

# ETHICS, EQUITY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE



## MALAYSIA

### Cultural Sensitivity Notes

# **MALAYSIA**

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

### **Population and Ethnicity**

Malaysia has a population of approximately 23 million (July 2003 est.)

Ethnic Malays comprise 57 per cent of the population, Chinese 32 per cent, and Indians 10 per cent.

### **Language**

The official language is Malay. However, English is also widely spoken. Chinese dialects are prevalent, as is Tamil and a range of indigenous languages.

### **Religion**

An estimated 52 per cent of Malaysia's population are Muslim. Other religions include Buddhism, Daoism, Hinduism and Christianity.

### **Currency**

Ringgit. A\$1 = 2.8492 Ringgit (Mar 2004).

### **Time**

WST – no difference.

### **Physical Features and Climate**

Malaysia is divided into two distinct areas – West (Peninsular) Malaysia and East Malaysia, which are separated by the South China Sea. Malaysia shares borders with Thailand, Indonesia and Brunei.

Both parts of Malaysia have extensive mountain ranges, which descend to coastal plains. More than 60 per cent of the country is covered in rainforest, some of it dense jungle.

As Malaysia is located close to the equator, it has a tropical climate. Heat and humidity are the norm, with temperatures usually between 20-30°C. The south-west and north-east regions experience annual monsoons.

### **Major Cities**

Capital city: Kuala Lumpur.

Other major cities include: Georgetown (on Penang Island) and Melaka.

### **Political and Legal System**

Malaysia is a constitutional monarchy with a bicameral Federal Parliament. Its Upper House members are appointed while Lower House members are elected. Nine of Malaysia's 13 states have hereditary rulers. Melaka, Georgetown, Sabah and Sarawak have governors appointed by the Federal Government. While Malaysia's states each have a unicameral Parliament, state leaders have very limited powers under the federal constitution and their roles are largely ceremonial.

A coalition of political parties, collectively called the Barisan Nasional, has governed Malaysia since 1955. Barisan Nasional comprises the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), Gerakan, and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), as well as a number of other political parties.

Malaysia's current Monarch is Paramount Ruler Tuanku Syed Sirajuddin ibni Almarhum Tuanku Syed Putra Jamalullail, the Raja of Perlis. He has held this position since December 2001. The head of Malaysia's Government is Prime Minister Abdullah

bin Ahmad Badawi, who has been in office since October 2003. He succeeded Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who was Prime Minister between 1974 and 2003.

The Paramount Ruler is one of the hereditary rulers of the nine Malaysian states which have them, and is elected by and from within this group to serve a five-year term. The Prime Minister is appointed by members of the House of Representatives following legislative elections, which are held at least every five years.

### **Economy**

Since the 1970s, Malaysia has undergone an economic transformation from a largely agriculture-based to a multi-sectored economy, with a particular emphasis on intermediate manufacturing. Economic growth has been driven by exports, mostly electronics. Other exports include chemicals, rubber, tin, timber and wood products and palm oil, of which Malaysia is the world's largest exporter.

Major industries within Malaysia include textiles and manufacturing.

Like most Asian countries in the region, Malaysia was significantly impacted by the Asian economic crisis in the late 1990s. There was a subsequent downturn in economic growth and unemployment rose sharply. Capital control measures introduced by the Malaysian government in 1999 served to offset some of the negative impacts of the crisis. Consequently, Malaysia's economy has averaged between four and five per cent growth over the past four years.

### **History**

Ethnic Malays originate from south-western China, and are thought to have begun populating the Malaysian peninsula 10,000 years ago. Chinese immigrants started to settle in Melaka in the early 15<sup>th</sup> Century. Melaka was colonised by the Portuguese in 1511, then the Dutch in 1641 and the British in 1795.

The various fledgling regions of Malaysia were united as the Federated Malay States during the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Following World War II, Britain also took control of Sabah and Sarawak, with a view to developing the rubber and tin industries. Labour from India was brought in to sustain these industries, and these are the origins of Malaysia's present-day Indian population.

Communist guerrillas who had fought against the occupying Japanese forces during World War II, campaigned against British rule from 1948 until 1957, when independence was granted. The regions of Sabah, Sarawak and Melaka joined with Singapore to form Malaysia in 1963. However, Singapore withdrew two years later. A brief confrontation with Indonesia over territorial claims was suppressed by Malaysian and British Commonwealth forces in 1963.

## **2. COMMUNICATION**

### **General Attitudes**

Malaysians are conscious of 'face' and it is important that people are not seen to 'lose face', especially in a formal or business setting. A foreigner can lose face, or cause their Malaysian counterpart to lose face, by being impatient or expressing irritation.

### **Names and Greetings**

Identifying the correct way to address Malaysian counterparts can be difficult, considering the country's varied ethnic backgrounds and naming patterns. If in doubt, it is perfectly acceptable to ask how a person would like to be addressed and to clarify that your pronunciation is correct.

