

Malaysia's Neocolonial Struggle: Unraveling the Complexities of Postcolonial Dynamics

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ABSTRACT

The article dissects the case of Malaysia in the context of postcolonial studies. After an introduction to the aspects of postcolonial studies that are instrumental in analyzing the case, the article begins by exploring the postcolonial landscape of Malaysia, including the existing discourses, values, and the public sentiments they embody. It then highlights significant milestones in the country's foreign policy and provides a comparative perspective on different periods. Finally, it assesses the most recent developments related to the geopolitical power struggle between China and the US in Southeast Asia. The article's main thesis argues that Malaysia has not fully undergone the process of decolonization. Initially, the ruling political elite preserved some colonial instruments to maintain their own dominance, and later, Malaysia became entangled in the rivalry between the US and China, with both establishing neocolonial dominance over the country in different ways. Malaysia's history since independence has not led to the formation of a cohesive nation, which has exposed it to foreign influence that exploits gaps in national consciousness and modes of governance.

KEYWORDS

Islamisation, Malaysia, neocolonialism, New Economic Policy, postcolonialism

Introduction

The postcolonial realities of Malaysia present challenges that are no less complex than the very definition of postcolonial studies. At first glance, the term “postcolonial studies” seems to refer to a chronological framework, indicating a period following colonialism. However, being situated after colonialism does not necessarily imply freedom from colonial control or influence, whether partially or fully. In some cases, domination and control persist in new forms,¹ which can be understood as different manifestations of neocolonialism. Therefore, it is important to consider postcolonialism as a process of liberating oneself from colonial dependency and to analyze where, through what means, and by which actors dominance continues to exist in neocolonial forms.

It is crucial to note that relying solely on a postcolonial lens when examining discourse and culture in postcolonial societies may lead to a distorted perception of postcolonial realities. This distortion occurs when we disregard the fact that a significant portion of postcolonial nations’ history encompasses a period without dependency, and postcolonial developments should not be viewed solely as a continuation of policies introduced by the colonial power.² Some scholars even attempt to avoid such distortions by formulating theoretical frameworks that interpret countries’ foreign policies based on their pre-colonial past.³

Traditionally, colonialism aimed to impose order on seemingly chaotic processes and cultures within dependent societies, often stripping away the original allure that captivated researchers, travelers, and artists. This loss is experienced by foreign communities initially fascinated by the cultures of the colonized Orient.⁴ However, a similar sense of loss, albeit with different nuances, permeates postcolonial societies themselves, as they reflect on the cultures that existed or could have existed without the effects of colonialism. While it is difficult to determine the baseline for the initial state of culture, in the postcolonial era, narratives about such possibilities and the pursuit of comprehensive decolonization take on lives of their own, becoming instruments of political rhetoric.

F. Fanon, prominent figure in postcolonial studies, warned about the dangers of a national consciousness where the newly established elite that emerged during the colonial period simply replaced the colonizers upon independence. In such cases, substantial change did not occur for the population at large.⁵ Russian historian A. Etkind discussed a similar concept of internal colonialism, where certain groups within the borders of a single state could be subjected to economic and cultural exploitation.⁶ Although A. Etkind is well-known for applying postcolonial theory to the subject of internal colonialism in Russia, it should be noted that Russia’s historical background differs significantly from countries that experienced prolonged colonial dependency under major powers like the British Empire.

1 Loomba 2015, 28.

2 Ibid., 37.

3 Alatas 2021.

4 Sharp 2008, 75.

5 Fanon 1967, 176.

6 Etkind 2011.

The Malaysian approach to decolonization and the reclamation of national culture primarily relied on religion, specifically Islam, and spirituality. Christianity, on the other hand, was seen as a religion brought in by Western missionaries, while other religions were also considered non-representative of the majority. Therefore, emphasis was placed on Islam, its role in the country's historical trajectory, and its influence in shaping the moral principles upon which the nation is built.

Discourse emerges as a critical field for analysis when determining whether colonial thinking and practices were dismantled or if new forms of dependence and dominance emerged.¹ To identify postcolonial features in Malaysian domestic and foreign policy discourse, we can examine how it aligns with dichotomies used to describe the West and the rest, such as "civilized-uncivilized," "rational-irrational," and "active-passive." We should also assess whether any efforts have been made to redirect the discourse and explore possible neocolonial connections. At times, it seems that the discourse of the colonial era has not undergone radical changes regarding how relations between former colonies and their colonizers are constructed. However, it is challenging to delineate a clear distinction between remnants of colonial approaches and other modern factors that shape interstate relations, such as the political weight and material power of states within the international system, particularly when considering great powers, middle powers, and small states.

Epistemologically, there is a degree of continuity between colonial and postcolonial governance systems. Concepts of international relations applied in postcolonial states serve as notable examples, as they often rely on conclusions drawn from Western schools of thought. This knowledge is perceived as "natural," explaining relations between states based on a set of universal norms and rules. Anything that deviates from this framework is seen as requiring correction or, at the very least, an explanation of what went wrong, rather than the exploration of an alternative framework that would interpret events differently.

Cultural materialism, characterized by the pervasive expansion of ideas and cultures, particularly American culture, has become another feature of the postcolonial world. The discourse surrounding the cultural influence of the West and its acceptability is highly prevalent in Malaysia. Criticism against Western policies aimed at establishing dominance in new forms can often be heard.

