

Definition: **Malaysia** from *Collins English Dictionary*

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**1** a federation in SE Asia (within the Commonwealth), consisting of **Peninsular Malaysia** on the Malay Peninsula, and **East Malaysia** (Sabah and Sarawak), occupying the N part of the island of Borneo: formed in 1963 as a federation of Malaya, Sarawak, Sabah, and Singapore (the latter seceded in 1965); densely forested and mostly mountainous. Official language: Malay; English and various Chinese and Indian minority languages are also spoken. Official religion: Muslim. Currency: ringgit. Capital: Kuala Lumpur. Federal seat of government: Putrajaya. Pop: 29 628 392 (2013 est). Area: 329 847 sq km (127 355 sq miles)



Summary Article: **Malaysia**

From *The Columbia Encyclopedia*

Image from: [This flag was adopted when the Federation of... in Philip's World Factbook 2008-2009](#)

(mə'lā'zhə), independent federation (2015 est. pop. 30,723,000), 128,430 sq mi (332,633 sq km), Southeast Asia. The official capital and by far the largest city is Kuala Lumpur; Putrajaya is the administrative capital.

### Land and People

Malaysia consists of two parts: **West Malaysia**, also called Peninsular Malaysia or Malaya (1990 est. pop. 14,400,000), 50,700 sq mi (131,313 sq km), on the Malay Peninsula and coextensive with the former Federation of Malaya, comprising the states of Perlis, Kedah, Pinang, Perak, Kelantan, Terengganu, Pahang, Selangor, Negeri Sembilan, Melaka (Malacca), and Johor, and two federal territories (the cities of Kuala Lumpur and Putrajaya); and **East Malaysia** (1990 est. pop. 3,410,000), 77,730 sq mi (201,320 sq km), comprising the states of Sabah and Sarawak (the former British colonies of North Borneo and Northwest Borneo) on the island of Borneo and one federal territory, the island of Labuan. The two parts are separated by c.400 mi (640 km) of the South China Sea.

West Malaysia is bordered on the north by Thailand, on the east by the South China Sea, on the south by Singapore (separated by the narrow Johore Strait), and on the west by the Strait of Malacca and the Andaman Sea. East Malaysia is bordered on the north by the South China Sea and the Sulu Sea, on the east by the Celebes Sea, and on the south and west by Kalimantan (Indonesian Borneo). Along the coast within Sarawak is the independent nation of Brunei. Both East and West Malaysia have mountainous interiors and coastal plains. The highest point is Mt. Kinabalu (13,455 ft/4,101 m) in Sabah. The longest of the country's many rivers are the Rajang (c.350 mi/560 km) in Sarawak, the Kinabatangan (c.350 mi/560 km) in Sabah, and the Pahang (c.200 mi/320 km) in West Malaysia. Lying close to the equator, Malaysia has a tropical rainy climate. Over two thirds of the land area is forested.

Although it makes up only 31% of the country's area, West Malaysia has more than 80% of its people. Of the total population, most of which is concentrated on the west coast, some 50% are ethnically Malay, almost 25% are Chinese, over 10% are of indigenous descent, and about 7% are South Asian (mainly Tamil). In West Malaysia, Malays comprise about one half of the population, Chinese one third, and South Asians one tenth. In East Malaysia, the two largest groups are the Chinese and the Ibans (Sea Dyaks), an indigenous people, who together make up about three fifths of the total. Conflict between

the ethnic groups, particularly between Malays and Chinese, has played a large role in Malaysian history, and recent years have seen increased tension between ethnic Malays and people of South Asian descent.

Nearly all of the Malays are Sunni Muslims (they are considered to be Muslim under the constitution), and Islam is the national religion. The majority of Chinese are Buddhists (Confucianism and Taoism are also practiced), and most of the South Asians are Hindu; 9% of the population is Christian. The official language is Bahasa Malaysia (Malay), although English is used in the legal system. Chinese (Cantonese, Mandarin, and other dialects), Tamil, and regional ethnic languages and dialects are also widely spoken.

