



Muslims wish their Christian minority all the best for the New Year

Felix Abt debunks the misconceptions of hateful Muslims - his report as Malaysia.

Felix Abt

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I got to know Felix Abt last year, first by e-mail and then in person when I visited him in Vietnam in September. Mr. Abt is a man who is at home everywhere. The Swiss has lived and worked in Africa, China, North Korea and now in Vietnam and has traveled the world during his long career. His political and cultural horizons are enviable and conversations with him are a great pleasure.

Felix Abt has already published several great articles with us and we hope this will continue. He runs his own blog easternangle.com and his own [Substack](#) channel.

His latest article is once again a treat.

Muslim Country Wishes Its Christian Minority A Merry Christmas: Malaysia's Journey From Shocking Racial Conflict To Astonishing Multicultural Tolerance

It is a common misconception among Westerners, many of whom consider themselves Christians, that Muslims are intolerant because of their religion. This is not surprising when you consider how little the uninformed in the West — from ordinary folk to prime ministers — know about Islam. They don't know that even some Christian women live in Muslim-majority countries and wear headscarves because their own [scriptures](#) tell them to, not because Muslims force them to.

To be sure, there are extremists in Muslim countries who wish to close churches, pagodas, and temples and drive out "infidels", just as extremists in Western countries want to close mosques and drive out all Muslims.

In a nutshell, this Vietnamese adage says, "*A day of traveling brings a basket full of learning.*" Traveling, then, broadens your horizons and is possibly the finest way to combat prejudice. For instance, you might be shocked to learn the following:

The majority of Malaysia's population is Muslim, and yet the country is also one of the most tolerant multicultural nations in the world.



The Chief Minister and his wife from the East Malaysian region of Sabah greet their Christian fellow citizens and wish them a Merry Christmas in December 2023.

One remarkable example of Malaysia's tolerance is a Chinese temple in Kuala Terengganu, which was constructed in 1801 by Chinese immigrants in front of a large mosque. Situated on the east coast of the Malaysian peninsula, approximately 440 kilometers (273 miles) northeast of Kuala Lumpur, the city is primarily home to 95% Malay Muslims, with a tiny Chinese minority. Following their disparate religious beliefs, the two distinct ethnic groups pray in harmony, almost side by side.

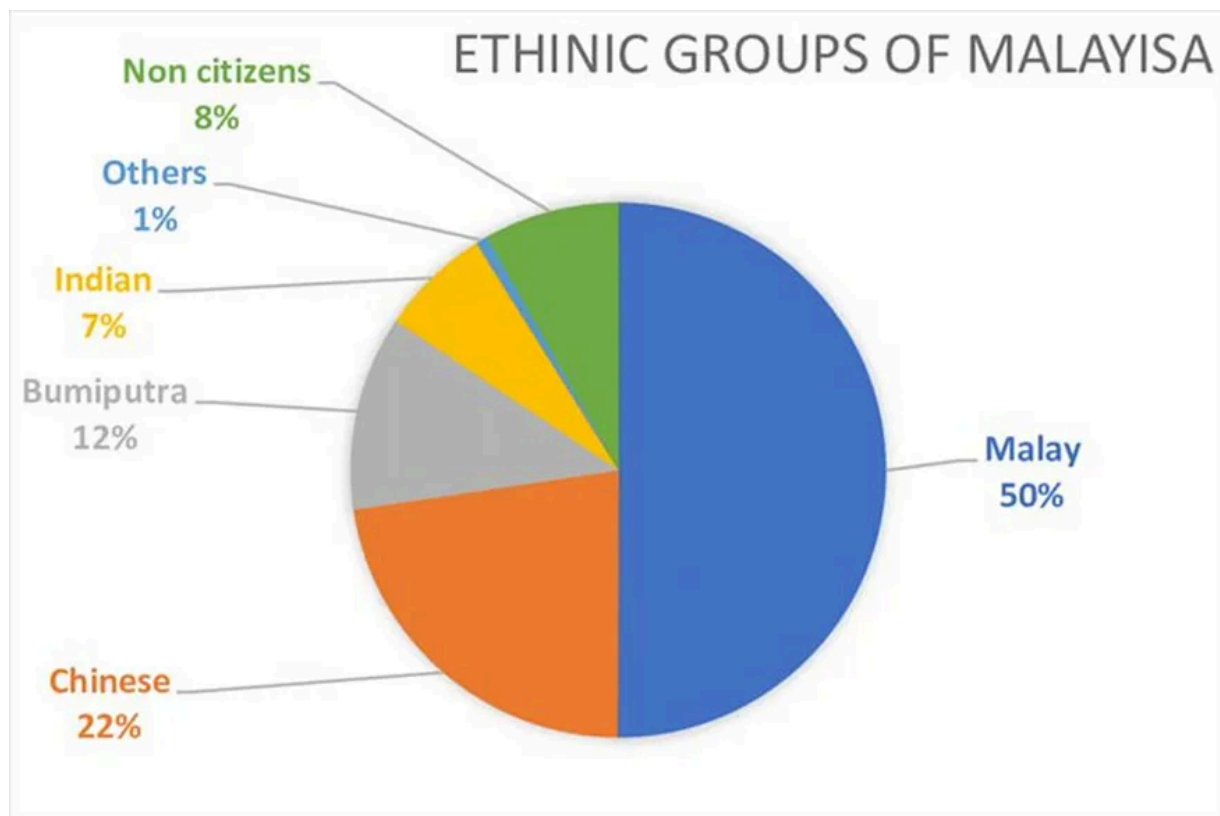
In addition to the Muslim call to prayer, one frequently observes people following Christianity, Buddhism, Taoism, Hinduism, Sikhism, and occasionally Kalathumpism when traveling across the country. Christmas, Diwali (also known as Deepavali), Eid (also known as Hari Raya) and other religious highlights are celebrated publicly and for all to see.