The postcolonial discourse can also be contextualized using the country typology proposed by K. Pletsch. By the end of the Cold War, Malaysia was considered a Third World country. According to K. Pletsch, the Third World is associated with irrationality, traditionality, religiosity, and low economic development and political organization. From the perspective of the First World, depicted as rational, highly developed, and politically organized, the only path for the Third World is seen as modernization towards the First World. Postcolonial discourse in Malaysia criticizes such a perspective. Additionally, with the reconfiguration of power in the international system, particularly between the US and China, many countries in the Third World, especially in Southeast Asia, have been drawn into this dynamic. Malaysia continues to be an arena for the US-China rivalry while striving to maintain a facade of neutrality. Furthermore, the

1 Said 2003; Spivak 1999.

country has evolved significantly from its initial definition as a Third World nation and is navigating the turbulent waters of this rivalry in a strategic manner.

The terminology and subject matter of modern postcolonial studies find perfect application in the case of Malaysia, considering its colonial past, attempts to overcome various forms of dependency on the former colonial master, the establishment of its own internal colonialism, and ultimately becoming ensnared in neocolonialism. Therefore, objective of this article is to dissect Malaysia's attempt at decolonization, even though it has resulted in dependency on neocolonial powers. By exploring the extensive material that elucidates Malaysia's relationship with its colonial past, this article will first focus on compelling illustrations to discuss the postcolonial landscape, later shifting to its foreign policy, and finally, analysing how geopolitical power struggles have compelled the country to unwittingly embrace the neocolonial framework.

Postcolonial Landscape of Malaysia

Malaysia has retained certain aspects of the British colonial legacy to this day. One example is the multiethnic composition of its society, which still reflects the divide and rule principle applied by politicians. Additionally, a number of laws have been preserved since colonial times. Malaysia's constitution, which delineates special rights for the Malay majority, was drafted under British authority. The sodomy law, specifically Section 377A of Malaysia's Penal Code, which was previously applied to current Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, also originates from the British colonial rule,¹ rather than being an institution of the rapidly Islamizing state. Another example is Section 498 of Malaysia's Penal Code, which criminalizes enticing a married woman for sexual intercourse and falls under the category of archaic colonial laws.²

Neocolonialism, on the other hand, may build upon existing structures. During the Cold War era, US geopolitical thinking justified providing economic support to postcolonial countries as a means to counter communism.³ Concurrently, economic inequality inherited from the postcolonial era contributed to the persistence of colonial structures in various forms. In the case of Malaysia, economic inequality and political imbalances among ethnic groups resulted in the racial riots of 1969, the memory of which continues to serve as an effective point of contention in Malaysian public discourse, particularly when criticizing the existing system of positive discrimination. A divided society creates opportunities for external actors to exploit gaps through various forms of inducement. For the West, the justification for channeling resources is no longer the fight against communism, but rather countering China's growing influence. Similarly, for China, ASEAN's territory is of great importance for expanding its influence due to the region's consumer markets and commodity exports, among other factors.

External forces have capitalized on the ethno-religious divide in Malaysia, but internally, the cultural emphasis on a specific ethnicity (Malay) and religion (Islam)

1 Zurairi Abdul Rahman, "Anwar: Anti-sodomy laws archaic, completely unjust," The MalayMail, September 21, 2018, accessed June 28, 2023, <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2018/09/21/anwar-anti-sodomy-laws-archaic-completely-unjust/1675013>.

2 Ding Jo-Ann, "Defending a Victorian-era law," Malaysian Bar, November 17, 2009, accessed June 28, 2023, <https://www.malaysianbar.org.my/article/news/legal-and-general-news/legal-news/defending-a-victorian-era-law>.

3 Sharp 2008, 80.

has also contributed to maintaining the divide and rule principle from independence until the present time. It is important to view culture, including political culture, as evolving rather than fixed.¹ In this regard, we argue that Malaysia has undergone a decades-long process of Islamizing its politics, resulting in the inseparability of ethnic and religious identity. However, this underlying cultural basis is often overlooked by analysts studying Malaysian politics. The politicization of culture, the attempt to draw lines between politically correct and incorrect utilization of national and ethnic identities, the organization of universities, and government programs aimed at assimilation and integration remain significant legacies of the postcolonial project in everyday life.² If one were to define the fundamentals of domestic politics in Malaysia, it would likely revolve around divisive ethno-racial politics. This politicized culture permeates all aspects of life and shapes the discourse in its own direction.

Within the structure of this politicized culture, several fundamental terms emerge. These include the need to provide legitimacy to decisions made by authorities (*daulat*), loyalty and respect towards elders, whether within the family or social structure (*kehalusan*), and condemnation of betrayal (*derhaka*), which may involve criticism of the incumbent power.³ This approach based on these fundamentals likely took shape in the precolonial period and became entrenched during the colonial era, carrying over into the postcolonial times. Therefore, when these features are exhibited in Malaysian political behavior, they are more of an extension of existing traditions rather than a direct effect of colonialism or a reflection of resistance against it.