In a business context, acquaintances should be addressed with either their professional title (eg. Professor, Foreman, Manager), or a generic title (eg. Mr, Mrs, Miss), followed by the person's name.

Ethnic Malays generally adhere to Muslim naming patterns. As such, males will be identified by a given name, followed by "bin" (meaning, "son of") and their father's name. Malay females are identified by their given name, followed by "binti" (meaning, "daughter of") and their father's name.

The names of Chinese Malaysians are applied in a different order to Western names. Chinese surnames come first, followed by a generation name and a given name. Chinese women do not generally adopt their husbands' surnames and retain their maiden name.

Indian Malaysians who are Hindu are referred to by an initial of their father's name first, followed by a given name. This is applied to females until they are married, when they usually use their husband's name first, followed by their personal name.

### **General Greetings:**

Morning	<i>'Selamat pagi'</i>
---------	-----------------------

Afternoon	<i>'Selamat petang'</i>
-----------	-------------------------

### **Conversation**

As mentioned previously, an effort should be made to avoid 'losing face' or causing a Malaysian counterpart to 'lose face' during a conversation.

### **Conversation Topics**

Some subjects that are considered fairly personal in Western society are entirely acceptable topics of conversation in Malaysia. Consequently, you may be asked questions about your income, marital status or your age.

Welcome topics of conversation include family and cultural heritage, business, travel and leisure activities. Be wary of discussing politics, aspects of Malaysian culture that you consider to be negative, religion, and sex or gender issues.

### **Body language and Gestures**

A female Malaysian will not necessarily offer a handshake and it is advisable to wait until being offered her hand. If she does not offer her hand, a nod or smile upon introduction will suffice.

It is respectful in Malaysia to give a slight deferential bow when you encounter elderly people. Similarly, a slight bow accompanied by the words, "excuse me", is appropriate when exiting a room where your Malaysian counterparts are present.

Shoes and sunglasses should be removed before entering a private home and must be removed before entering a mosque.

### **Touching**

Apart from an initial handshake, it is not acceptable for members of the opposite sex to touch each other in public. However, it is perfectly acceptable for members of the same sex to touch in public. This is commonplace and does not imply a homosexual relationship.

### **3. HOSPITALITY – BUSINESS AND SOCIAL CONTEXT**

#### **Business Cards**

Business cards should be printed in English and should include your professional qualifications. Given that many Malaysian businesspeople are Chinese, it may be worthwhile to have your details translated into Chinese on the reverse side of your business card.

You should present your business card to each person you are introduced to. Offer your card with both hands, with the print facing the person receiving it.

When being offered a Malaysian counterpart's business card, you should accept it with both hands and study it for a moment. Place it carefully away, either in a holder or a pocket.

#### **Appointments**

Standard business hours are Monday to Friday, 8.00am to 5.00pm, with some offices being open on Saturday mornings. In Malaysia's more observant Islamic states – Kedah, Kelantan, Perlis, Johore and Terengganu – the Muslim workweek of Saturday to Wednesday is observed.

Muslim prayer times should be avoided when making appointments anywhere in Malaysia. For example, appointments should not be made for the middle of the day, especially on Fridays (the Islamic holy day).

Appointments should be made at least two weeks in advance and should be confirmed a week beforehand.

#### **Hospitality**

Social occasions are an important aspect of doing business in Malaysia and it is therefore advisable to accept any invitations. Be aware that declining an invitation may cause the prospective host embarrassment and loss of face. Invitations will usually be given in writing and should be accepted in writing.

It is important to have attended an event being hosted by your Malaysian counterpart prior to hosting one yourself. The host is expected to pay for the meal/function. Tipping is not customary in Malaysia, however some restaurants and hotels will add a service charge of between five and ten per cent to the bill.

In Malaysian business culture, the order of seating is important and will be arranged according to hierarchy. Wait until your host directs you to a place setting.

#### **Punctuality/Time**

Your Malaysian counterparts will expect you to be punctual for meetings and appointments, even if they arrive late. Social events have varying standards in terms of punctuality, but tend to be slightly more relaxed. As a rule, arriving either on time or slightly late is advisable.

#### **Negotiation**

Successful negotiations within the Malaysian business culture depend on the formation of relationships between the parties. Initial meetings are usually about 'getting to know' each other and as a result, the negotiation process can seem lengthy and protracted by Western standards.

Most business negotiations in Malaysia are held in English, albeit with some culturally unique pronunciations and syntax. However, as Malay is the official language, any meetings with government officials will usually be conducted in Malay. Similarly, written correspondence with government officials should be in Malay.

Displaying politeness and good manners is critical during the negotiation process. Lengthy pauses are often observed after a person has finished speaking to consider the information they have presented. It is advisable to pause after being asked a question, to take the time to contemplate your answer.

To avoid the risk of either party losing face, Malaysians will often refrain from giving a direct “no” as an answer. Instead, a hesitant “yes” or a qualified answer may indicate that the underlying response is “no”.