However, some of my Malaysian acquaintances from different ethnic and religious backgrounds have given me reservations. One friend told me, *"The Christmas greetings appear in the eastern regions of Malaysia, Sabah and Sarawak, which are more racially and religiously harmonious than West Malaysia, where racial tensions are constantly stoked for political reasons. Envy of the affluent ethnic Chinese, and to a lesser extent Indians, still culminates in hatred."*

Many of the statements made by politicians who agitate against minorities in West Malaysia would be illegal in neighboring Singapore. Another Malaysian told me that Singapore became independent partly in response to racism and to protect the ethnic Chinese persecuted in Malaysia.

But while today's Malaysia is a comparatively tolerant and peaceful country, its history is far less so.

Chinese migrants have been arriving in the country since the 13th century and now make up about a fifth of the population. Although the number of Malaysian Chinese increases with each census, the proportion of ethnic Chinese in the country's total population has steadily declined in recent decades due to a lower birth rate and a high emigration rate. Christians make up the second-largest religious group among ethnic Chinese people, with Buddhists making up the large majority (around 80%). Today, Muslim Malaysians manage the government and state-owned businesses, but ethnic Chinese still control the lion's share of the country's economy.



As the Chinese have been mastering business for millennia, it is actually not unexpected that they are among the world's most skilled businesspeople. Their unparalleled networking skills and work ethic have been acquired in parallel for historical reasons. Due in large part to this, they have emerged as a major force in Malaysian and other local economies in Southeast Asia. Before the Western powers arrived with their gunboats and destroyed China in two horrible Opium Wars, the Chinese, unlike the Western powers, used their ships only for trade and did not convert them into gunboats to subjugate other countries.

Returning to the present, the thriving ethnic Chinese minority was leaving the increasingly impoverished Malay majority behind, leading to the violent race riots of May 13, 1969, which resulted in violent fights between these groups in Kuala Lumpur's streets, inflicting hundreds of casualties and deeply traumatizing the then young nation. This was described as an "orgy of racial violence" by The [Asia Times](#).

AT FINANCE, MALAYSIA

Fifty years on, fateful race riots still haunt Malaysia

PM Mahathir Mohamad's political career was forged in the fires of May 13, 1969 race riots yet he remains reluctant to seek truth about the violence



By NILE BOWIE

MAY 29, 2019

The news shocked the Malaysian people greatly. The goal of politicians' efforts was to stop new racial strife. The introduction of affirmative action programs was prompted by the economic and social decline of the indigenous Malay population, which comprised the majority of the country. During that period, the proportion of native people among university students and civil personnel was low. Chinese ethnic people also made far more money.



Visit to the Cameron Highlands in Malaysia, which are known for their huge tea plantations. They bear the name of the British colonial official William Cameron, who discovered them in 1885. The British colonial rulers temporarily resided in this cool place during the hot and humid summers in Kuala Lumpur. British-born J.A. Russell arrived in Kuala Lumpur in 1890 at the age of seven and later started growing tea plants imported from British India. The tea business he founded here in 1929 during the Great Depression was to become one of the largest in Southeast Asia. Today, the Malaysian plantation owners in the Cameron Highlands are of Chinese and Indian descent and often employ workers from Bangladesh and other South Asian countries. (Photo Felix Abt)

Laws governing land distribution, which were designed to provide poorer farmers and other Malaysians with additional land, were among the new policy's principal components. For example, "native" land could only be transferred among "natives" (a practice that is perceived as discriminatory by ethnic Chinese and Indians). They also benefited from changes to tax laws. As a result, a Malaysian economist told me, *"Not only have many people been lifted out of poverty but also Malaysia has become a biochemical and palm oil powerhouse in the nineties."* He continued and admonished, *"But nowadays, this policy probably causes more harm than good since it fosters a crony economy and helps the upper class more than the lower class."*

