70	Uganda	8.1	5.0	7.4	6.7	8.8	15.9	52	51	48	47	48
71	Angola	6.8	6.7	8.1	11.5	11.4	7.2	52	52	51	46	43
72	Lebanon	11.0	10.2	7.0	6.1	6.6	7.2	48	40	11	-	35
73	Gambia	8.3	8.2	8.9	8.8	8.9	3.7	47	44	44	43	43
74	South Sudan	5.7	4.4	7.0	6.3	7.6	15.6	46	46	43	43	44
75	Belarus	9.6	3.8	5.8	9.7	13.3	3.3	46	43	33	30	28
76	Ivory Coast	12.0	6.5	8.7	5.9	8.0	3.3	44	44	42	42	42
77	Ukraine	5.5	4.8	8.0	11.6	11.6	2.8	44	37	37	34	33
78	Israel	9.8	8.6	5.8	6.3	6.9	6.7	44	38	41	40	38

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## Sources and definitions

- This country report is a collation of data and analysis based around Open Doors World Watch List (WWL) and includes statistical information on world religions, Christian denominations and people groups prepared by the World Christian Database (WCD).
- Highlighted links in the text can be found written out in full at the conclusion of each main section under the heading “External links”. In order to reduce the length of these reference sections, a table containing links to regularly used sources can be found at the beginning of the “Keys to Understanding” chapter under the heading “Links for general background information”. Where one of these sources has been quoted in the dossier text, a quote reference is supplied as indicated in the second column of the table.
- The WWL 2024 reporting period was 1 October 2022 - 30 September 2023.
- The definition of persecution used in WWL analysis is: “Any hostility experienced as a result of one’s identification with Christ. This can include hostile attitudes, words and actions towards Christians”. This broad definition includes (but is not limited to) restrictions, pressure, discrimination, opposition, disinformation, injustice, intimidation, mistreatment, marginalization, oppression, intolerance, infringement, violation, ostracism, hostilities, harassment, abuse, violence, ethnic cleansing and genocide.
- The latest update of WWL Methodology can be found on the research pages of the Open Doors website: <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/wwl-documentation/> and on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom): <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/>.

# WWL 2024 Situation in brief / Malaysia

## Brief country details

Malaysia: Population (UN estimate for 2023)	Christians	Chr%
33,579,000	3,096,000	9.2

Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)

## Map of country



Malaysia: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2024	64	49
WWL 2023	66	44
WWL 2022	63	50
WWL 2021	63	46
WWL 2020	62	40

## Dominant persecution engines and drivers

Malaysia: Main persecution engines	Main drivers
Islamic oppression	Government officials, Ethnic group leaders, Non-Christian religious leaders, One's own (extended) family, Political parties, Ideological pressure groups
Dictatorial paranoia	Government officials, Political parties
Ethno-religious hostility	Government officials, One's own (extended) family, Political parties, Ethnic group leaders, Non-Christian religious leaders, Ideological pressure groups

Engines and Drivers are listed in order of strength. Only Very strong / Strong / Medium are shown here.

## Brief description of the persecution situation

Converts from Islam to Christianity experience most pressure and hostility as every ethnic Malay is expected to be Muslim. Whoever deviates from this is not just going against the Constitution, but also against society at large and of course against family and neighborhood. Roman Catholics, Methodists and NGOs are watched by the authorities, but non-traditional Protestant groups are more often targeted for interference as these tend to be more active in testifying about their faith. The tumultuous times in Malaysian politics since 2020 have made all Malay parties lean towards a stronger emphasis on Islam and have emboldened Islamist parties like the PAS (Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party), which is leading several state governments in the federation and emerged as the largest single party in the snap general election held on 19 November 2022. It went on to consolidate its strong position in Malaysia's politics in the six state elections held in August 2023. PAS members frequently make statements opposing religious and ethnic minorities, including Christians.

## Summary of international obligations and rights violations

Malaysia has committed to respect and protect fundamental rights in the following international treaties:

1. [Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women](#) (CEDAW)
2. [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) (CRC)

Malaysia is not fulfilling its international obligations by regularly violating or failing to protect the following rights of Christians:

- Christian female converts run the risk of being forcibly married to Muslim men (CEDAW Art. 16)
- Christian parents cannot raise their children according to their religious values (CRC Art. 14)

## Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period

For security reasons, no details can be provided.

## External Links - Situation in brief

- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women - <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CEDAW.aspx>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: Convention on the Rights of the Child - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>



# WWL 2024: Keys to understanding / Malaysia

## Links for general background information

Name	Quote Reference	Link	Last accessed on
Amnesty International 2022/23 Malaysia report	AI Malaysia 2022	<a href="https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/asia-and-the-pacific/south-east-asia-and-the-pacific/malaysia/report-malaysia/">https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/asia-and-the-pacific/south-east-asia-and-the-pacific/malaysia/report-malaysia/</a>	11 July 2023
BBC News Malaysia profile - updated 19 May 2023	BBC Malaysia profile	<a href="https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-15356257">https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-15356257</a>	11 July 2023
Bertelsmann Transformation Index 2022 – covering 137 countries	BTI Malaysia Report 2022	<a href="https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/MYS">https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/MYS</a>	11 July 2023
CIA World Factbook Malaysia - updated 3 July 2023	World Factbook Malaysia	<a href="https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/malaysia/">https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/malaysia/</a>	11 July 2023
Crisis24 Malaysia report (Garda World)	Crisis24 Malaysia report	<a href="https://crisis24.garda.com/insights-intelligence/intelligence/country-reports/malaysia">https://crisis24.garda.com/insights-intelligence/intelligence/country-reports/malaysia</a>	11 July 2023
Economist Intelligence Unit Malaysia profile 2023	EIU Malaysia profile 2023	<a href="https://country.eiu.com/malaysia">https://country.eiu.com/malaysia</a>	11 July 2023
FFP's Fragile States Index 2023 – covering 179 countries	FSI 2023 Malaysia	<a href="https://fragilestatesindex.org/country-data/">https://fragilestatesindex.org/country-data/</a>	11 July 2023
Freedom House's 2023 Democracy index – covering 29 countries, Malaysia not included	Democracy Index 2023	<a href="https://freedomhouse.org/countries/nations-transit/scores">https://freedomhouse.org/countries/nations-transit/scores</a>	
Freedom House's 2023 Global Freedom index – covering 210 countries	Global Freedom Index 2023 Malaysia	<a href="https://freedomhouse.org/country/malaysia/freedom-world/2023">https://freedomhouse.org/country/malaysia/freedom-world/2023</a>	11 July 2023
Freedom House's Freedom on the Net 2023 report – covering 70 countries	Freedom on the Net 2023 Malaysia	<a href="https://freedomhouse.org/country/malaysia/freedom-net/2023">https://freedomhouse.org/country/malaysia/freedom-net/2023</a>	31 January 2024
Georgetown's Women, Peace and Security Index 2021/2022 – covering 170 countries	GIWPS 2021 Malaysia profile	<a href="https://giwps.georgetown.edu/country/malaysia/">https://giwps.georgetown.edu/country/malaysia/</a>	11 July 2023
Girls Not Brides Malaysia report	Girls Not Brides Malaysia	<a href="https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/learning-resources/child-marriage-atlas/regions-and-countries/malaysia/">https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/learning-resources/child-marriage-atlas/regions-and-countries/malaysia/</a>	11 July 2023
Human Rights Watch World Report 2023 - Malaysia country chapter	HRW 2023 Malaysia country chapter	<a href="https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2023/country-chapters/malaysia">https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2023/country-chapters/malaysia</a>	11 July 2023
Internet World Stats available in 2023	IWS 2023 Malaysia	<a href="https://www.internetworldstats.com/asia.htm#my">https://www.internetworldstats.com/asia.htm#my</a>	11 July 2023
RSF's 2023 World Press Freedom Index – covering 180 countries	World Press Freedom 2023 Malaysia	<a href="https://rsf.org/en/malaysia">https://rsf.org/en/malaysia</a>	11 July 2023
Transparency International's 2022 Corruption Perceptions Index – covering 180 countries	CPI 2022 Malaysia	<a href="https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2021/index/mys">https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2021/index/mys</a>	11 July 2023
UNDP Human Development Report Malaysia (2021)	UNDP HDR Malaysia	<a href="https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/specific-country-data/#/countries/MYS">https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/specific-country-data/#/countries/MYS</a>	11 July 2023
US State Department's 2022 International Religious Freedom Report Malaysia	IRFR 2022 Malaysia	<a href="https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom/malaysia/">https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom/malaysia/</a>	11 July 2023
USCIRF 2023 country reports – covering 17 CPC / 11 SWL	USCIRF 2023 Malaysia SWL	<a href="https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2023-05/Malaysia.pdf">https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2023-05/Malaysia.pdf</a>	11 July 2023
World Bank Macro Poverty Outlook Malaysia - April 2023	Macro Poverty Outlook 2023 Malaysia	<a href="https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/c6aceb75bed03729ef4ff9404dd7f125-0500012021/related/mpo-mys.pdf">https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/c6aceb75bed03729ef4ff9404dd7f125-0500012021/related/mpo-mys.pdf</a>	11 July 2023
World Bank Malaysia data (2021)	World Bank Malaysia data	<a href="https://databank.worldbank.org/views/reports/reportwidget.aspx?Report_Name=CountryProfileId=b450fd57tbar=ydd=yinf=nzm=ncountry=MYS">https://databank.worldbank.org/views/reports/reportwidget.aspx?Report_Name=CountryProfileId=b450fd57tbar=ydd=yinf=nzm=ncountry=MYS</a>	11 July 2023
World Bank Malaysia overview – updated 29 November 2022	World Bank overview Malaysia	<a href="https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/malaysia/overview">https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/malaysia/overview</a>	11 July 2023

## 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. The king had urged that a government of national unity should be formed. While it seems that the ruling coalition is losing support, it is still too early to write it off and 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 (see also below: *Trends analysis*).