### **Eating**

Malaysian cuisine reflects the dominant cultural groups within the country, as well as its neighbouring states. Many Malaysian dishes are hot and spicy, with various types of curries a major feature. Dishes based on coconut milk are popular. A common form of presentation is the satay, which is bite-sized pieces of meat arranged on bamboo skewers, served with a peanut-based sauce. Rice is a staple and is the basis for many dishes, as well as being served plain with every meal. Tropical fruits and seafood are in abundant supply and feature heavily in the Malaysian diet.

Breakfast is considered to be the most important meal of the day in Malaysia. Expect to be served a full hot meal consisting of curries, meat, vegetables and rice.

Muslims and Hindus believe that the left hand is unclean. It is therefore advisable to avoid eating or passing food with the left hand. Similarly, Malays from an Indian background will not allow a serving spoon to touch the plate.

Chopsticks are commonly used as eating implements in Malaysia. They should be rested after every few bites, and when talking.

### **Drinking**

It is advisable to avoid drinking alcohol in the presence of observant Muslims.

### **Behaviour in Public**

Malaysians have a deep respect for the elderly. It is polite to bow your head slightly out of respect when encountering an elderly person in public.

Obvious pointing in public will not be well received and any pointing should avoid using the forefinger only.

Feet are considered to be unclean and should be kept to oneself and covered up as much as possible. You should apologise immediately after accidentally stepping on another person's feet.

Littering in public is severely frowned upon, especially in Kuala Lumpur, where there are harsh penalties for doing so.

### **Gift Giving**

Official anti-corruption policy in Malaysia is very strict and rigidly enforced. Consequently, gifts given in a business context may be perceived as a form of bribery, especially if the gift is of any value. Gifts should only be given where there is an established personal relationship with the recipient as gifts are usually only given to friends.

Gifts should be relatively inexpensive. When reciprocating, select a gift that is of approximate value to the one you received, to ensure there is no loss of face.

A gift should be accepted with both hands, palms facing upwards. Malaysians do not open gifts in front of one another to avoid any potential embarrassment for either the giver or the recipient.

Appropriate business gifts are pens, other forms of stationery, or gifts that represent the bearer's home country or company. Gifts should not be wrapped in white, blue, black or yellow paper as there are cultural meanings attached to these colours that may be misinterpreted.

Malaysians of Chinese origin will refuse a gift three times before accepting. The bearer should continue to insist and thank the recipient when they finally do accept. This initial refusal should also be demonstrated when being offered a gift by a Malaysian Chinese counterpart.

### **Dress**

Malaysia's heat and humidity make light-weight garments, made of natural material such as cotton and linen, a sensible choice. Business dress in Malaysia can be quite casual. Dress slacks, a shirt with either long or short sleeves and a tie is fairly standard office attire for males. Foreigners are advised to dress more conservatively when in doubt.

Females should be respectful of Muslim and Hindu beliefs and dress accordingly. As a minimum, blouses should cover the upper arms and skirts should fall below the knees. Malaysian businesswomen tend to dress in lighter and brighter colours. Dresses and skirts are worn more frequently than slacks, which may be inappropriate in some offices.

## **4. RELEVANT LAWS THAT GOVERN BEHAVIOUR**

### **Illicit Drugs**

Malaysian laws against the possession and trafficking of illicit drugs are especially strict. Severe penalties, including the death penalty, are often handed down to offenders.

### **Smoking**

Smoking is not uncommon amongst Malaysian men, but females are far less likely to smoke. Malaysia does have laws governing smoking in public places. If in doubt, look for signage or observe whether or not others are smoking.

## **5. DATES OF CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE**

Major Islamic events are focussed around Ramadan, which is the month-long fasting period observed each year during the ninth month of the Islamic lunar calendar. Hari Raya Puasa marks the end of Ramadan with three days of celebrations.

Chinese New Year usually falls in February, but the dates change each year to coincide with the first day of the lunar calendar. Festivities can last up to a week and include parades, traditional dances and feasting. Businesses will usually be closed for at least the first day of the festive week.

## **6. VISAS**

Australians visiting Malaysia for periods of less than three months do not require visas. Foreign visitors are usually issued with visas of either 30 or 60 days upon their arrival. These are extendable.

## **7. USEFUL CONTACTS**

### **Australia**

#### **High Commission for Malaysia**

7 Perth Avenue  
Yarralumla ACT 2600  
Telephone: (02) 6273 1543  
Facsimile: (02) 6273 2496

### **Malaysia**

#### **Australian High Commission**

6 Jalan Yap Kwan Seng  
Kuala Lumpur  
Telephone: (60 3) 21465555  
Facsimile: (60 3) 21415773

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Malaysia Country Information. Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2004.

Malaysian Business Culture. Executive Planet. [www.executiveplanet.com](http://www.executiveplanet.com), 2004.

Lonely Planet Worldguide – Malaysia. Lonely Planet, 2004.

The World Factbook – Malaysia. Central Intelligence Agency, 2004.