The New York Times

Ethnic Chinese Flee Malay Pressure



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By David A. Andelman Special to The New York Times

July 18, 1976

In fact, after the race riots of 1969, Malaysia's New Economic Policy (NEP) increased the economic influence of the so-called Bumiputera (ethnic Malays) by sixty percent. The NEP was implemented from 1971 to 1990 and favored the Malays. Notably, however, Malaysian Chinese continue to dominate the economic sector; their share ownership grew from roughly 22 percent in 1969 to over twice that amount in 1990, and nearly all of Malaysia's wealthiest individuals are ethnic Chinese.



A visit to the first Indo-Chinese restaurant in Malaysia, which blends Chinese and Indian cultures and their culinary techniques and ingredients. (Image by Felix Abt)

Because they control the nation's economy, Malaysian Chinese people primarily reside in cities. They collaborate more closely with the indigenous communities in Sabah and Sarawak, East Malaysia, particularly in the small interior towns. This, along with the NEP, has played an important role in the significant decline in interracial animosity.



Kathleen Tyson ✓
@Kathleen_Tyson_

Malaysian politicians made a conscious choice and state policy to be tolerant after the race riots seared the country with bloody violence. I remember being taken to a 'mixed' restaurant in the 1990s as if it were some kind of miracle. They worked at tolerance. Good choice.

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Tweet from former US central banker and entrepreneur Kathleen Tyson

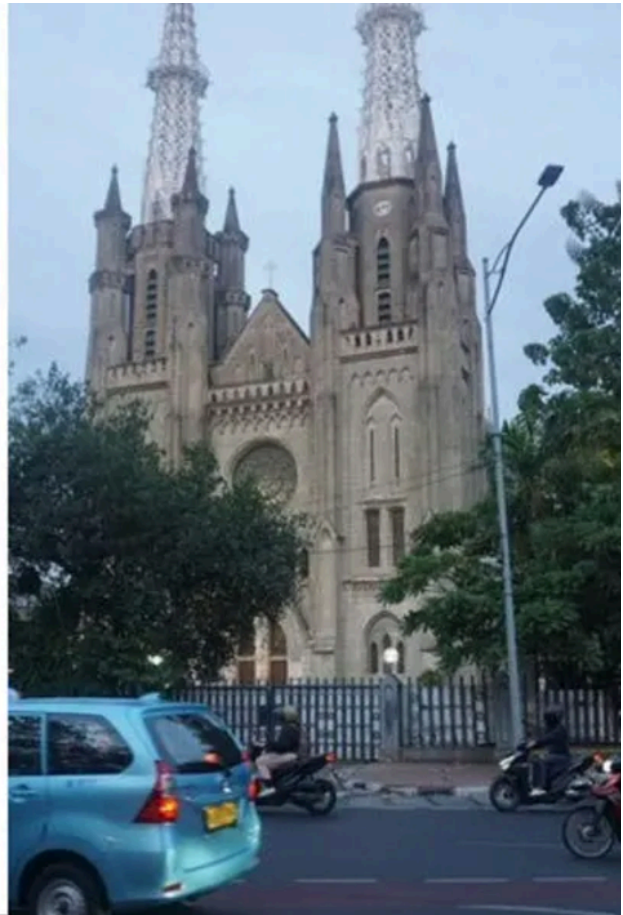
Other "intolerant" Muslim countries

I've lived in Egypt and traveled to most Muslim nations on several occasions. There are also large Christian communities in Egypt, Indonesia, Lebanon, and the United Arab Emirates, comprising millions of citizens. Despite the challenges of coexisting, the Christian minorities in these countries manage to get along. And as far as multicultural tolerance is concerned, Malaysia today is undoubtedly a shining example for all.



After-work fun with Muslim and Coptic (Christian) employees in Cairo, who together made a great and successful team. (Photo: Felix Abt)

This Christmas season, I also observed that Muslims in Indonesia, Malaysia's neighboring country, which is also Muslim-majority, were involved in the planning of Christmas celebrations. The presidents of Indonesia often pray in the country's largest mosque, the Istiqlal, which was built in Jakarta by an Indonesian architect whose father was a Christian pastor.



The Istiqlal Mosque is located directly opposite the Cathedral of St. Mary of the Assumption.

An underground tunnel called the Friendship Tunnel connects the mosque to the Cathedral of St. Mary of the Assumption across the street. I know of no stronger symbol of good neighborliness than this one, which triumphs over vile and ignorant racial and religious animosity.

This travelogue was written for the Asian internet magazine [Eastern Angle](#), which will be published shortly.

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