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 as announced on 9 December 2022. 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, the largest opposition party, PAS, strengthened its political position: Apart from successfully defending the three states of Kedah, Kelantan and Terengganu, PN made inroads into Penang, Selangor and Negeri Sembilan.

## 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). While there are constant rumors that Najib Razak may be pardoned sooner or later - and at least some in his party UMNO have been [advocating](#) for it (Straits Times, 14 June 2023) -, this did not yet take place in the WWL 2024 reporting period.

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.

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).

### **With policies continuing to favor Bumiputra, all non-Malay 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). This topic remained central and seemed to be used as a rallying point for all economic and social fears, which multiplied during the COVID-19 crisis, at the expense of ethnic and religious minorities, like Christians.

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 affirma-

tive action policies, many Malay people struggle to make ends meet, as became evident in the crisis surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic. 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 (see below: *Trends analysis*).

### **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	3,096,000	9.2
Muslim	18,808,000	56.0
Hindu	2,130,000	6.3
Buddhist	1,810,000	5.4
Ethno-religionist	1,093,000	3.3
Jewish	100	0.0
Bahai	78,900	0.2
Atheist	41,100	0.1
Agnostic	137,000	0.4
Other	6,385,900	19.0
<i>OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.</i>		

Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds. , *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)

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. For example, the history lessons in Year 11 (Secondary school form 4) are mainly about Islamic history, which takes up 80% of the syllabus. 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 states 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 2022 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 (see below: *Pressure in the 5 spheres of life / 2.11*). As the US State Department states on page 1 of IRFR 2022 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 HDR Malaysia:

- **Gross National Income:** 27,534 USD (2017 USD PPP)
- **Rate of multidimensional poverty:** No data are available, except for an estimated 0.4% of people living below the national poverty line. This led to heated discussion previous WWL reporting periods (see below: *Social and cultural landscape*)
- **Remittances:** 0.45% of the total GDP

According to the World Bank Malaysia data:

- Malaysia is classified as an upper middle-income economy and is expected to become a high income economy between 2024 and 2028.
- **GDP per capita (PPP, constant 2017 international USD):** 28,315
- **GDP per capita growth rate:** 7.5% (1.9% in 2021 and -6.7% in 2020)
- **Poverty gap at 6.85 USD a day (2017 PPP):** 0.6% (2018)

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 6.7% 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:

- "Malaysia is one of the most open economies in the world with a trade to GDP ratio averaging over 130% since 2010. Openness to trade and investment has been instrumental in employment creation and income growth, with about 40% of jobs in Malaysia linked to export activities. After the Asian financial crisis of 1997-1998, Malaysia's economy has been on an upward trajectory, averaging growth of 5.4% since 2010, and is expected to achieve its transition from an upper middle-income economy to a high-income economy by 2024. However, the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic has had a major economic impact on Malaysia, particularly on vulnerable households. Having revised its national poverty line in July 2020, 5.6% of Malaysian households are currently living in absolute poverty. The Government is focused on addressing the well-being of the poorest 40% of the population ("the bottom 40"). This low-income group remains particularly vulnerable to economic shocks as well as increases in the cost of living and mounting financial obligations."



At the same time, this development comes at a price. In its overview, the World Bank also warns:

- "Income inequality in Malaysia remains high relative to other East Asian countries but is gradually declining. While income growth for the bottom 40 has outpaced the top 60 over much of the last decade, the absolute gap across income groups has increased, contributing to widespread perceptions of the poor being left behind. Following the removal of broad-based subsidies, the Government has gradually moved toward more targeted measures to support the poor and vulnerable, mainly in the form of cash transfers to low-income households. "

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 2023 Trafficking in Persons report, however noting that the government is making [significant efforts](#) to eliminate it (US State Department, TIP Report Malaysia, 2023).

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. As a first step, Malaysia's state oil company Petronas agreed to give a [larger revenue share](#) to Sarawak State (Nasdaq, 6 December 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. 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 writes 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 February 2023](#) presented surprisingly varied data when it comes to government social transfers:

- "There are also geographic disparities among recipients of government social transfers. For one government cash transfer program Bantuan Keluarga Malaysia (BKM), targeted at Malaysians with incomes below RM5000 (US\$ 1130) per month, Ministry of Finance data show that 445,485 of the 8.7 million beneficiaries in March 2022 were unbanked and received cash. The highest share of recipients receiving cash payments were in Sarawak (6.9

percent), Perlis (5.9 percent), Sabah (5.9 percent), which are three of the five states World Bank. Catching Up Inclusive Recovery Growth for Lagging States Malaysia Economic Monitor June 2022 the World Bank defined as “lagging” based on a measure of lowest average income/highest poverty rate. However, surprisingly Kuala Lumpur which is wealthier also had 5.7 percent of recipients receiving cash, which is higher than the national average of 5.4 percent. World Bank Global Findex Data (2021) also indicate that Malaysia has a higher share of social transfer recipients receiving cash (6 percent) than its regional peer Thailand (2 percent).” (Page 82)

## 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 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 ([Haque et al, 2020](#)). Under Sharia rules of inheritance, daughters inherit half that of a son.

## Social and cultural landscape

According to UNDP HDR Malaysia and the World Factbook Malaysia:

- **Main ethnic groups:** Bumiputera 62.5% (Malays and indigenous peoples, including Orang Asli, Dayak, Anak Negeri), Chinese 20.6%, Indian 6.2%, other 0.9%, non-citizens 9.8% (2019 est.)
- **Main languages:** Bahasa Malaysia (official), English, Chinese (Cantonese, Mandarin, Hokkien, Hakka, Hainan, Foochow), Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, Panjabi, Thai
- **Urbanization rate:** 78.7%
- **Literacy rate:** 95% (of all adults age 15 and higher)

- **Mean years of schooling:** 10.4 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 World Bank Malaysia data:

- **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 104.9%, the primary enrollment rate is 104%
- **Unemployment:** The unemployment rate is 3.7%; the rate of vulnerable employment is 20.9% (2021; modeled ILO estimate)
- **IDPs/Refugees:** According to the UN's [IOM](#), drawing on numbers from the Ministry of Home Affairs, as of 2021 Malaysia 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, 86% from Myanmar.

According to the UNDP HDR Malaysia:

- **HDI score and ranking:** With a score of 0.810, Malaysia ranks 62nd of 189 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 76.2 years.
- **Median age:** 30.3
- **GINI coefficient:** 41.0
- **Gender inequality:** With a score of 0.253, Malaysia ranks 59th of 162 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 are 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). For 2020, and under the influence of the COVID-19 crisis, the government announced that the [rate had increased](#) to 8.4% (Free Malaysia Today, 17 June 2021).

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. The World Bank Malaysia overview concludes:

- "To fully realize its human potential and fulfil the country's aspiration of achieving the high-income and developed country status, Malaysia will need to advance further in education, health and nutrition, and social protection outcomes. Key priority areas include enhancing the quality of schooling to improve learning outcomes, rethinking nutritional interventions to reduce childhood stunting, and providing adequate social welfare protection for household investments in human capital formation."

In maybe one of the best illustrations of how the COVID-19 crisis and lockdowns have affected 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 Internet World Stats (IWS 2023 Malaysia):

- **Internet usage:** 93.8% penetration - survey date: July 2022. According to [Statista \(2023\)](#), there is a small gender gap in relation to internet access. As of 2021, 96.3% of internet users were female compared to 97.2% male users.
- **Facebook usage:** 91.3% penetration – survey date: July 2022

According to World Bank Malaysia data:

- **Mobile phone subscriptions:** 141

As described in 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).

Malaysiakini, 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 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).

As 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 organisations 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 so far declined to recognize the arbitration award as legal.

## The most concrete threat comes from the Abu Sayyaf group

After the successful attack against the cathedral in Makassar in March 2021 in Indonesia, the Islamic State group called upon [Malaysian and Indonesian supporters](#) to carry out further attacks (Malay Mail, 31 March 2021). Given the close monitoring by security services, executing such plans is, however, far from easy. By far the most concrete threat comes from the Abu Sayyaf group, which has its main base in the Philippines, but continues to kidnap ship crews in the waters between the three countries and off the coast of Sabah. In May 2021, the Malaysian police killed [five members](#) of Abu Sayyaf in a raid in Sabah (Reuters, 18 May 2021). Given that more Abu Sayyaf members [surrendered](#) to Philippines' authorities in 2023, the organization would appear to be considerably weakened and not pose such a grave threat as before (Jamestown Foundation, 27 May 2023).

Malaysia's security situation remains complex and involves a variety of actors. For a comprehensive overview, see: [Murray Hunter Blog](#), 23 March 2022.

## 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](#)).

## Trends analysis

### 1) Muslim Malay-centric politics are here to stay

According to a report by East Asia Forum, a survey carried out in recent years showed that 84.3% of Malaysians feel that the relationship between the government and people is similar to that between a parent and a child. It is therefore by no means certain that Malay citizens want to vote for a growing openness instead of paternalism. However, a more recent survey has shown that 51% of respondents were [undecided](#) about who to vote for in a future federal election (East Asia Forum, 3 June 2021), which reflects feelings of insecurity and disenfranchisement. At the same time, the desire to be protected and safe is still strong. New Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim [reassured](#) the public that he will be upholding Islam as the religion of the federation and protect Malay and Bumiputera rights as enshrined in the Federal Constitution. He also pledged to safeguard the rights of Malaysians, regardless of race or religion (Free Malaysia Today, 24 November 2022).

Whether the prime minister can follow this "middle of the road" approach (of not appearing fully Islamic but not quite secular either) remains to be seen. The Malay Madani policy is not very encouraging in this respect. With Zahid becoming the deputy PM, Malay-centric politics is

here to stay as he champions for Malays under UMNO's wings. A further point to mention is that activists have raised their concern about "[Project Cinta](#)" (translated "project love"), a program within the *dakwah* movement originating in the 1980s that aims to convert non-Muslims in Sabah and Sarawak. Activists say that it still encouraging such conversion (Malaysiakini, 11 February 2023). However, the government has denied its existence.

## 2) The Islamic influence is growing

One outcome of the November 2022 elections and the subsequent state elections in August 2023 is particularly clear: The influence of political Islam is here to stay and it is growing. At the same time, there are conflicts within the Islamist movement which show that it is far from united. While PAS can be said to be [influenced](#) by the Muslim Brotherhood, there are other groups and persons (including muftis) at state level, who are influenced by the Wahhabi-Salafi ideology (Murray Hunter Blog, 4 September 2022). The likelihood of [conflict](#) between Malaysia's royal houses and the Islamic political party, PAS, has been growing and may indicate where Islam in the country is heading (Channel News Asia, 7 April 2023). Especially in states in which they are ruling, PAS has defied royal decrees by declaring that Muslims are not allowed to participate in non-Islamic festivals, not permitted to even enter a church, but may spread political messages in Friday sermons at mosques. It remains to be seen if and for how long the royal houses will stay silent on these matters, and whether PAS will dare to challenge their position if they do speak up.

From the perspective of the ethnic and religious minorities, including Christians, this is a critical time. The window of opportunity for real change for the benefit of all is closing fast and several chances have already been squandered. Whether within the limits of a coalition or outside, PAS influence can be seen to be growing, as it is the largest single party and also governs several states. Just before the November 2022 elections, ex-PM and PN chairman Muhyiddin warned that Jews and Christians in Malaysia were working together with Pakatan Harapan (PH) to "[Christianize](#)" Malaysia. Many parties slammed him for this claim and demanded action to be taken against him (The Star, 19 November 2022). Nevertheless, his claims reflect a widespread popular mindset. While such 'demonization' of Christians is a decades-old political strategy followed by more than one party in Malaysia, the intensity and frequency with which Christians are being portrayed as aiming at "destroying the Malay race, their religion and the country" is certainly to be noted. It is tempting to dismiss this as purely political demagoguery, but that would ignore the fact that it is effectively shaping perceptions and polarizing society.

## 3) Making sense of the election results and competing with the opposition

If the elections and the hung parliament resulting from it shows one thing, it is that voters were fed up with the status quo, but seem not to have realized yet that they need to be united when they aim to achieve real change. If they remain divided along racial and religious lines (as taught by political parties, leaders and society in general), they will not. With PAS being the largest party in parliament, this may be [the most likely path](#) for Malaysian politics (The Interpreter, 1 December 2022). It seems that the government is trying to stem what observers have called "the [green wave](#)" (Benar News, 28 November 2022). If this will work by competing with PAS in an attempt to become more Islamic than the opposition, however, is doubtful. The government announced plans to have the [controversial Sharia harmonization law draft](#) voted



on in Parliament, once the Cabinet has approved (Malay Mail, 25 May 2023). The draft, originally proposed by the Islamic PAS party and better known by its number, RUU 355, plans to harmonize Sharia law with civil law, mostly at the expense of the latter. This would be detrimental to the rights of minorities. A different question is whether this initiative was driven more by pure ideology or rather to woo Muslim-Malay voters away from PAS in the six state elections held in August 2023. If so, with PAS making inroads in these elections, it seems to have failed to convince the electorate. Neither possibility is encouraging for a country wishing to present itself as 'tolerant'.

In February 2023, the home minister slammed a military-like parade by Terengganu PAS Youth, saying it was not only inappropriate but could create uneasiness among the public. The [two-day parade](#) featured members from the Islamic party's youth wing in Setiu, Terengganu and saw the group marching with replicas of swords, spears and shields (Free Malaysia Today, 23 February 2023). In response, PAS president Hadi accused those who condemned the parade as [Islamophobic](#) (Free Malaysia Today, 23 February 2023). It is still unclear what message PAS wants to send through the war-like parade, but it has given the impression of forthcoming hostility against non-Muslims. In June 2023, PAS president Hadi once again hit the headlines where he said that non-Muslims must be [grateful](#) for 'being given a place' here (meaning Malaysia), they should just let Malays continue leading the country (Malay Mail, 7 June 2023). This came after his claim in 2022 that non-Muslims are the "root of corruption" in the country.

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## WWL 2024: Church information / 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	4,800	0.2
Catholic	1,555,000	50.2
Protestant	1,223,000	39.5
Independent	246,000	7.9
Unaffiliated	91,600	3.0
Doubly-affiliated Christians	-25,000	-0.8
<b>Total</b>	<b>3,095,400</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement	660,000	21.3
Renewalist movement	675,000	21.8

Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)

**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. **Renewalist movement:** Church members involved in Pentecostal/Charismatic renewal.

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 con-

version is seen as acting against their very ethnicity and nation as well.

## Areas where Christians face most difficulties

There are no hotspots of persecution for Christians in Malaysia. However, the Islamic missionary work among Christians (*dakwah*) - especially among the *Bumiputra* - focuses on communities in East Malaysia, but is not limited to that region as a [report](#) from the Western Malaysian state of Pahang shows (Cilisos, 10 May 2021). State-supported plans for conversion to Islam have been published. Helped by the number of migrating Muslims, the religious affiliation in Sabah state already ceased to be Christian-majority several years ago, and Sarawak is now only a Christian majority state on paper.

## Christian communities and how they are affected

**Communities of expatriate Christians:** There are many nationalities who have their own Christian fellowships and are self-supporting (e.g. Korean and Japanese churches). They struggle to obtain legal status at times, but are basically free to live their faith as long as they stay within their walls. Nepalese and Vietnamese Christians in most cases join the Historical Christian communities. Hence, communities of expatriate Christians are not involuntarily isolated and are not considered for the purposes of the WWL.

**Historical Christian communities:** Examples are churches belonging to Roman Catholics, Anglicans, Methodists, Lutherans and the Protestant Church in Sabah. These are all less affected by persecution than Non-traditional Christian communities or converts, but they do suffer from discrimination and *dawah* efforts to convert them to Islam.

**Converts to Christianity:** By law, in Malaysia, apostasy is punishable by death. Malaysia is one out of only 11 countries in the world to have apostasy technically punishable by death, although this has not been implemented. Depending on where they are in the country, Christian converts from a Muslim background are able to meet. But all are facing opposition to varying degrees, namely from family, friends, neighbors and the authorities.

**Non-traditional Christian communities:** Examples are Evangelical, Baptist and Pentecostal congregations, Assemblies of God, Salvation Army, Sabah Injil Borneo and others. They often face monitoring, discrimination, intimidation and harassment.

## External Links - Church information

- Areas where Christians face most difficulties: report - <https://cilisos.my/are-malaysias-orang-asli-being-pressured-to-convert-to-islam-we-investigate/>

# WWL 2024: Persecution Dynamics / Malaysia

## Reporting period

1 October 2022 - 30 September 2023

## Position on the World Watch List

Malaysia: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2024	64	49
WWL 2023	66	44
WWL 2022	63	50
WWL 2021	63	46
WWL 2020	62	40

While the scores for pressure almost remained unchanged in the WWL 2024 reporting period, the violence score decreased by 1.3 points, consequently the overall score decreased in this range as well. Christians continued to be marginalized and disadvantaged by a Malay-first policy and this does not seem likely to change in the foreseeable future.

## Persecution engines

Malaysia: Persecution engines	Abbreviation	Level of influence
Islamic oppression	IO	Strong
Religious nationalism	RN	Not at all
Ethno-religious hostility	ERH	Medium
Clan oppression	CO	Very weak
Christian denominational protectionism	CDP	Not at all
Communist and post-Communist oppression	CPCO	Not at all
Secular intolerance	SI	Not at all
Dictatorial paranoia	DPA	Strong
Organized corruption and crime	OCC	Not at all

*The scale for the level of influence of Persecution engines in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong. For more information see WWL Methodology.*

### **Islamic oppression (Strong), blended with Ethno-religious hostility (Medium)**

For a long time, Malaysia carried the image of probably being the world's best role model for a liberal and tolerant Islamic country. However, this image has been fading over the last years. One example of this can be seen in the government's continued attempt to introduce Sharia penal law (*hudud*) in the state of Kelantan. The conservative Muslim PAS party in power in Kelantan immediately called for Sharia penal law after the elections in May 2018 and also took over power in Terengganu. It also emerged as the strongest single party from the November 2022 and August 2023 elections.

According to the Constitution, Sharia law is not on an equal footing with civil law, but in practice this regulation is not so clear. This can especially be seen in cases of divorce and custody: Civil courts frequently decide in favor of the child's non-Muslim mother, which is why fathers sometimes decide to convert to Islam. The claim for custody can then be brought before Sharia courts, and the conversion will give him leverage before this court. The police prefer to implement the latter's decisions as this causes less trouble for them. In February 2022, the Federal Court decided that Sharia courts do not have the right to legal reviews; as a result Sharia lawyers are now pushing for a [change](#) in the Constitution (Malay Mail, 21 February 2022).