Research has shown that the New Economic Policy (NEP), introduced in 1971 as a response to the racial riots of 1969 and aimed at addressing economic inequality between the Malay majority and the predominantly Chinese minority, has proven largely unsuccessful in terms of reducing income and wealth disparity. Instead, decades of the NEP have led to the formation of a particular mindset that is unfavorable to economic, technological, and personal development, as well as the deepening of racial and religious divisions.⁴

Public discourse and the existing legal framework are utilized to suppress criticism of the policy of positive discrimination favoring the *Bumiputera*, which includes Malays and other indigenous groups. The limited criticism is also reflected in Malaysia's refusal to ratify international legal instruments, such as the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) of 1965 or the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court of 1998. Attempts to initiate discussions on ratifying these international documents, face resistance by those who perceive them as undermining the special rights of ethnic Malays stipulated in Article 153 of the federal constitution. Political forces are hesitant to raise the issue of ending the New Economic Policy (NEP) or reinterpreting Article 153 of the Constitution,

1 Chio 2004, 112.

2 Прус, И. Краткая история постколониализма: что это и почему все о нем говорят? // Perito. 16 сентября 2022. [Электронный ресурс]. URL: <https://perito.media/posts/kratkaya-istoriya-postkolonializma-chto-eto-i-pochemu-vse-o-nem-govoryat> (дата обращения: 28.06.2023).

3 Vaseehar 2013, 40.

4 Yusuf Hashim, "You will know that your society is doomed," MalaysiaKini, October 1, 2020, accessed June 28, 2023, <https://www.malaysiakini.com/letters/544754>.

Malaysia has traversed a path of intensifying racial divisions by merging the nationalist discourse with the Islamic one. According to the Constitution, the ethnicity of the majority is already defined based on religious affiliation, with only Muslims considered Malays. Religious affiliation takes precedence, as conversion to Islam results in a legal change of ethnicity to Malay. Meanwhile, the minorities, consisting mostly of non-Muslims, tend to be more secular due to the absence of religious institutionalization.

The model practiced in Malaysia has faced repeated criticism for its feudal inclination, with the rhetoric of political patrons being the sole protectors of the Malay-Muslim majority being reiterated. This position justifies control over national resources, facilitates corrupt and non-transparent practices, and discourages public criticism by easily suppressing it when necessary.¹ Such practices, coupled with the restriction of space for discussion and political freedoms, have affected the overall assessment of the political regime in Malaysia, resulting in its downgrade from an emerging democracy to an authoritarian one.²

Despite a generally anti-Western stance, the elites, particularly notable among the Islamists from the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS), still prefer imported Western products. For instance, the Kelantan state government, traditionally under PAS rule, allocated funds from the federal government for state needs but used them to purchase a batch of Mercedes Benz cars for state government officials.³ It is important to note that some of the brands widely used by the government, including Islamists, have been implicated in employing forced labor of ethnic Uighurs in China.⁴ The issue of oppressed Muslim minorities in their home countries is often exploited for both domestic and foreign policy purposes, presenting Malaysia as a responsible member of the Muslim *ummah* (community), with China's Uighurs being no exception. Furthermore, there is a lack of consistency in the lifestyle of the neo-feudal elites, as they prefer to invest, travel, and even educate their children abroad, with the United Kingdom remaining a preferred destination.

Discussions on education often reflect a postcolonial flavor influenced by globalization. In these discussions, the emphasis on university rankings and prestige implies that the culture underlying education in Malaysia is considered inferior compared to Western standards.⁵

While the public at large is not deeply concerned about global geopolitical developments, there are a few foreign policy themes that target the domestic audience and serve the objectives of political rivalries among different factions. For instance, topics such as the Palestinian cause, aimed at regaining territories and statehood, correspond with the non-aligned component of Malaysia's foreign policy. These topics are pursued by political elites to enhance their credentials within the global Muslim *ummah*, as well as to demonstrate resilience against pressures from

1 "Political Polarisation in South and Southeast Asia: Old Divisions, New Dangers," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, August 18, 2020, accessed June 28, 2023, https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Political_Polarization_RPT_FINAL1.pdf.

2 Ibid.

3 "Kelantan Gov't Bought Mercs for Security Purposes, Says Deputy MB," MalaysiaKini, January 24, 2020, accessed June 28, 2023, <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/508330>.

4 Xu et al. 2020.

5 Campbell 2009.

Israel and its supporters—a portrayal that appeals to the Muslim electorate at home. It was within this discourse that Malaysia approached the conflict in Ukraine that unfolded on February 24, 2022. Public opinion sympathized with the position of the Russian government, seen as standing against the West and its perceived neocolonial appetites,¹ even though the Malaysian government officially refused to take sides.

Foreign Policy of Postcolonial Malaysia

When analyzing Malaysia's foreign policy from a postcolonial perspective, it is logical to examine the discourse arising from the statements of political leaders, foreign visits of heads of state and delegations, program documents of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and other relevant ministries. It is also beneficial to consider shifts in foreign policy and domestic politics from one government to another by employing a comparative perspective on both the policy itself and the factors influencing it.

For smaller countries like Malaysia, foreign policy serves not only as a means to project a certain image abroad but also to cater to domestic politics². Consequently, as foreign policy becomes an extension of domestic politics and the internal power struggles within the political elite, it reflects their aspirations to garner support from foreign political forces and fulfill their personal political ambitions and financial interests.

Malaysian political scientist S.M. Alatas suggests relying on historical and cultural traditions when analyzing the foreign policies of non-Western states. She argues that the Westphalian system framework is not suitable for states that did not participate in its formation. In particular, she deems this framework inadequate for analyzing threat perception by non-Western states and the decision-making process based on such perceptions.³ S.M. Alatas highlights the significant impact of regional geopolitical dynamics⁴ on Malaysian politics, which explains why the Association of Southeast Asian States (ASEAN) is a key priority for Malaysia. Interestingly, authors like S.M. Alatas point out the irony of Southeast Asia having made a tremendous contribution to the evolution of European capitalism, while the region itself developed according to different rules, which are rarely studied within the context of postcolonial studies.

S.M. Alatas identifies *kerajaan* and *nama*⁵ as two culturally derived principles that define Malaysia's foreign policy. According to her, these principles elucidate how identity is shaped in Malaysian political life, emphasizing the significance of monarchic rulers (*raja*), loyalty to their rule (*kerajaan*), and the sense of prestige (*nama*) associated with reputation and respect for various forms of hierarchy in social and political life.

If we view Malaysia within the framework of the Westphalian system, we might fall into the neorealist current, which suggests that a state must ensure its security by accumulating material power or aligning with more powerful allies. From this perspective, Malaysia's foreign policy might appear indecisive, as if it is overdue in

1 Alena Nadia, "Racial Identity, Anti-West Sentiments Reasons for M'sian Pro-Russia Stance," MalaysiaKini, July 1, 2022, accessed June 28, 2023, <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/626727>.

2 Farish Noor, "Malaysian Foreign Policy – A Reflection of its Domestic Policy," MalaysiaKini, November 23, 2001, accessed June 28, 2023, <https://www.malaysiakini.com/columns/7024>.

3 Alatas 2021, 1.

4 Ibid., 2.

5 Ibid.

making a choice regarding which side to align with. However, Malaysia does not perceive itself as a peripheral state. Judging by the number of diplomatic missions abroad, it positions itself as an active player. According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Malaysia has 111 diplomatic missions in 85 countries,¹ comparable to the representation of larger countries like Saudi Arabia.

In the first decades after independence, Malaysia's foreign policy primarily focused on its regional neighbours and its role in the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). Within the Malaysian discourse on foreign policy, the Bandung Conference of 1955, which proclaimed the "Third Way" as an alternative to the capitalist West and the Communist bloc, holds significant importance.

During the early years of independence under Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman (1957–1969), it became apparent that joining alliances with clear-cut priorities and commitments could potentially destabilize the country due to its diverse ethnic and religious composition.² Malaysia may have had a preference for cooperation with the West, as it perceived the communist threat to be very real.³ At the time of independence, Malaysia was still under a state of Emergency declared by the British due to the communist guerilla movement that began in 1948 and lasted, to varying degrees of intensity, until 1989. Within Malaysia, the communist insurgency was viewed as an anti-British liberation war, predominantly fought by Chinese groups, resulting in a milder perception of communism as a threat compared to other countries. Consequently, Malaysia chose to maintain neutrality and declined to join the US-led Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO).

The early post-independence foreign policy of Malaysia was not solely based on the religious identity of the majority. For example, during the India-Pakistan war of 1962, Malaysia supported India rather than religiously closer Pakistan. Malaysia's support for India on the issue of Kashmir even led to severing diplomatic relations with Pakistan in 1965. During the period of Confrontation (*Konfrontasi*) with Indonesia from 1963 to 1966, Malaysia's foreign policy leaned towards the West rather than the Muslim world, which supported Indonesia's claim to the territories of former Malaya.

Meanwhile, the secular orientation of Malaysia's foreign policy made it susceptible to criticism from Islamist forces such as the religious-based political party PAS. For instance, during the 1964 elections, PAS directly appealed to voters not to support political parties that collaborated with non-Muslims, with the former colonial powers being implied. In response, Tunku was compelled to explain the reconciliation with Indonesia in 1966 as a rapprochement between two Muslim nations opposing communist forces that sought to divide them.

In 1969, PAS issued a fatwa (religious ruling) declaring the ruling United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) apostates for collaborating with non-Muslims. In response, UMNO sought support from various quarters in the Muslim world. They hosted the International Islamic Conference in Kuala Lumpur, which condemned the fatwa and expressed support for UMNO. This conference, which discussed the Six-Day

1 "Our Embassies Abroad," Ministry of Foreign Affairs Malaysia, accessed June 28, 2023, <https://www.kln.gov.my/web/guest/malaysian-mission#:~:text=Malaysia%20maintains%20diplomatic%20relations%20with,missions%20in%2085%20countries%20abroad.>

2 Nair 1997, 56.

3 Ibid., 56.

War of 1967 and the incident at the Al-Aqsa Mosque, gained attention as it preceded the establishment of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) at the Islamic Summit in Rabat later that same year. Malaysia's first Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman, even chaired the OIC Secretariat in 1971. In 1975, Malaysia lobbied for the OIC to gain observer status at the United Nations and began playing a more active role in the Muslim world. This policy not only aimed to address criticisms from Islamists at home but also attracted investment from oil-rich Arab countries.

This foreign policy approach continued during the premiership of Tun Hussein Onn (1976–1981), where an appeal to Islam as a basis for unity was pragmatically used to attract investors.¹ It was within this policy that Malaysia banned trade with Israel to please its partners in the Arab world.

Initially, support for the Palestinian cause stemmed from pragmatic considerations, strengthened by the influence of intellectual currents originating from the Middle East. In Malaysia, the humiliation experienced by Muslim-majority countries in their conflict with Israel resonated strongly, as it was perceived as a battle against an occupying power, which in turn was associated with former colonial masters.

Previously, the current Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim was the president of the International Islamic Youth Movement (Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia, ABIM), which represented the country at the World Assembly of Muslim Youth (WAMY) and actively supported the Islamic revolution in Iran.² The Iranian Revolution (referred to by the Malaysian government as the events of 1979 in Iran) was not only seen by Islamic movements as a successful example of instituting theocracy, but also, and more importantly, as a triumph against Western influence over governance processes.³ Malaysia took an opposing stand on the hostage crisis at the US Embassy in Tehran in 1979, but at the same time criticized US attempts to release the diplomats as a breach of international law.⁴ Even back then, Islamic movements and activists in Malaysia criticized the pro-Western angle in the coverage of the events in Iran, as the local press heavily relied on information from Western news agencies. However, it should not be assumed that with Anwar coming to power in 2022, Malaysia would shift towards a theocracy or openly adopt a pro-Iran policy, despite President Ibrahim Raisi of Iran considering Malaysia a priority in its Asia policy and in relation to the Muslim ummah.⁵ Until now, Iran has played a marginal role in Malaysia's foreign policy and trade relations, and the country's Shia minority has faced persecution due to their deviation from the religious norms of the Shafi'i school of Sunni Islam in Malaysia.

From a pragmatic approach to Islamization as a means of attracting international support and investment, Malaysia moved towards accommodating political infighting and deepening societal fault lines. During the Emergency period, most participants in the communist movement in Malaysia were ethnic Chinese, although there was also a significant presence of other racial groups. Despite the communist wave being

1 Nair 1997, 65.

2 Sundaram, Cheek 1988, 843.

3 Nair 1997, 75.

4 Ibid., 76.

5 "Ayatollah Raisi: Malaysia a Priority for Iran in Asia," Website of Iran President Office, November 25, 2022, accessed June 28, 2023, <https://www.president.ir/en/140972#>.

more of an anti-colonial struggle, political elites, when necessary, disregarded the importance of the communist movement in Malaysia's independence and emphasized the association between the dangers of communism and non-Muslims. This deepened divisions not only along ideological lines but also along ethnic and religious lines. While the British portrayed the Emergency in terms of fighting communism, the Malaysian government, established after independence, continued with a similar discourse, giving little acknowledgment to the anti-colonial struggle within it. The process of Islamization gained momentum with the rise in popularity of the Islamist PAS. Despite the more secular government orientation towards closer cooperation with the West, the opposition advocated for a more neutral approach and cooperation with the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) or even leaning towards closer cooperation with countries in the Islamic and Arab world that were fighting for independence.¹ It was from this latter current that new nationalist leaders emerged, including Mahathir Mohamad who would later become Prime Minister.

Mahathir's rise on the political scene coincided with the expansion of revivalist ideas in the Muslim world, which influenced Malaysia's approach to political decision-making. The proliferation of these ideas in other Muslim-majority countries such as Pakistan, Iran, and Egypt also had an influence on Malaysian discourse. Additionally, the political infighting between UMNO and PAS became more pronounced as both targeted the same voter base. Consequently, during Mahathir's premiership (1981–2003), Malaysia's foreign policy increasingly reflected UMNO's desire to position itself as the protector of the Malay-Muslim majority. Alongside projecting this image in foreign policy, Mahathir made significant efforts to institutionalize religion as a means of garnering more support domestically. Funding for institutions like the International Islamic University (IIUM) came from Muslim countries such as Saudi Arabia, which along with Kuwait sponsored also missionary activities in the country.

Indeed, Mahathir's foreign policy initially prioritized ASEAN, followed by Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and the Commonwealth of Nations (comprising former territories of the British Empire). However, the ongoing surge of Islamism across the Muslim world led to increased efforts by previous prime ministers to establish closer ties based on a proclaimed common identity with other Muslim countries, particularly the Arab states. From the 1980s onward, Malaysia began speaking more frequently on issues concerning the Muslim world, and UMNO's rhetoric increasingly presented Malaysia as a Muslim nation, with UMNO itself claiming to be the third-largest Muslim party in the world.² However, this shift in rhetoric was not equally reflected in increased trade with Muslim countries, especially when compared to Malaysia's trade with neighboring and developed countries.³ Among Malaysia's top ten trade partners, Indonesia is the only Muslim country, but it falls under the ASEAN priority rather than expanding ties with the broader Muslim world.

Support for other Muslim countries and Islamic movements became another hallmark of Mahathir's foreign policy. Initially, such support was given to the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) and the Afghan *mujahideen*. Malaysia became the first

1 Nair 1997, 57.

2 Nair 1997, 80.

3 Ibid., 103.

Southeast Asian country to establish diplomatic ties with the PLO. It also supported Hamas, providing humanitarian aid to Palestine through Hamas channels, staunchly refusing to consider normalization with Israel, unlike other Muslim countries that participated in such efforts over the years. Malaysia's position on this issue was evident in recent events, where it denied visas to Israeli athletes participating in sports events hosted in the country¹.

In 1982, Malaysia donated to the Afghan refugee support fund. With government permission, the Mujahideen opened an office in the country, and Afghan students received scholarships to study in Malaysia.

Malaysia justified its support for the Palestinian cause and the Mujahideen in their struggle against the USSR based on principles of sovereignty, territorial integrity, non-interference, and the right of peoples to self-determination. The support was grounded in of Islamic brotherhood as well as nationalist ideas promoted by Malaysia, which had developed during the anticolonial struggle and the period after independence.

It was Mahathir's initiative to send Malaysian peacekeepers to Bosnia and offer refuge to Bosnian families during the war from 1992 to 1995². When Mahathir came to power again in 2018, this time as the head of the so-called opposition, it was revealed that the preceding government of Najib Razak had sent troops to support the Saudi operation in Yemen³. Najib was known for his ties with countries in the Persian Gulf, which he used to justify funds from the scandalous state corporation, 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB), as personal donations from Saudi and Emirati royalty.⁴

Another aspect of Mahathir's Look East Policy (1981–2003) was his focus on Japan, which extended from his fascination with the country. Apart from Japan's economic miracle and rapid growth during the post-war decades, Mahathir admired the fact that Japan had forced the British out of Malaya during World War II. To nationalists, this represented an Asian power driving out colonisers. Mahathir aimed to instil this sentiment in his own nation and build a country with similar economic and political resilience.

Continuing this trend, Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim (since 2022) personally traveled to Turkey after parts of the country were hit by an earthquake in early 2023. It is true that Anwar maintains close personal ties with Turkish President Recep Erdogan, but in this case, the newly installed prime minister was also following Mahathir's approach of projecting an image of the country actively involved in the issues of the Muslim world. The political coalition formed by Anwar left the Islamists of PAS fiercely opposing his government, so the prime minister once again found himself in a position to demonstrate his commitment to the *ummah* to his opponents.

To sum up, Malaysia's foreign policy since independence has shown that successive

1 "No Place for Israeli Athletes in Malaysia," Prime Minister Says," Middle East Monitor, January 12, 2019, accessed June 28, 2023, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20190112-no-place-for-israeli-athletes-in-malaysia-prime-minister-says/>; "World Squash Event in Malaysia Axed After Israelis Barred," Aljazeera, November 30, 2021, accessed June 28, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/11/30/world-squash-event-in-malaysia-axed-after-israelis-barred>.

2 Hamza Karcic, "Haven Far From Home: The Bosniaks of Malaysia," Balkan Insight, October 8, 2020, accessed June 28, 2023, <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/10/08/haven-far-from-home-the-bosniaks-of-malaysia/>.

3 "Malaysia's Military Involvement in Saudi-led War in Yemen Must End – Lawyers for Liberty," New Straits Times, June 19, 2018, accessed June 28, 2023, <https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2018/06/381692/malaysias-military-involvement-saudi-led-war-yemen-must-end-lawyers>.

4 "1MDB Scandal: Malaysia's Former PM 'Asked UAE to Fake Evidence'," The Guardian, January 8, 2020, accessed June 28, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jan/08/1mdb-scandal-malaysias-former-pm-asked-uae-to-fake-evidence>.

governments aimed to maintain independence, align with Third World countries, and support liberation movements. However, this aspiration faced limitations. The Islamization of foreign policy emerged partly due to the global spread of Islamic revivalist ideas, but primarily as a result of domestic political infighting. As part of this process, the Islamization of political and social life was portrayed as a departure from the colonial past, leaving little choice for even secular-minded politicians but to comply with the demands of this evolution.

Precarious Balancing Act

The postcolonial period in Malaysia did not offer much room for true independence. It transitioned from a phase where it sought to establish independence from former colonial powers to one where political elites perpetuated colonial-like mechanisms, such as exploiting racial and religious divisions and establishing a patronage system. Furthermore, Malaysia has become entangled in neocolonial dependencies in modern times. The ongoing rivalry between China and the US has significantly constrained Malaysia's sovereignty, both in terms of foreign policy and domestic politics.

Malaysian political elites often pride themselves on having a principled stance when it comes to foreign policy. At the same time, despite some academic attempts to suggest an alternative to Westphalian framework for organisation of the international system and hedging strategy as an alternative to dichotomic realist choices, statements made by the same politicians reflect a more sober outlook of Kuala Lumpur's powers as compared to the giants present in the region: "We cannot decide and make a choice [between the US and China] because look at the strength of both countries," lamented prime-minister Najib. In these conditions Malaysia has tried hard to adopt an approach of being equidistant from all the major players.¹

The disputes in the South China Sea illustrate the Thucydides trap, which not only ensnares the US and China but also smaller powers like Malaysia. These smaller powers are left with limited options: either becoming collateral damage or navigating the battle of giants with their own agency.

Malaysia, along with the Philippines, Vietnam, Brunei, and Taiwan, asserts its claims in the South China Sea. China, employs a divide-and-rule strategy by preferring bilateral discussions rather than engaging with ASEAN as a whole. China recognizes that ASEAN, as a united front, poses a significant challenge to its approach.²

During Mahathir's second term in office (2018–2020) and beyond, Malaysia made it clear that it was not considering military means to counter China's regional influence.³ Its response to China's airspace and maritime incursions have been restrained.

However, it is not solely a matter of being reluctant to challenge a significantly larger power. Malaysia has maintained diplomatic relations with China since 1974, and this longstanding period of interaction is highly valued. China remains Malaysia's top

1 "Najib: Why Should Malaysia Choose Between US And China?," The Star, August 24, 2014, accessed June 28, 2023, <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2014/08/24/najib-foreign-policy/>.

2 Tashny Sukumaran, "How Will Malaysia And China's Maritime Consultation Mechanism Affect The South China Sea Dispute?," South China Morning Post, September 22, 2019, accessed June 28, 2023, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/explained/article/3029732/how-will-malaysia-and-chinas-maritime-consultation-mechanism>.

3 "Tun Dr Mahathir Bin Mohamad: Former Malaysian Prime Minister address at the Oxford Union," Oxford Union, September 17, 2022, accessed June 28, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2QT-y44NhxE>.

trading partner, with the annual bilateral trade volume reaching \$203.6 billion.¹

One prominent manifestation of China's presence in Malaysia is the East Coast Rail Link (ECRL) project. Signed under Najib's administration in 2016, the ECRL project is also connected to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). China Communications Construction Co Ltd (CCC-ECRL) is responsible for the implementation of the project on China's behalf. There has been extensive public debate regarding the feasibility of the project and its potential environmental and socioeconomic impacts, but the government has not adequately addressed these concerns.

Media coverage of China's regional policy has become more lenient since around 2016. However, it is important to note that Malaysia's alignment with China in the power struggle with the US was likely driven by more parochial concerns related to the 1MDB scandal. During that time, Najib Razak, the then Malaysian prime minister, was under investigation by multiple countries, which led to discomfort on the part of Donald Trump and his decision not to meet Najib during his visit to the US. This contrasted with the warm reception Najib received from Barack Obama during his visits to Malaysia in 2014 and 2015. Najib and Obama even played golf together, leading to speculation that the US was aligning with Malaysia to counter China's influence in Southeast Asia, given Obama's cordial relationship with Najib.² Malaysia attempted to improve the strained personal relationship with the US by investing money to end the investigation, but these efforts did not yield the desired results. In fact, the US cautiously urged Malaysia to resolve the corruption case and restore the country's image until Najib's conviction in 2022. During his visit to China, Najib shifted the focus to criticizing former colonial powers³ and called for more inclusivity in international institutions for countries that had been marginalized during the formation of the current international system.⁴

The lenient coverage of China's activities in the region by Malaysian media can be attributed to various factors, highlighting the pervasive influence of China. One such factor is the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), a component party of the former ruling alliance Barisan Nasional (BN) that represents the ethnically Chinese electorate. The MCA is traditionally perceived as having a pro-China stance, and it holds a controlling share in one of Malaysia's largest newspapers, *The Star*. This ownership arrangement helps explain the newspaper's restrained position on Malaysia's claims in the South China Sea and other aspects of Malaysia-China relations. While Malaysia's Chinese minority primarily identifies with Malaysia itself, there is a segment that views China as a strong business partner and a culturally familiar "big brother."⁵ This example illustrates how media coverage and China's image in Malaysia are influenced not only by the political priorities of the government but also by the positions of media owners, particularly Malaysian Chinese individuals with business interests in or with China.

During the 2018 electoral campaign, the MCA was accused of suppressing

1 "Malaysia-China bilateral trade hit record US\$203.6b in 2022, says Chinese ambassador," Malaysian Investment Development Authority, February 17, 2023, accessed June 28, 2023, <http://surl.li/jgoie>.

2 "Golf Diplomacy And 'Back-Channel Lobbying' – US\$8 Million To Lobby President Trump, But Najib's Golf Got Cancelled!," *Sarawak Report*, August 22, 2020, accessed June 28, 2023, <https://www.sarawakreport.org/2020/08/golf-diplomacy-and-back-channel-lobbying-jho-low-paid-us8-million-to-lobby-president-trump-but-najibs-golf-got-cancelled/>.

3 "Najib Asks West to Stop 'Lecturing' As Malaysia Embraces China," *Reuters*, November 2, 2016, accessed June 28, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/article/china-malaysia-idINL4N1D31LQ>.

4 *Ibid.*

5 Jennifer Pak, "Will China's Rise Shape Malaysian Chinese Community?," *BBC News*, December 30, 2011, accessed June 28, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-16284388>.

criticism against Beijing's policies and promoting the notion that voting for Najib would guarantee a continued flow of investments from China.¹ According to the Wall Street Journal (WSJ), China allegedly promised to assist Najib in covering the debts related to the 1MDB scandal and exert its influence in countries investigating the case.²

In its 2023 report on Beijing's Global Media Influence, Freedom House emphasized the significant influence of Chinese language media in Malaysia, noting instances of disinformation.³ The report highlighted that Chinese language media in Malaysia tends to follow China's playbook in covering sensitive issues and promoting pro-China narratives. Criticism of China is often censored, with cases of articles being taken down upon China's request.⁴ Additionally, a 2020 report by the Atlantic Council mentioned the presence of "troll farms" based in Malaysia that targeted Malaysian audiences with disinformation, particularly through social media and messaging apps.⁵

The situation raises questions about the potential for alternative scenarios in Malaysia's nation-building process. If a pan-Malaysian nationalism that transcended ethno-religious identity had been fostered, it could have diminished the incentives for Malaysian Chinese to maintain strong ties with China. Currently, these ties are reinforced by both pragmatic interests and cultural proximity. In the present climate of discrimination against minorities, China is perceived as an appealing partner for business and patronage.

For the US, Malaysia has long been an important destination for various programs, some of which have had implications for political outcomes. In 2018, after the UMNO-dominated Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition's decades-long rule came to an end, a scandal arose concerning members of the newly elected Pakatan Harapan (PH) coalition receiving training from the International Republican Institute (IRI), an organization associated with the US Republican Party. PH members, including Lim Guan Eng, the leader of the Democratic Action Party (DAP), a component of PH, denied the allegations and instead shifted the blame to BN, claiming that they had close ties with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and even US governmental institutions, suggesting that it was an attempt to sabotage the 2018 general elections.⁶ The IRI acknowledged its work in Malaysia since 2002, aiming to enhance the ability of political parties to compete in elections and adhere to citizen-centered governance practices.⁷ The IRI collaborated with the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), an organization that promotes American political interests globally by providing support to civil society organizations.⁸ However, the extent of NED and IRI influence

1 Joshua Kurlantzick, "China's Influence Tactics in Malaysia—Failure Now, Failure Forever?," Council for Foreign Relations, March 3, 2023, accessed June 28, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/chinas-influence-tactics-malaysia-failure-now-failure-forever>.

2 Tom Wright, Bradley Hope, "WSJ Investigation: China Offered to Bail Out Troubled Malaysian Fund in Return for Deals," The Wall Street Journal, January 7, 2019, accessed June 28, 2023, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/how-china-flexes-its-political-muscle-to-expand-power-overseas-11546890449>.

3 BC Han, Benjamin Loh, "Beijing Global Media Influence Report 2023," Freedom House, accessed June 28, 2023, <https://freedom-house.org/country/malaysia/beijings-global-media-influence/2022>.

4 Collins Chong Yew Keat, "Keep Malaysia's Press Free From Foreign Influence," Business Today, May 4, 2023, accessed June 28, 2023, <https://www.businesstoday.com.my/2023/05/04/keep-malysias-press-free-from-foreign-influence/>.

5 BC Han, Benjamin Loh, "Beijing Global Media Influence Report 2023."

6 "Lim: 'IRI Courses Were Also Attended By BN Member'," The New Straits Times, August 7, 2018, accessed June 28, 2023, <https://www.nst.com.my/news/politics/2018/08/398981/lim-iri-courses-were-also-attended-bn-member>.

7 "IRI Statement On Collaboration With Political Parties In Malaysia," International Republican Institute, August 6, 2018, accessed June 28, 2023, <https://www.iri.org/news/iri-statement-on-collaboration-with-political-parties-in-malaysia/>.

8 "Up To PH To Reveal Funding By US-Based NED, Says Activist," Free Malaysia Today, August 30, 2021, accessed June 28, 2023, <https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2021/08/30/reveal-funding-by-us-based-ned-suaram-tells-ph/>.

on decision-making within the government formed in 2018 was not disclosed by PH, who simply denied the allegations.¹ During a forum in July 2018, IRI President Daniel Twining expressed satisfaction with how the new Malaysian government's approach to China was beneficial to the US, stating that the IRI's long-term strategy with the Malaysian opposition had paid off.²

In 2016, a similar scandal emerged regarding leaked documents from a meeting of George Soros's Open Society Foundation (OSF), which some interpreted as interference in Malaysian politics and Soros's personal interest in the election outcome.³ However, there was only an indication of the active role played by OSF in supporting civil society organizations (CSOs), some of which were also funded by the IRI and National Democratic Institute (NDI). These organizations included the Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections (Bersih), polling organization Merdeka Center, online news portal MalaysiaKini, and others.

Apart from the US-China rivalry, there are other occasions on which the neocolonial discourse is invoked. One recent case concerns the European Union's (EU) legislation and policy aimed at phasing out palm oil used in biofuel, as it supposedly causes massive deforestation. The Malaysian palm oil lobby referred to "colonialist NGOs" smearing the image of the crop, denounced the EU policy as "crop apartheid," and called to "end the colonial crusade" against palm oil.⁴ This terminology could be explained by the idea with which Malaysia and Indonesia took up the fight with the EU – that the ban of palm oil under the pretext of environmental protection in Southeast Asia is only a means to support the EU's own rapeseed and sunflower oil export industry.⁵

Malaysia and Indonesia have joined forces in engaging with the EU, signalling yet another foreign policy consideration for Malaysia: economic wellbeing. However, while Malaysia strongly opposes supposed threats to its palm oil industry, it is unlikely to resort to actions beyond protests and complaints, as it must walk a fine line with the bloc, which is a key partner. Economic considerations can also provide a way for great power competition, with Malaysia recording China as its biggest trading partner over the past 14 years.

Conclusion

Malaysia's image on the international stage is shaped by several priorities projected through its foreign policy: the importance of regional ties for trade and security, particularly within ASEAN; the aspiration to play an active role in the global Muslim *ummah*; and the continued economic and technological development. However, it is domestic political infighting that determines which priority takes precedence.

1 Predeep Nambiar, "PKR, DAP Deny Receiving Foreign Funds," Free Malaysia Today, August 30, 2021, accessed June 28, 2023, <https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2021/08/30/pkr-dap-deny-receiving-foreign-funds/>.

2 "Republican-Linked Group: 'Long Game' With M'sian Opposition Paid Off," MalaysiaKini, August 6, 2018, accessed June 28, 2023, <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/437655>.

3 "Leaked Doc: Soros Has 'Personal Interest' In M'sian GE," MalaysiaKini, October 23, 2016, accessed June 28, 2023, <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/361091>.

4 Joe Sandler Clarke, "How Palm Oil Sparked A Diplomatic Row Between Europe And Southeast Asia," Unearthed, March 18, 2019, accessed June 28, 2023, <https://unearthed.greenpeace.org/2019/03/18/palm-oil-indonesia-malaysia-biofuels-eu/>.

5 "EU Bans Palm Oil To Protect Its Own Oil Seeds, