

State of the World's Minorities and Indigenous Peoples 2014 - Malaysia

Publisher [Minority Rights Group International](#)

Publication Date 3 July 2014

Cite as Minority Rights Group International, *State of the World's Minorities and Indigenous Peoples 2014 - Malaysia*, 3 July 2014, available at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/53ba8de29.html> [accessed 25 November 2014]

Disclaimer This is not a UNHCR publication. UNHCR is not responsible for, nor does it necessarily endorse, its content. Any views expressed are solely those of the author or publisher and do not necessarily reflect those of UNHCR, the United Nations or its Member States.

Malaysia's national elections in May marked the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition's worst performance in more than 40 years, with Prime Minister Najib Razak remaining in power with a mere 47 per cent of votes. He subsequently blamed a 'Chinese tsunami' for the losses, drawing out deep racial and ethnic fissures in the diverse South East Asian country. Following accusations of electoral fraud and vote buying, Razak arrested activists and opposition leaders using a colonial-era sedition law he had previously pledged to repeal. A law on peaceful assembly, introduced in 2012, was swiftly invoked to silence the tens of thousands of people who poured onto the streets to protest the disputed poll.

Indigenous communities were targeted throughout the year, often for staging protests against land grabs and large-scale development projects. In Sarawak province on the island of Borneo, indigenous communities have organized against a string of hydroelectric projects planned by the government in their native lands. In September, hundreds of Penan locals launched a blockade against the vast Murum dam, which once completed will flood approximately 1,500 indigenous homes. The authorities responded by clamping down on protesters and issuing threats to communities. In November, the Child Rights Coalition Malaysia condemned the arrest of two Penan children accused of taking photographs near the dam site. Media reports suggest that an influx of loggers and company workers to Sarawak has also sparked an epidemic of sexual violence against Penan women. But five years after setting up a national task force to investigate the allegations, activists say the government has taken no action.

The Murum dam is located 70 miles upstream of the 220 metre Bakum dam, the largest in South East Asia, which was completed in 2011. The projects are part of 12 mega-dams planned by the government, which will inundate over 2,300 square km of pristine rainforest. Described by Transparency International Malaysia as 'a monument to corruption', the Bakum project displaced over 10,000 indigenous people, most of whom were subsequently forced into abject poverty. Penan locals living near the Murum dam insisted that they did not wish to suffer the same fate. But in

December, amid growing pressure and with water quickly filling their homes, they were forced to abandon their protest. Similar blockades were formed near other development projects in Borneo, including the Baram dam.

In March, an undercover investigation by Global Witness exposed rampant nepotism and corruption in Malaysia's largest state, implicating then Chief Minister Abdul Taib Mahmud in the exploitation of Sarawak's rainforests and its inhabitants for personal profit. The film documents how the chief minister accepts multimillion-dollar 'kickbacks' for the distribution of plantation licences, while allocating cheap land concessions to a nexus of family members; these are subsequently sold off at enormous profits through murky transactions in Singapore, forcing indigenous populations from their traditional lands. Taib, who has ruled the state since 1981, has publicly lashed out at protesting indigenous communities, calling their demands for better compensation 'outrageous'.

The Orang Asli, a collective of 18 indigenous groups inhabiting peninsular Malaysia, also came under assault this year when the government moved to weaken the 1954 Aboriginal Peoples Act. The law, which forms the backbone of protection mechanisms for indigenous communities, has already been criticized for its diluted land rights provisions. According to the Peninsular Malaysia Orang Asli Villages Network, the changes will result in the loss of over 645,000 hectares of ancestral lands and are being pushed through without adequate consultation. Indigenous women are particularly vulnerable to land encroachments due to traditional patriarchal structures, which may exclude them from individual land rights.

Racial tensions have been high since the disputed May election. Razak's party, the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), has been accused of fomenting racism by blaming the Chinese minority for its electoral losses. *Utusan Malaysia*, a newspaper controlled by UMNO, announced the results with the headline 'What more do the Chinese want?', while former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad berated the group as 'ungrateful'. Conversely, opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim alleged that foreigners had been flown in to vote illegally. In March, two US-based rights groups accused both leading coalitions of failing to protect minorities, notably the Indian population.

Religious tensions also erupted into vocal disputes between the Muslim majority and other faiths. In October, a Malaysian court ruled that only Muslims are allowed to use the term 'Allah', following a long-running controversy that has polarized the country. Critics say the decision, purportedly based on a desire to prevent conversions, is intended to delegitimize religious minorities. Subsequently, Ibrahim Ali – the president of a right-wing group affiliated with the ruling party – called on Muslims to seize and burn all copies of the Bible using the Arabic word for God. His actions have been termed 'hate speech' by civil rights lawyers, but the police have taken no action.

Malaysia does not have specific hate speech laws, but curtails the right to free speech through various provisions in its Constitution, Penal Code and Sedition Act. Many of these have been criticized by human rights lawyers for conflating censorship with justified restrictions on hate speech and incitement to violence. For example, the Constitution and Sedition Act prohibit criticisms of the 'special privileges' of the Bumiputra (ethnic Malay and certain indigenous peoples) and the role of Islam as the national religion.

These laws can be, and often are, used to reinforce the notion of Malaysia as an ethnic Malay and Sunni Muslim state. In the so-called 'Alvivi' case, a Christian couple were charged with sedition for posting a photograph in July on Facebook showing them eating pork during the Muslim holiday

Ramadan under a provocative slogan. A state-backed religious body later called for social media channels to be censored in order to prevent 'attacks' on Islam. Similarly, the government has aggressively pursued Shi'a Muslims accused of violating an edict that says only Sunni Islam can be promoted in Malaysia. Shi'a found in possession of banned religious texts are regularly arrested and prosecuted, risking up to two years in prison.

Copyright notice: © Minority Rights Group International. All rights reserved.

Search Refworld

by keyword

and / or country

ClearSearch

[Advanced Search](#) | [Search Tips](#)

Countries

- [Malaysia](#)

Topics

- [Aborigine](#)
- [Housing, land and property rights \(HLP\)](#)
- [Indigenous persons](#)
- [Minorities](#)
- [Orang Asli](#)