An example of *Islamic oppression* has been the attempted interference in Christian publications, including Bible translations:

- In 2015, there was a High Court ban on using the standard vocabulary "Allah" for God in Bahasa Malay, implemented against a Catholic newspaper. More court cases followed, e.g. in the state of Sabah. This is all [highly sensitive](#) and political (Ecumenical News, 16 June 2020). The use of the word "Allah" for God had been used for hundreds of years in Bibles and other Christian publications and is used in the Bahasa Indonesia Bible without any problem. A proposal made during the Jill Ireland case in November 2017 requested that the country's (Islamic) language institute issue a new Bible translation without the word "Allah" (Malay Mail, 20 November 2017). It also revealed the Islamic authorities mindset when they proposed getting the state authorities to do the translation of the Bible - instead of Christians. The High Court made headlines by issuing a detailed decision on the Ireland case in March 2021, explaining why Christians are allowed to use the word "Allah" (Malay Mail, 24 March 2021). Not surprisingly, the government and several State Islamic authorities declared they would appeal the decision. For further information see Malay Mail's [Explainer](#) published on 24 March 2021.
- The 16-year legal contest by a Sabah-based church against Putrajaya on its right to use the word "Allah" in religious publications and education has come to an end. On 15 May 2023, the government [withdrew an appeal](#) against the decision of the lower court in the [Ireland case](#) (Benar News, 15 May 2023). A few days later, it was reported that the Evangelical Church of Borneo (SIB) had [ended its legal fight](#) against the 'Allah' ban after 16 years (UCA News, 18 May 2023). However, the "Allah" issue is far from over as it continues on the political level. The Malay rulers feel it is important for the National Council for Islamic Religious Affairs (MKI) to review and issue the final decision on the use of the word. Using the ruling power he has, the Sultan of Selangor, chairman of MKI, called upon all parties to respect the provisions in the Federal Constitution that guaranteed the rights and powers of



the Malay Rulers in matters related to Islam. The home ministry said more sessions will be held with other stakeholders, including state Islamic religious councils, in its effort to prepare a proposal to improve the administrative directive on the use of the word “Allah”.

Politics and society are driven by one particular ethnic impulse, namely the preservation and superiority of the Malay ethnic group. While the Persecution engine *Ethno-religious hostility* is clearly blended with and dominated by religious motives, as every Malay has to be a Muslim, it has to be mentioned since it clearly plays out in the missionary *dawah* movement which has been offering poverty-stricken native communities in East Malaysia lucrative incentives and benefits if they convert to Islam.

One country expert explained it this way: "Ethno-religious hostility is promoted/fanned by narratives of Islamic religious superiority and ethnic Malay supremacy. This is used at all levels of government and in the social media. Christians and other non-Muslims are told that their presence and continued practice of their religion is "tolerated" by the Muslim community, and warned not to do anything which would upset Muslims. Inter-racial peace and harmony is often skin-deep/superficial, and can easily be overturned by overly-sensitive Muslims who take offence too easily."

### **Dictatorial paranoia (Strong)**

Although *Dictatorial paranoia* is certainly only a subsidiary Persecution engine in Malaysia, it is relevant for understanding the country's situation. All parties claiming to defend the Malay people and their privileges choose to re-emphasize policies of preferential treatment for Malay people (instead of following a policy of equality) and play religious and racial cards. While UMNO managed to translate its defeat in the November 2022 elections into being part of a coalition government, the corruption scandal of former Prime Minister Najib Razak and the acquittal of UMNO president and Vice-Prime Minister Zahid Hamidi of 47 graft accusations on 4 September 2023 seem to have estranged more and more Malay voters from UMNO. Although the party had been predicted a demise before, it seems more voters, also among the young electorate, prefer to vote for PAS. Therefore, *Dictatorial paranoia* will remain a constant companion of Malaysian politics.

## Drivers of persecution

Malaysia: Drivers of persecution	IO	RN	ERH	CO	CDP	CPCO	SI	DPA	OCC
	STRONG		MEDIUM					STRONG	
Government officials	Strong		Strong					Strong	
Ethnic group leaders	Strong		Medium					Weak	
Non-Christian religious leaders	Strong		Medium						
Ideological pressure groups	Medium		Medium					Weak	
Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs	Weak								
One's own (extended) family	Strong		Strong						
Political parties	Strong		Strong					Strong	

The scale for the level of influence of Drivers of persecution in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong. Please note that "-" denotes "not at all". For more information see WWL Methodology.

### Drivers of Islamic oppression (Strong), blended with Ethno-religious hostility (Medium)

- Non-Christian religious and ethnic group leaders (Strong):** Various Muslim NGOs see themselves as 'champions of Islam' and have enjoyed government support. At times they stir up racial disharmony and religious discrimination with their statements and actions. They keep reminding citizens that being a Malay means being a Muslim and sometimes warn against alleged Christian mission and conversion efforts. At the same time, leaders of ethnic minority groups (such as the Iban, among others) can compromise their rights for the sake of getting material benefits, and ethnic majority group leaders will emphasize and strengthen their group's domination as much as possible. A country expert added: "Former Prime Minister Dr Mahathir has been perpetuating ethnic divisions and promoting inequality by rallying Malays to join his 'Malay Proclamation' movement. Throughout his career, he actively used the Bumiputera policy to uplift the Malays in the country, in education, government and business. According to him, now the Malays are being overrun by other ethnic minorities and will soon lose their power. His policies reflected Islamic beliefs and values, which he believed should guide governance. Once a critic of PAS, he now welcomes the 'green wave'.
- Extended family (Strong):** For converts, family members continue to be the strongest drivers of persecution, as leaving their original faith is seen as a disgrace, putting them outside the ethnic and religious community. Social pressure on the family to bring the convert back into the fold is also high. This can also mean handing the converts over to the authorities for ideological treatment.
- Government officials (Strong):** The Constitution prohibits Malays from converting to other religions and limits the propagation of non-Muslim religions. Government officials hence strive to maintain and increase Islamic standards, to the detriment of non-Muslim minorities. The government announced to keep up the preferential treatment of the Malay and Bumiputera population. The economic challenges Malaysia is facing will serve as an-

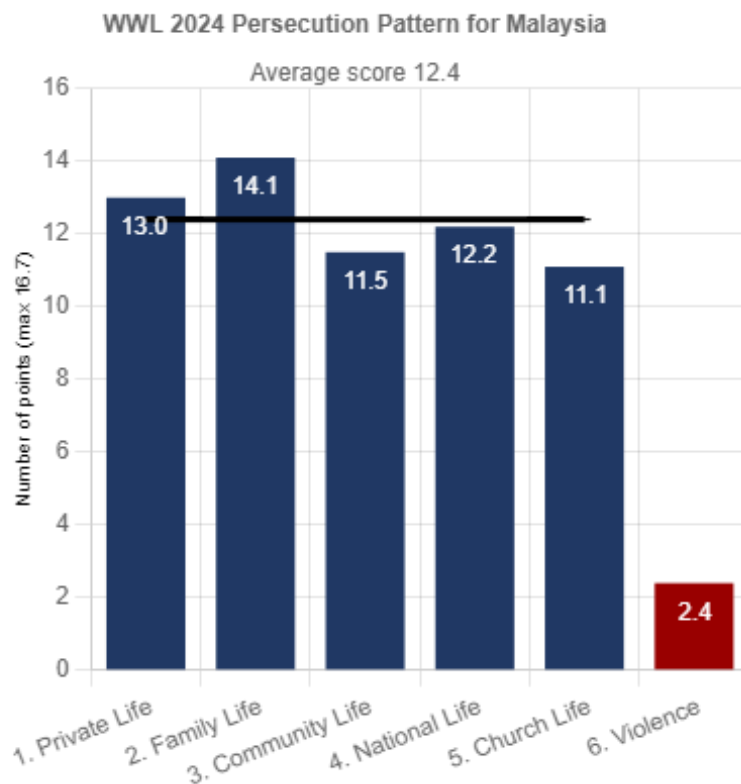
other incentive to benefit Malays first.

- **Political parties (Strong):** One of the main points on the agenda of political parties like UMNO and PAS is to uphold and protect Islam and the dominance of the ethnic Malay group. It was PAS, for example, who proposed the introduction of Hudud Law in Kelantan. They also announced efforts to harmonize Shariah law with civil law under the Act 355. UMNO and PAS are sowing discord and hatred towards Christians and are using religion to rally support from the Malays.
- **Ideological pressure groups (Medium):** Most pressure groups focus on preserving the ethnic dominance of the Malay people. But Islamic groups like ISMA are very active in calling for the protection of Islam as well (e.g., protecting a once [converted child](#) from an inter-religious marriage, 2 August 2022). However, pressure on Christians has also been reported as coming from a Hindu minority group in Malaysia.

### Drivers of Dictatorial paranoia

- **Government officials (Medium):** The Islamist party PAS has strengthened its political position: As well as being back in the federal government after more than four decades, in the August 2023 elections, it successfully defended its leading position in the three states of Kedah, Kelantan and Terengganu. Additionally, civil servants in the administration do not change their thinking quickly. This is especially true for the administration of religious affairs.
- **Political parties (Strong):** What has been stated above for drivers of *Islamic oppression* is applicable here as well.

## The Persecution pattern



The WWL 2024 Persecution pattern for Malaysia shows:

- The average pressure on Christians in Malaysia remained at 12.4 points.
- Pressure is extremely high and strongest in the *Family sphere of life*. Next highest pressure occurs in the *Private and National spheres of life*. The pressure in the *Family, Community and Private spheres* points to problems faced by converts from Islam and other religions, driven as well by the country's Islamization policy. Pressure resulting from the persecution engine *Islamic oppression* is present in all spheres. Conservative Islamic groups and parties have increased in strength and influence in Malaysia.
- The score for violence against Christians was 2.4 points, lower than in WWL 2023. Apart from the abduction of certain Christians in recent years, persecution has rarely been visibly violent in Malaysia.

## Pressure in the 5 spheres of life

*In each of the five spheres of life discussed below, four questions have been selected from the WWL 2024 questionnaire for brief commentary and explanation. The selection usually (but not always) reflects the highest scoring elements. In some cases, an additional paragraph per sphere is included to give further information deemed important. (To see how individual questions are scored on a scale of 0-4 points, please see the "WWL Scoring example" in the WWL Methodology, available at: <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/>, password: freedom).*

### Pressure in Block 1 / Private sphere

**Block 1.1: Conversion has been opposed, forbidden, or punishable, including conversion from one type of Christianity to another. (3.50 points)**

By law, Malay Muslims are not allowed to convert from Islam in any state except Sarawak, but even here, the process is long and tedious. The Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) wants the penalty for apostasy to be death at the federal law level, but so far those efforts have not succeeded. Penalties differ by states, but in Perak, Melaka, Sabah and Pahang, apostasy is a criminal offense punishable by fine and imprisonment. A court ruled that apostasy cases can only be heard by Sharia courts, not civil courts, adding to the almost impossible situation converts find themselves in.

**Block 1.3: It has been dangerous to privately own or keep Christian materials. (3.50 points)**

Converts have faced abuse and pressure to renounce Christianity after families found their Bibles and other Christian materials. Most of them have been ostracized and driven out of their homes. Even reading the Bible or other Christian materials in digital form comes at a risk and converts have to ensure that they are truly alone and their homes or surroundings are free from anyone watching. Some converts reported that Bibles can be used as evidence of apostasy or blasphemy.

**Block 1.4: It has been risky for Christians to reveal their faith in written forms of personal expression (including expressions in blogs and Facebook etc.). (3.50 points)**

As a country expert explained: "Converts reported that this is considered very risky and dangerous. They prefer to use pseudo identities if they have to, but most would not even risk

that. They are hyper-vigilant when it comes to leaving any trace or trails of written or published posts on Christianity. The reason behind that is that such behavior easily fulfils the Sedition Act which prohibits the sharing of sensitive topics on race and religion, mainly Islam." There are other repercussions if a convert reveals his/her faith in a blog or on Facebook as well: The family is usually the first to act by cutting all family ties. Sometimes religious officials take the convert away for relocation and re-education. Therefore converts exert a high level of self-restriction and if they dare to share about their new faith, they use another account with a different name in social media.

**Block 1.8: It has been risky for Christians to speak about their faith with those other than immediate family (extended family, others). (3.25 points)**

As no Malay is allowed to leave Islam, every discussion about faith is fraught with the risk of being perceived as proselytizing. It is also possible that Christians - or atheists - are accused of 'insulting Islam' because of such a topic. While Article 11 of the Federal Constitution of Malaysia states that every individual has the right to profess, practice and preach his religion or belief, Article 11(4) of the Federal Constitution also states that the propagation of non-Islamic religions among Muslims is forbidden. Therefore, sharing faith with a Muslim is considered illegal and punishable by law. For converts, discussions about faith come naturally with a much higher risk, as they can lead to one's conversion being discovered.

**Block 1: Additional information**

Christians from a Muslim background cannot attend any public church activities (except in East Malaysia, although even there it is not without risk. A rule of thumb is: The more rural the village, the higher the risk). If they do, they risk being caught by the authorities and the church attended will face serious consequences for welcoming them. Therefore, converts gather secretly in homes for all their Christian activities, away from the prying eyes of government, community and the registered churches. Even attending online meetings is not without risk.

## Pressure in Block 2 / Family sphere

**Block 2.5: Burials of Christians have been hindered or coercively performed with non-Christian rites. (3.75 points)**

As the registration department also issues death certificates, burials are a problem for converts and also for many Christians from the indigenous people (see below: 2.1). If records show that the person who died is registered as Muslim, the authorities will inform the Islamic religious authority. If the burial rites are not celebrated according to Islam, this Islamic authority has the right to take the body away from the non-Muslim family so that they can perform Islamic rites for the deceased.

**Block 2.8: Christian children have been pressured into attending anti-Christian or majority religion teaching at any level of education. (3.75 points)**

It is very common for state high schools to teach compulsory subjects such as 'Tamadun Islam' (Islamic civilization), 'Sejarah Islam' (History of Islam) and 'Sastera Melayu' (Malay literature). For example, the history lessons in Year 11 (Secondary school form 4) are mainly about Islamic

history and take up 80% of the syllabus. Non-Muslim children must take these subjects since attendance is compulsory. The content of these lessons led one educator to call for teaching an [undistorted version of history](#) (Free Malaysia Today, 14 April 2021). It is also common for children of the indigenous tribes in Malaysia (Orang Asli) to be pressured into attending religious/Arabic classes. In August 2023, the government has taken a step further in expanding Islamic influence through the education system by introducing the [40 Hadith appreciation module](#) in national schools starting in 2024, in the name of fostering unity and religious understanding (Malay Mail, 19 August 2023). The initiative has been criticized as being 'unconstitutional' by the Malaysian interfaith body which argued that the module promotes the complete Islamic way of life, which they believe goes against the principles of religious freedom enshrined in Article 3(1) of the Federal Constitution. In its defense, the Education Department said that the [module is only for Muslim students](#) and its development was undertaken based on a recommendation from PM Anwar Ibrahim, who has promised a more influential role in governance for The Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (INOVASI LAMAN TERAPEUTIK PSSAS, accessed 31 January 2024).

**Block 2.9: Children of Christians have been harassed or discriminated against because of their parents' faith. (3.75 points)**

Children of converts have to attend Islamic education in schools and there are reports that Christian children are put under pressure to convert to Islam in an effort to bolster *dakwah*. Sometimes, parents who have converted to Christianity have to take their children out of school as they may unintentionally talk about their parents' faith. Children of Christians are frequently harassed and discriminated against because of their parents' faith. Derogatory comments by peers are common and even teachers have shamed Christian students for what is often a mix of religious and ethnic reasons. One country expert shared: "Everyone has to attend Islamic seminars and take exams for Islamic studies. If you fail the Islamic exams, that's something which is frowned upon. You have to wear a headscarf to school, you have to go for prayers - it's all mandatory especially in government schools." This is not only true for converts, it has been reported that this kind of pressure is put on indigenous children of Christian faith and on Iban Christians as well.

**Block 2.1: Babies and children of Christians have automatically been registered under the state or majority religion. (3.50 points)**

According to the current law, children born to couples where one parent is a Muslim (either by birth or conversion) are automatically registered as Muslims. Since converts cannot officially change their religion to Christianity, their children will be registered as Muslims. The problem surrounding registering children is an ongoing problem for Bumiputras (Malays and indigenous people). As for the law concerning the unilateral conversion of children, the Federal Court has now ruled that it is unlawful, and therefore both parents' consent are needed for the conversion of children. The official practice is that the religion of the child is registered in the Birth Certificate, MyKID (identity card below 12 years old), and MyKAD (identity card 12 years old and above). However, there are cases of malpractice where the registrar has put the child's religion as Islam - especially for Orang Asli (indigenous population). Natives in Sabah and Sarawak have the affixes 'bin' (son of) or 'binti' (daughter of) in their names even though they are not Muslims,

which leads officers to believe they are Muslims and put Islam as their religion in the MyKADs (Identity Card). The National Human Rights Commission SUHAKAM has officially complained about this practice of ['forced conversion'](#) in Sarawak (MalayMail, 21 January 2021), but so far their complaints have been ignored.

This has also been one of the problems the Bumiputra Christians have been facing. However, some of them do not bother to 'fight' over it as the process is long and arduous with very few successful results. With a growing number being converted to Islam, either willfully or through deceit, the parents' children will automatically follow the 'new' religious identity, which is Islam. As the 'religion' is not shown in the physical identity card but in the digital information accessed only via card reader, it is easy for the government to register children of indigenous people groups and native/tribal groups under Islam without the parents knowing it or checking it.

## **Block 2: Additional information**

Malaysia seems to be the only country in the world where religious conversion changes ethnicity as well. There are reported cases where children of converted natives suddenly 'professed' to be Muslim Malays when their real ethnicity was Iban. When asked why they answered that way, they said: "Because our (Muslim) teachers told us so!" Some Christians from indigenous tribes, especially in Sabah, are converted to Islam by trickery. To accept financial help from the government, some of them handed in their identity card and signed a form not knowing that this was a declaration to convert to Islam. When they got their card back, they realized that their religion has been changed to Islam. When they tried to reverse this, they were told by the Federal Registration Department that their religious status can only be changed if approval is given by the Sharia courts, which is impossible to obtain.

The challenge of registration reaches into the next generation. Often, converts do not want to register their children's births as they will automatically be entered as Muslim. So, most children of converts are unregistered and grow up without enjoying privileges such as access to public education, which depend on registration. However, if converts decide to have their children registered, they have to be registered as Muslims.

Christians with a Muslim background can also be forced to divorce (if married) and lose their inheritance rights, once discovered. Organizing a baptism, Christian wedding or funeral can become difficult or even impossible. Converts can be kept isolated by their families, or expelled from the family home, or even sent to Islamic purification (i.e. re-education) camps, although this rarely happens. There has been a report that such camps have been re-named and function or double as Islamic schools.

According to the religious affairs minister, marriages registered overseas between a Malaysian Muslim and a non-Muslim foreigner are [neither allowed nor recognized](#) under Malaysian law, should the couple choose to later reside in Malaysia. He reiterated that for Muslims, the Islamic Family Law (Federal Territory) Act 1984 states that no man can marry a non-Muslim woman and vice versa. "If a Muslim was to marry someone of a different faith, their partner has to convert to Islam" (Free Malaysia Today, 9 June 2023). Because of this, converts from Islam to Christianity cannot register for marriage.

## Pressure in Block 3 / Community sphere

### **Block 3.7: Christians have been pressured by their community to renounce their faith. (4.00 points)**

This pressure is acute for the indigenous people in East Malaysia, but also affects the Orang Asli in West Malaysia (Cilisos, 10 May 2021). The state-driven and financed Muslim missionary activity (*dakwah*) often uses the economic and social difficulties experienced by Christian and animist natives to entice them to convert to Islam with financial benefits. Friends often persuade them to speak the Islamic meal prayers and invite them to celebrate Muslim festivals. Such and even stronger pressure is exerted against Christian converts from a Muslim background, as they face stints in re-education camps. (for details, see below: *Persecution of other religious minorities/IRFR 2022 Malaysia, pp.14-15*). Converts from other religious backgrounds can face physical abuse, depending on the family. A country expert summed up as follows: "Believers continue to be pressured by their communities to renounce their faith specifically through these four means: 1) interfaith relations, 2) receiving of benefits, rewards or promotion, 3) false promises or threats, and lastly 4) parental conversion."

### **Block 3.9: Christians have faced disadvantages in their education at any level for faith-related reasons (e.g. restrictions of access to education). (3.75 points)**

What one country expert called the "racial micro-aggression in the Malaysian School System" has continued and is inextricably linked with religious motives. For non-Malay students, access to several universities is limited. Public universities are still adopting the quota system whereby Bumiputra students (Malays and indigenous people) have a higher quota while non-Bumiputra students have less access to courses at state universities. This applies to state universities' intake and government scholarships. In order to qualify for higher education and scholarships, Christians - as non-Malay in general - need to overcome far higher hurdles than Muslims due to the "affirmative action policy" in favor of Malays. There were also reports that non-Malays and non-Muslims converted to Islam, just to get their student loans, which were then approved without further background checks.

### **Block 3.10: Christians have been discriminated against in public or private employment for faith-related reasons. (3.75 points)**

There has always been discrimination against non-Malays and preference for Malays in public employment, even though on paper the preferential policy applies to Bumiputra as well. As for private businesses (for example owned by Chinese Christians, but also in general to all non-Malay business owners), to get government contracts it is required by law that the owners must have Bumiputra partners. To get round this, some companies are known to have 'Bumiputra partners' on paper only. On the other hand, there are private businesses with a "Muslim only" hiring policy. Although many Sabahans and Sarawakians qualify as Bumiputras, the religious factor hinders their employment, especially in higher positions.



**Block 3.2: Christians have been monitored by their local communities or by private groups (this includes reporting to police, being shadowed, telephone lines listened to, emails read/censored, etc.). (3.25 points)**

Converts always have to be cautious in their activities and are "always on the lookout", as one convert said - especially concerning the people they visit or receive into their homes. They are watched by neighbors and can be easily reported to the village authorities who will question them. Churches, like other religious entities, are being monitored by the Special Branch of the police. Even online meetings are monitored, which is done less noticeably. Aside from the state authorities and local Muslim communities, Malay Islamic rights groups (e.g., Perkasa and ISMA) are known to monitor Christian activities.

**Block 3: Additional information**

In remote areas in Sabah and Sarawak, Malay communities have access to water and electricity, but some native communities known to be Christian are denied such access. Although in general, indigenous and Orang Asli communities are deliberately neglected (for example, they have less access to infrastructure), being a Christian among such communities makes them even more prone to discrimination. Converts face strong pressure from family, friends and neighbors to recant their Christian faith. Christians in Malaysia are often harassed and threatened for faith-related reasons. The discrimination often takes places because of dress codes. In states like Kelantan, ruled by the PAS, there have been raids focusing on the proper Islamic dress for women. This puts pressure on Christians, particularly converts, as well. One country expert explained the background: "Although wearing a headscarf is not mandatory, the hijab issue has always been around. There is tremendous pressure on Malay and Muslim women to wear the hijab for fear of being deemed less devout, un-Islamic or showing apostasy tendencies. Muslim men and media have been reported to scorn and ridicule Muslim women who do not wear the hijab."

## Pressure in Block 4 / National sphere

**Block 4.2: Officials have refused to recognize an individual's conversion as recorded in government administration systems, identify cards (etc.). (4.00 points)**

Officials refuse to recognize an individual's right to convert, especially when it is stated in the documents that they are Muslim, be they Malay or non-Malay. Muslims desiring to renounce Islam have to go through a long and painful legal process, and are often charged with apostasy. It is virtually impossible for ethnic Malays to legally convert to Christian faith, since even the Constitution stands against it. In general, the religion entered on the identity card is taken as authoritative and it is an uphill battle to have it removed should someone wish to leave Islam. As a result, many Bumiputra are wrongly categorized as Muslims on their ID cards. The authorities provide financial aid to those who want to convert to Islam.

**Block 4.1: The Constitution (or comparable national or state law) limits freedom of religion as formulated in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. (3.75 points)**

Religious freedom is enshrined in the Malaysian Constitution; Article 11 provides the right to

profess and to practice religion for every person, and (subject to applicable laws restricting the propagation of other religions to Muslims) to propagate it. The Constitution defines ethnic Malays as Muslims. That is why Malays do not have the religious liberty to leave Islam and embrace another religion. As already stated above, the Federal Court ruled that jurisdiction on the validity of a conversion lies with the Sharia courts, not the civil courts, leaving converts effectively without legal representation for the time-being. The Constitution also prohibits adherents of other religions from propagating their religion among Malay Muslims. Yet it allows Muslims to propagate Islam all over the country. Furthermore, Sharia law is in place in conjunction with civil law. As one country expert explained: "Malaysia's Islamists and conservatives, led by PAS, are challenging the country's legal system, calling for the 'de-secularization' of Malaysian law in cases involving religious conversions."

**Block 4.5: Christians have been discriminated against when engaging with the authorities (local administration, government, army, etc.) for faith-related reasons. (3.75 points)**

Religion is part of every sphere of life in Malaysia. Discrimination against Christians (and all non-Malay and non-Muslims) takes place at all levels of society, including local administration and government. The authorities give special treatment to Malays and, for example, non-Malay owned companies are required to have at least one Malay as board member. In the previous reporting period (WWL 2023), Orang Asli groups officially complained that the Department of Orang Asli Development (JAKOA) did not provide any support to those who had converted to Christianity. JAKOA also refused to entertain their request for a proper road, water pipeline and sewage system, while Muslim Orang Asli groups in the same settlement were provided with a proper tar road and water system.

**Block 4.11: Christians have been subjected to smear campaigns or hate speech. (3.50 points)**

On websites run by Malay Islamic rights groups and in government-owned media, Christians are frequently slandered, for example by spreading rumors that Christians and Jews want to take over Malaysia. The most prominent case concerned PAS President Abdul Hadi Awang who has not been detained despite the reports lodged against him. He claimed publicly over non-Muslims and non-Bumiputras that they are the root of corruption in Malaysia. Hadi boldly [challenged](#) the public claiming that he would answer all questions and justify his remarks, should he summoned by the court (The Star, 3 September 2022). Similar cases and more details can be found under *Trends 2 and 3* and *Political and legal landscape*.

**Block 4: Additional information**

The country's harsh sedition laws have drawn much condemnation from international observers. Although the law bans any action, speech or publication that brings contempt against the government or Malaysia's nine royal sultans and prohibits people from inciting hatred between different races and religions, it is used one-sidedly, as could be seen in the cases quoted above. Those who instigate hatred and stoke racial and religious sentiments against Christians are rarely charged for sedition. Questioning the special position of the ethnic Malay majority and the natives of Sabah and Sarawak falls under sedition as well. Those who have spoken out against the government have mostly had to face sedition charges too. Indigenous people face aggressive, deliberate attempts to convert them to Islam, especially those who migrate to West

Malaysia as it is easy to take advantage of their social uprooting and their economic vulnerability. In the long term, the Christian population may shrink because of this, especially in East Malaysia. A Muslim mother-daughter duo challenged the strengthened [Sharia laws](#) of Kelantan State in court (UCA News, 17 November 2023); if they succeed, it may generate a renewed impetus to incorporate the status of Sharia laws at the federal level.

## Pressure in Block 5 / Church sphere

### **Block 5.7: Churches have been hindered from openly integrating converts. (4.00 points)**

Most churches - even the large and well-established ones - are very cautious when it comes to welcoming converts as it is very risky for them to integrate Muslim background Christians. As a result, converts usually meet in secret groups, separate from other Christians, because churches will otherwise run into trouble with the authorities. At times, churches have even turned away converts and even reported them to the authorities, as they did not want to get into trouble. The risk of converts being caught going to church is much higher in West Malaysia, but even in East Malaysia converts require great caution.

### **Block 5.2: It has been difficult to get registration or legal status for churches at any level of government. (3.50 points)**

Article 11(3) of the Constitution states: "Every religious group has the right to: manage its own religious affairs; establish and maintain institutions for religious or charitable purposes; and acquire and own property and hold and administer it in accordance with the law." However, a country expert states: "Generally, it is difficult for a newly established church to register or obtain legal status for operating as a church. Churches often register as societies or clubs to make it easier (or even possible) to open a bank account, as well as to acquire and manage assets." This comes with the duty to report to the authorities. Non-traditional churches face more challenges compared to historical churches.

### **Block 5.11: Pastors or other Christian leaders (or their family members) have been special targets of harassment for faith-related reasons. (3.50 points)**

Pastors and church leaders have been natural targets for hostility from religious or ethnic groups, especially when they or their church have been perceived as engaging in acts of evangelism, and even more so, when this happens among Muslims. There are also, for instance, reports of unknown men attending church services taking photos.

The abduction of Pastor Raymond Koh in broad daylight in February 2017 sent shockwaves through the Christian community and leadership which are still felt today. It is particularly unnerving for churches, pastors and particularly his family, that - so many years after the incident - his whereabouts are still unknown, the perpetrators have not been found (let alone punished), and that findings point to the involvement of the Special Branch of the police.

### **Block 5.12: Churches or Christian organizations have been hindered in printing Christian materials or owning printing presses. (3.50 points)**

All printing of Christian materials requires permission from the government. Restrictions are im-

posed on importing Bahasa Malaysia materials and the Bible and Christian Malay books from Indonesia are banned. In 2015, the government issued a SOP (standard operating procedure) according to which [all imported Christian publications](#) (including the Malay Bible) are to be controlled by the Quranic Division of the Home Ministry (Malaysiakini, 17 June 2015). Despite objections from church leaders, the government went ahead with its implementation. As described in detail above (in: Persecution engines/Islamic oppression), there has been considerable legal action against Christians using the term "Allah" for God, notwithstanding the fact that this term has been used for hundreds of years in Bibles and other Christian publications and has been used in the Bahasa Indonesia Bible without any problem. Revealing the Islamic authorities mindset, one proposal made was that the country's (Islamic) language institute should issue a new Bible translation without the word "Allah", with the state authorities doing the translation of the Bible - instead of Christians. Although the legal side of this dispute has been settled, the "Allah" issue is far from over and continues on the political level.

### **Block 5: Additional information**

In early September 2021, a deputy minister announced that the federal government had drafted four new laws to strengthen Sharia law in Malaysia, among them a law to [control the development of non-Muslim religions](#) (Malay Mail, 9 September 2021). Although the Law Minister said that no such proposal had been submitted in the final draft, churches and members of other religious minorities were alarmed and claimed that such a law would [the constitutional provisions](#) of Malaysia (UCA News, 13 September 2021). These efforts are continuing and they are a sign that religious minorities in Malaysia are facing ever more organized opposition and limitations. With PAS as the largest single party in parliament, it likely that more such attempts will be made in the future and the efforts in Kelantan state, referred to above, are a harbinger of things to come.

## **Violence**

*Violence is defined in WWL Methodology as the deprivation of physical freedom or as bodily harm to Christians or damage to their property. It includes severe threats (mental abuse). Data obtained for WWL is based on reported cases as much as possible. However:*

### **1. Some incidents go unreported because the Christians involved choose not to speak about the hostility being faced**

*Possible reasons for this may be:*

- *Doing so would expose them to more attacks. For example, if a family member is killed because of his/her faith, the survivors might decide to keep silent about the circumstances of the killing to avoid provoking any further attacks.*
- *In some circumstances, the reticence to pass on information may be due to the danger of exposure caused by converts returning to their previous faith.*
- *If persecution is related to sexual violence - due to stigma, survivors often do not tell even their closest relatives.*
- *In some cultural settings, if your loved one is killed, you might be under the obligation to take revenge. Christians not wishing to do that, may decide to keep quiet about it.*

### **2. Other incidents go unreported for the following possible reasons**

- *Some incidents never reach the public consciousness, because no one really knows about it; or the incident is simply not considered worth reporting; or media coverage is deliberately blocked or distorted; or media coverage*

*is not deliberately blocked, but the information somehow gets lost; or the incidents are deliberately not reported widely for security reasons (e.g. for the protection of local church leaders).*

- *In situations where Christians have been discriminated against for many years, armed conflict can make them additionally vulnerable. Christians killed in areas where fighting regularly takes place are unlikely to be reported separately. Examples in recent years have been Sudan, Syria and Myanmar.*
- *Christians who die through the deprivation of basic necessities such as clean water and medical care (due to long-term discrimination) are unlikely to be reported separately. Christians are not always killed directly; they can be so squeezed by regulations and other oppressive factors that they die – not at once, but in the course of years. This often includes the deprivation of basic necessities such as clean water and medical care, or exclusion from government assisted socio-economic development projects. These numbers could be immense.*

For security reasons, no details about violence targeting Christians in Malaysia can be provided.

## 5 Year trends

The following three charts show the levels of pressure and violence faced by Christians in the country over the last five WWL reporting periods.

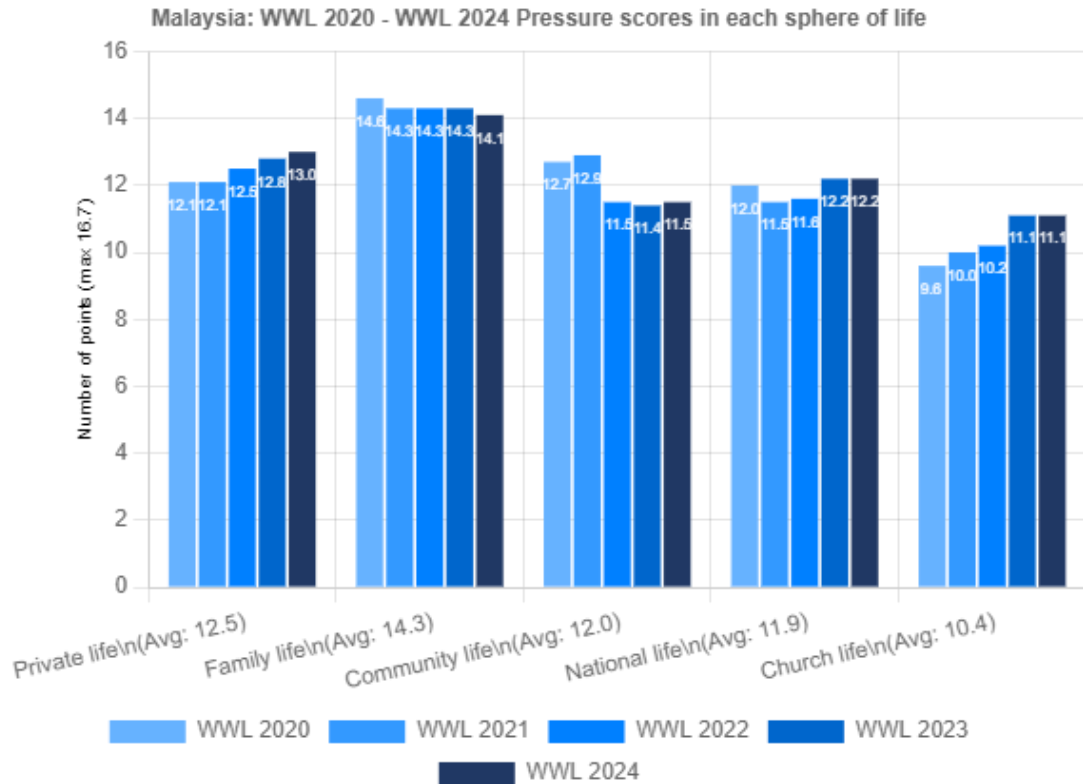
### 5 Year trends: Average pressure

Malaysia: WWL 2020 - WWL 2024	Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life
2024	12.4
2023	12.4
2022	12.0
2021	12.2
2020	12.2

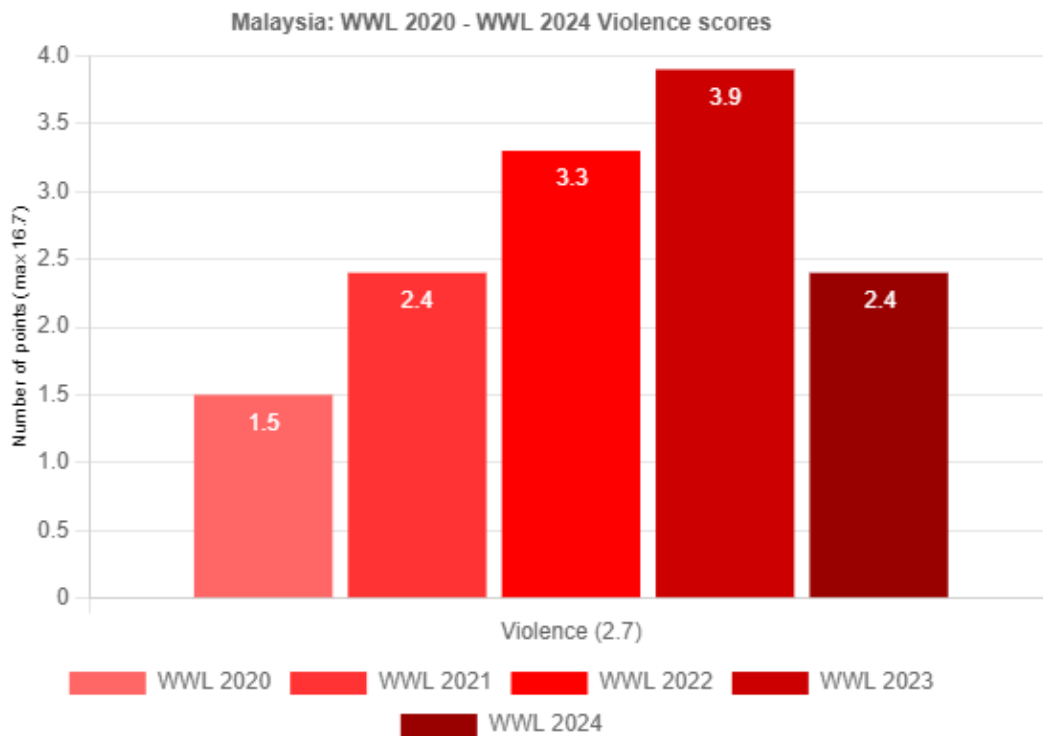
The score for average pressure on Christians is fairly stable at a very high level within the range 12.0 and 12.4. The political turmoil and the changes of government did not yet result in immediate changes in the situation for Christians and other religious minorities. The growing influence of the PAS will however very likely become apparent in the coming years and limit the space for the Christian minority, especially converts.

### 5 Year trends: Pressure in each sphere of life

As can be seen in the chart below: Pressure has always been highest (at an extreme level) in the *Family sphere of life*. The level of pressure in *Church life* has always been the lowest compared to the rest of the *spheres of life*, but displayed a steady increase in the WWL 2020-2023 reporting periods. Pressure in *Community life* is currently at its lowest level in all 5 reporting periods presented.



### 5 Year trends: Violence against Christians



From WWL 2020-2023, the violence score rose each year. However, in the WWL 2024 reporting period, fewer reports on violence were received and consequently, the violence score dropped.

## Gender-specific religious persecution / Female

Group	Female Pressure Points
Economic	-
Political and Legal	Forced marriage
Security	Targeted Seduction; Violence – sexual
Social and Cultural	Enforced religious dress code
Technological	-

With four prime ministers since 2018, political instability is an ongoing challenge for Malaysia ([Independent](#), 24 November 2022). Rights have long been restricted for Muslim women and girls who are governed by Sharia law, which restricts their rights in relation to marriage, divorce and child guardianship. In light of this, female converts from Islam to Christianity are vulnerable to a wide spectrum of pressure and violence, the most prevalent being the threat of sexual violence and/or forced marriage to a Muslim. Since the minimum legal age for marriage in the Islamic family laws can be lowered with the consent of a Sharia judge, it is possible for girls to be married as teenagers ([Unicef](#), 21 July 2022). This can make girls who convert to Christianity much more vulnerable. Such cases are rarely reported, however, as they are seen as shameful for the family (in the sense that it is deemed shameful for marriage to be necessitated to pressure a convert daughter into rejecting her new-found faith).

Sexual grooming for the purposes of conversion is also a risk for Christian women and girls; a country expert explained: “Women are targeted and seduced by Muslim men into having relationships and urged to convert to Islam before they get married. Sometimes the relationship is broken off by the men before they even got married, after the women have converted to Islam.” This is in line with tactics associated with ‘Project Cinta’, an alleged government operation to convert non-Muslims in Sabah and Sarawak ([FMT](#), 14 June 2023; see also above: *Trends analysis #1*). Peer pressure within schools has reportedly increased for girls, particularly in relation to dress code. While schools in Malaysia have been prohibited from compelling students to wear the *tudong* (a traditional headscarf) for nearly three decades, social pressure leads to them wearing it anyway ([Free Malaysia Today](#), 9 February 2021).

On rare occasions, Christian women are also vulnerable to being detained and interrogated by the authorities about Christian networks and leaders, although this remains a greater source of pressure for men.

## Gender-specific religious persecution / Male

Group	Male Pressure Points
Economic	-
Political and Legal	-
Security	-
Social and Cultural	-
Technological	-

Following a period of political instability, the government is a point of concern for male Christians in Malaysia. While there had been previous pledges to sign the UN Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief, ultra-conservative Muslim groups strongly oppose this as they fear it will encourage apostasy and proselytism of Muslims. Men and boys are often the targets of these ultra-conservative Muslim groups. The persecution typically impacting Christian men can come in the form of bullying by vigilante groups and monitoring by the religious authorities. However, no particular Pressure Points were evidenced in 2024.

## Persecution of other religious minorities

According to the US State Department (IRFR 2022 Malaysia):

"The government continued to take action against some individuals who diverged from the official interpretation of Islam, including subjecting some to "rehabilitation" in centers that taught and enforced government-approved Islamic practice." (p.1)

- "Those differing from the official interpretation of Islam continued to face adverse government action, including assignment to "rehabilitation" in centers that taught and enforced government-approved Islamic practices. The government forbade individuals to leave such centers until they completed the program, which varied in length but often lasted approximately six months. These counseling programs continued to be designed to ensure detainees adopted the government's official interpretation of Islam." (pp.14-15)
- "Federal and state governments continued to forbid religious assembly and worship for groups considered to be "deviant" Muslim groups, including Shia, Ahmadiyya, and al-Arqam. While Ahmadi Muslims in the country reported being able to maintain a worship center, government religious authorities did not allow them to hold Friday prayers, as these could only be performed in an officially registered mosque." (p.17)
- "In January, the Selangor State Religious Affairs Department (JAIS) appealed an October 2021 High Court ruling that JAIS does not have jurisdiction over 29 Ahmadi Malaysians, both those who were born to Ahmadi parents and non-Malaysians who became Ahmadi later in life. The High Court's decision would also apply to 10 additional plaintiffs who were not born Ahmadi, if they received an order from the sharia court declaring them Ahmadi. The appeal remained pending as of year's end. A 2018 High Court decision stated that the sharia court had no jurisdiction over the Ahmadi community, since JAIS refused to recognize them



as adherents of Islam." (p.17)

## Future outlook

The outlook for Christians as viewed through the lens of:

### Islamic oppression

While PAS has been elected the strongest single party in parliament in the elections in November 2022, their group of parties (called Perikatan Nasional, PN) does not have the majority. The same has to be said of the largest coalition, Pakatan Harapan (PH). Both groups need a coalition partner and thus, the strongly decimated UMNO became the kingmaker. As significant elements within UMNO are openly wooing conservative Muslims and cooperate with conservative Muslim PAS, trying to exploit the already big ethnic and religious divide, which the country is suffering from, it is very possible that UMNO, while ruling in a PH-led government, will at least partly feel closer to opposition PAS, where swathes of former UMNO voters found a new political home. Additionally, PAS is gaining more and more influence at the state-level, even in urban and semi-urban states like Selangor.

A shift towards more rigid and political Islamic practice is taking place with an influx of radical Islamic scholars returning from training in Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Many of these Malay scholars have joined the government as members of the Department of Islamic Advancement of Malaysia to preach in mosques and spread their radicalized views on Islam. Islamization of native Christians from Sabah and Sarawak (East Malaysia) is happening at a fast rate. Sarawak still enjoys a greater degree of religious freedom compared to West Malaysia and is the only place where Islam is not the state religion. But once the population demography tilts towards Islam, more Islamic laws will undoubtedly be set in place.

A potential wildcard in the future of Malaysian politics may be the states of Sabah and Sarawak. They aim for more autonomy (termed '[state nationalism](#)' in an article in *The Diplomat*, published on 25 May 2021) and all policy made in Putrajaya will necessarily affect these two states with the largest Christian population in the country. Politicians in Sarawak announced before the elections that they will not cooperate with the PAS. Consequently, the situation in Malaysia will remain volatile, as drivers of the main persecution engine *Islamic oppression* have become more active than before, leading to ongoing challenges and threats for the Christian minority.

### Dictatorial paranoia

Given the volatility of Malaysian politics and that the new government will possibly not have a large majority, *Dictatorial paranoia* may climb to new heights. As shown throughout this country dossier, Christians have always been a useful scapegoat; they are regularly blamed for the country's woes and Malay Muslim majority fears. This is even more the case in an economic situation made difficult and unpredictable by world events on top of the recent political volatility.

## External Links - Persecution Dynamics

- Persecution engines description: change - <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2022/02/21/after-federal-courts-decision-shariah-lawyers-want-federal-constitution-cha/2042958>
- Persecution engines description: highly sensitive - <https://www.ecumenicalnews.com/article/ban-on-churches-in-malaysia-using-allah-for-god-arises-again/60738.htm>
- Persecution engines description: Explainer - <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2021/03/24/explainer-high-courts-96-page-judgment-on-why-malaysias-1986-allah-ban-was/1960449>
- Persecution engines description: withdrew an appeal - <https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/malaysian/malaysia-govt-drops-appeal-against-word-allah-05152023123652.html>
- Persecution engines description: Ireland case - <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/malaysia-high-court-rules-christians-can-use-allah-for-god/>
- Persecution engines description: ended its legal fight - <https://www.ucanews.com/news/malaysian-church-drops-legal-bid-against-allah-use-ban/101358>
- Drivers of persecution description: converted child - <https://isma.org.my/kenyataan-media-tetap-pertahan-keislaman-anak-anak-loh/>
- Block 2.8: Christian children have been pressured into attending anti-Christian or majority religion teaching at any level of education. (3.75 points): undistorted version of history - <https://www.freemalysiatoday.com/category/nation/2021/04/14/tell-the-true-story-in-history-textbooks-says-educationist/>
- Block 2.8: Christian children have been pressured into attending anti-Christian or majority religion teaching at any level of education. (3.75 points): 40 Hadith appreciation module - <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2023/08/19/fadhlin-education-ministry-launches-imam-al-nawawis-40-hadith-appreciation-module/86093>
- Block 2.8: Christian children have been pressured into attending anti-Christian or majority religion teaching at any level of education. (3.75 points): module is only for Muslim students - [https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1uuyOg-lewncryzuWfK43JjwwMHGRGzbJZEIp98bFQJw/edit#slide=id.gd27437779d\\_3\\_1178](https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1uuyOg-lewncryzuWfK43JjwwMHGRGzbJZEIp98bFQJw/edit#slide=id.gd27437779d_3_1178)
- Block 2.1: Babies and children of Christians have automatically been registered under the state or majority religion. (3.50 points): 'forced conversion' - <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2021/01/21/suhakam-reports-forced-conversion-of-sarawakian-native-children-over-mykad/1942696>
- Pressure in Block 2 / Family sphere: neither allowed nor recognized - <https://www.freemalysiatoday.com/category/nation/2023/06/09/when-a-malaysian-muslim-enters-interfaith-marriage-overseas/>
- Block 4.11: Christians have been subjected to smear campaigns or hate speech. (3.50 points): challenged - <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2022/09/03/non-muslims-the-root-of-corruption-i039ll-explain-in-court-says-hadi>
- Pressure in Block 4 / National sphere: Sharia laws - <https://www.ucanews.com/news/mother-daughter-duo-challenge-stronger-sharia-law-in-malaysia/103294>
- Block 5.12: Churches or Christian organizations have been hindered in printing Christian materials or owning printing presses. (3.50 points): all imported Christian publications - <https://www.malaysiakini.com/letters/302177>
- Pressure in Block 5 / Church sphere: control the development of non-Muslim religions - <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2021/09/09/deputy-ministers-claim-of-bill-to-control-non-muslim-faith-concerning-says/2004186>
- Pressure in Block 5 / Church sphere: the constitutional provisions - <https://www.ucanews.com/news/churches-oppose-anti-minorities-bill-in-malaysia/94116>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: Independent - <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/anwar-ibrahim-ap-malaysia-mahathir-mohamad-kuala-lumpur-b2231972.html>

- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: Unicef, 21 July 2022 - <https://www.unicef.org/malaysia/press-releases/raising-minimum-age-marriage-malaysia>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: FMT, 14 June 2023 - <https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2023/06/14/jakim-unaware-of-projek-cinta-says-minister/>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: Free Malaysia Today, 9 February 2021 - <https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2021/02/09/peer-pressure-makes-tudungs-the-norm-in-schools/>
- Future outlook: state nationalism - <https://thediplomat.com/2021/05/james-chin-on-ma63-and-the-return-of-state-nationalism-in-malaysia/>

## 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/>.

As in earlier years, these are also available on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom):

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