## **Economy**

Malaysia has one of the highest standards of living in SE Asia, largely because of its expanding industrial sector, which propelled the country to an 8%–9% yearly growth rate from 1987 to 1997. Growth contracted during the 1997–98 Asian financial crisis, and the government was forced to cut spending and defer several large infrastructure projects. Unemployment and interest rates rose, and thousands of foreign workers, many of them from Indonesia, were forced to leave the country. The economy began recovering in 1999, and growth continued into the early 21st cent. Despite long-term efforts of the government to improve the economic status of Malays through preferences, the Chinese have generally continued their long-standing dominance of the economy. The economic status of Malays, however, has significantly improved, leading to resentment among South Asians who, though largely poor, are not eligible for the opportunities open to Malays.

Malaysia is a large producer of rubber and tin; palm oil, crude petroleum and petroleum products, electronics, textiles, and timber are also important. Since the late 1980s, the government has moved to privatize large industries that had been under state control, and foreign investment in manufacturing has increased significantly. Pinang city is the chief port. Subsistence agriculture remains the basis of livelihood for about 13% of Malaysians and agriculture provides about 8% of GDP. Rice is the staple food, while fish supply most of the protein. Cocoa, coconuts, and pepper are also important agricultural products. Industry is largely concentrated in West Malaysia. The major cities on the Malay Peninsula are connected by railroads with Singapore, and an extensive road network covers the west coast. Malaysia's exports include electronic equipment, petroleum and liquefied natural gas, wood and wood products, palm oil, rubber, chemicals, and textiles. The main imports are electronics, machinery, petroleum products, plastics, vehicles, iron and steel, and chemicals. The major trading partners are the United States, Singapore, Japan, and China.

## **Government**

Malaysia is a constitutional monarchy and is governed under the constitution of 1957 as amended. The sovereign (the Yang di-Pertuan Agong) is a largely ceremonial head of state, and is elected every five years by and from the nine hereditary rulers of Negeri Sembilan, Selangor, Perlis, Terengganu, Kedah, Kelantan, Pahang, Johor, and Perak in rotation. The current sovereign is Sultan Muhammad V of Kelantan.

The prime minister is head of government and must be a member and have the confidence of the House of Representatives (Dewan Ra'ayat). The cabinet is chosen by the prime minister with the consent of the sovereign. There is a bicameral Parliament. The House of Representatives consists of 219 members, all elected by popular vote in single-member districts. The House sits for a maximum of five years but may be dissolved by the sovereign. The Senate (Dewan Negara) consists of 70 members chosen for three-year terms; each state legislature elects two and the sovereign appoints

the remaining 44. There is a high court for each half of Malaysia and a supreme court. Administratively, the country is divided into 13 states and three federal territories.

## **History**

### ***Foreign Influence and Settlement***

(For early history of West Malaysia, see Malay Peninsula; for history of East Malaysia, see Sabah and Sarawak.) When the Portuguese captured Malacca (1511), its sultan fled first to Pahang and then to Johor and the Riau Archipelago. One of his sons became the first sultan of Perak. From both Johor and Aceh in Sumatra unsuccessful attacks were made on Malacca. Aceh and Johor also fought each other. The main issue in these struggles was control of trade through the Strait of Malacca. Kedah, Kelantan, and Terengganu, north of Malacca, became nominal subjects of Siam.

In the early 17th cent. the Dutch established trading bases in Southeast Asia. By 1619 they had established themselves in Batavia (Jakarta), and in 1641, allied with Johor, they captured Malacca after a six-month siege. Another power entered the complicated Malayan picture in the late 17th cent. when the Bugis from Sulawesi, a Malay people economically pressured by the Dutch, began settling in the area of Selangor on the west coast of the peninsula, where they traded in tin. The Bugis captured Johor and Riau in 1721 and, with a few interruptions, maintained control there for about a century, although the Johor sultanate was permitted to remain. The Bugis were also active in Perak and Kedah. Earlier, in the 15th and 16th cent., another Malay people, the Minangkabaus from Sumatra, had peacefully settled inland from Malacca. Their settlements eventually became the state of Negeri Sembilan.

The British role on the peninsula began in 1786, when Francis Light of the British East India Company, searching for a site for trade and a naval base, obtained the cession of the island of Pinang from the sultan of Kedah. In 1791 the British agreed to make annual payments to the sultan, and in 1800 the latter ceded Province Wellesley on the mainland. In 1819 the British founded Singapore, and in 1824 they formally (actual control had been exercised since 1795) acquired Malacca from the Dutch. A joint administration was formed for Pinang, Malacca, and Singapore, which became known as the Straits Settlements.

During this period Siam was asserting its influence southward on the peninsula. In 1816, Siam forced Kedah to invade Perak and made Perak acknowledge Siamese suzerainty. In 1821, Siam invaded Kedah and exiled the sultan. The Anglo-Siamese treaty of 1821 recognized Siamese control of Kedah but left the status of Perak, Kelantan, and Terengganu ambiguous. In 1841 the sultan of Kedah was restored, but Perlis was carved out of the territory of Kedah and put under Siamese protection.

### ***British Involvement***

Later in the 19th cent. a number of events led Great Britain to play a more direct part in the affairs of the peninsula. There was conflict between Chinese settlers, who worked in the tin mines, and Malays; there were civil wars among the Malays; and there was an increase in piracy in the western part of the peninsula. Merchants asked the British to restore order. The British were also concerned that Dutch, French, and German interest in the area was increasing. As a result, treaties were made with Perak, Selangor, Pahang, and the components of what became (1895) Negeri Sembilan. In each state a British "resident" was installed to advise the sultan (who received a stipend) and to supervise administration. The Pangkor Treaty of 1874 with Perak served as a model for subsequent treaties.

In 1896 the four states were grouped together as the Federated Malay States with a British resident

general. Johor, which had signed a treaty of alliance with Britain in 1885, accepted a British adviser in 1914. British control of the four remaining Malayan states was acquired in 1909, when, by treaty, Siam relinquished its claims to sovereignty over Kedah, Kelantan, Perlis, and Terengganu. These four, along with Johor, became known as the Unfederated Malay States.

In the latter half of the 19th cent. Malaya's economy assumed many of the major aspects of its present character. The output of tin, which had been mined for centuries, increased greatly with the utilization of modern methods. Rubber trees were introduced (Indian laborers were imported to work the rubber plantations), and Malaya became a leading rubber producer. Malaya's economic character, as well as its geographic position, gave it great strategic importance, and the peninsula was quickly overrun by the Japanese at the start of World War II and held by them for the duration of the war. The British, assuming that the attack would come from sea, had built their fortifications accordingly, but a land attack quickly drove them from the island. Malaya's Chinese population received particularly harsh treatment during the Japanese occupation.

When the British returned after World War II they arranged (1946) a centralized colony, called the Malayan Union, comprising all their peninsula possessions. Influential Malays vehemently opposed the new organization; they feared that the admission of the large Chinese and Indian populations of Pinang and Malacca to Malayan citizenship would end the special position Malays had always enjoyed, and they were unwilling to surrender the political power they enjoyed within the individual sultanates. The British backed down and established in place of the Union the Federation of Malaya (1948) headed by a British high commissioner. The Federation was an expansion of the former Federated Malay States. Pinang and Malacca became members in addition to the nine Malay states, but there was no common citizenship.

In that same year a Communist insurrection began that was to last more than a decade. The Communist guerrillas, largely recruited from among the Chinese population, employed terrorist tactics. In combating the uprising the British resettled nearly 500,000 Chinese. "The Emergency," as it was called, was declared ended in 1960, although outbreaks of terrorism have continued sporadically.

### *Independence and the Birth of Modern Malaysia*

The Communist insurrection had the positive effect of spurring the movement for Malayan independence, and in 1957 the federation became an independent state within the Commonwealth of Nations and was admitted to the United Nations. The first prime minister was Tunku (Prince) Abdul Rahman, the leader of the Alliance Party, a loose coalition of Malay, Chinese, and Indian parties. The constitution guaranteed special privileges for Malays. In 1963 Singapore, Sabah, and Sarawak were added to the federation, creating the Federation of Malaysia. Since Singapore has a large Chinese population, the latter two states were included to maintain a non-Chinese majority. Brunei was also included in the plan but declined to join. Malaysia retained Malaya's place in the United Nations and the Commonwealth, and in 1967 it became one of the founding members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

The new state was immediately confronted with the hostility of Indonesia, which described the federation as a British imperialist subterfuge and waged an undeclared war against it. In the struggle Malaysia received military aid from Great Britain and other Commonwealth nations. Hostilities continued until President Sukarno's fall from power in Indonesia (1965). Nonviolent opposition came from the Philippines, which claimed ownership of Sabah until early in 1978.

The merger with Singapore did not work out satisfactorily. Friction developed between Malay leaders and Singapore's prime minister, Lee Kuan Yew, who had worked to improve the position of the Chinese minority within the Malaysian Federation. In 1965, Singapore peacefully seceded from Malaysia.

Intercommunal tension continued, however, between Chinese and Malays, and led in 1969 to serious violence and a 22-month suspension of parliament. Since then, political balance has been maintained by a multiethnic National Front coalition. Tun Abdul Razak succeeded Abdul Rahman as prime minister in 1970, and the following year Abdul Razak adopted the New Economic Policy, intended to improve the economic status of Malays through a system of preferences. When Abdul Razak died in 1976, Hussein Onn succeeded him as prime minister.

In 1981, Mahathir bin Mohamad, of the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), became prime minister. Mahathir led the National Front parties to reelection victories in 1982, 1986, and 1990. Mahathir's government was criticized for repression of Chinese and Indian minorities. A formal peace treaty between the Malay Communist party (MCP) and the Kuala Lumpur government was signed in 1989.

In 1995 the National Front again triumphed at the polls, winning in a landslide. Like several of its neighbors, Malaysia suffered a recession in 1997–98; however, unlike those that accepted financial aid from the International Monetary Fund, Malaysia took matters into its own hands. In Sept., 1998, it discontinued trading in its currency and imposed sweeping controls on its capital markets, particularly on investment from overseas; by mid-1999, the economy had begun to recover, though economic growth was slower compared to previous years.

Also in Sept., 1998, Mahathir dismissed his heir apparent, Anwar Ibrahim, who held the posts of deputy prime minister and finance minister. Anwar was found guilty of corruption charges in Apr., 1999, and sentenced to six years in prison, setting off unusual public protests; in Aug., 2000, he was convicted of sodomy and sentenced to nine years. Both convictions were condemned by international rights groups. In the Nov., 1999, elections the National Front again won a resounding victory, but big gains were made by the Islamic party of Malaysia (PAS), which increased its seats in parliament to 27 from 8, largely as a result of support from Malays who had previously voted for the UMNO. A party formed by Anwar's supporters and led by his wife did poorly.

A tough new law against illegal foreign workers, which took effect in 2002, forced many Indonesians and Filipinos to leave Malaysia. This strained relations particularly with Indonesia, where as many as 400,000 returned home. In Oct., 2003, Prime Minister Mahathir stepped down and was succeeded by Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, deputy prime minister since 1999. At the time of his resignation, Mahathir was the longest serving government leader in Asia. Five months later Badawi won a mandate of his own in parliamentary and state elections when the National Front coalition increased its sizable parliamentary majority by a third, winning 90% of the seats and 64% of the vote. PAS suffered significant losses at the national and state levels. In Sept., 2004, Anwar Ibrahim's conviction on sodomy charges was overturned, and he was released, his corruption sentence having been already reduced.

A second wave of some half million illegal immigrants left Malaysia in late 2004 and early 2005 under a government amnesty before the government began arresting and expelling illegal immigrants in Mar., 2005. By May, however, when the slow influx of Indonesians with work permits resulted in a worker shortage, Malaysia agreed to allow Indonesians seeking work to enter on tourists visas. In 2006 there was sharp public verbal jousting between Prime Minister Abdullah and his predecessor, and Mahathir



found his influence in UMNO greatly diminished.

In late 2007 and early 2008 there was increased public unhappiness on the part of Malaysians of South Asian descent with their lagging standard of living (relative to Malays and Chinese). These concerns carried over into the parliamentary elections in Mar., 2008, and the National Front, though retaining a majority, failed to win two thirds of the seats for the first time since 1969, and lost control of five states as well (one state returned to National Front control in 2009). PAS, Anwar Ibrahim's Justice party, and the largely Chinese Democratic Action party all gained seats. The election results led to calls for Abdullah to resign, and he eventually announced that he would step down in Mar., 2009.

Anwar, meanwhile, sought to organize the opposition to defeat the government through parliamentary defections and a no-confidence vote. In June, 2008, however, he was again accused of sodomy, this time by a former aide. He denied the charges and accused the government of conspiring against him to remain in power. Anwar nonetheless was elected to parliament by a landslide in a by-election in August, but he was not successful in securing the parliamentary defections necessary to bringing down the government. Anwar later was acquitted (Jan., 2012) for questionable evidence, but a government appeal resulted in his conviction in Mar., 2014. (His 2014 conviction occurred shortly before he was to run for the Selangor state assembly, which was expected to lead to his become Selangor's chief minister; he was imprisoned in Feb., 2015, after his conviction was upheld.)

Deputy Prime Minister Najib Razak succeeded Abdullah as UNMO leader in Mar., 2009, as planned, and the following month Najib became prime minister. A court ruling in Dec., 2009, that Christians could use the word Allah to refer to God (a usage that is not unusual in other Muslim countries) sparked an outbreak of anti-Christian violence and resulted in increased religious tensions; an appeals court overturned that decision in 2013 and was upheld by the supreme court in 2014.

In July, 2011, frustration with the slow pace of economic and political reforms led thousands to protest Kuala Lumpur against the government despite the rally having been banned by the government and police efforts to prevent it and to disperse and arrest demonstrators. Filipino supporters of one of the claimants to the title of sultan of Sulu, a former territory that included parts of N Borneo and the S Philippines, occupied locations in E Sabah beginning in Feb., 2013; the invasion led to fighting with Malaysian security forces.

In the May, 2013, general elections, the National Front retained a majority in parliament but lost the popular vote to the three-party opposition coalition led by Ibrahim. The win was the result of gerrymandering and unequal electoral districts; the opposition also accused the National Front of fraud. The elections marked a clear shift in the country's politics, with the opposition in general supported by richer, urban, and Chinese voters and the National Front by poorer, rural, and Malay voters. Subsequently, Najib's government reemphasized policies that favored Malays and suppressed dissent, abandoning earlier tentative moves toward liberal reform and adopting more openly pro-Islamic positions.

A corruption scandal involving 1MDB, a Malaysian development fund founded by Najib's government, threatened the prime minister in 2015 when media reports said an investigation had found that nearly \$700 million appeared to have been transferred from 1MDB to Najib's accounts. Najib denied the reports and dismissed his deputy prime minister, who had criticized him, the attorney general, and other government members; Najib's efforts to shore up UMNO support led to resignations and dismissals from party leadership positions in 2016. In Jan., 2016, the new attorney general cleared Najib, saying

that the money was a donation from the Saudis and was not made corruptly, and that \$620 million had been returned; he also said that there was no evidence that Najib was aware of other deposits made to his accounts from a 1MDB subsidiary.

Subsequently, former prime minister Mahathir and other political leaders not aligned with Najib called for him to resign, and a parliamentary investigation was critical of 1MDB's leadership and board. 1MDB also was the subject of several foreign investigations involving money-laundering rule violations. A U.S. investigation led to a civil case that sought to recover more than \$1 billion in assets that had been purchased with money stolen from 1MDB; some of the assets were held by persons close to Najib. U.S. officials alleged that in all more than \$3 billion had been stolen, and implied that large sums had been transferred from 1MDB to Najib's accounts.

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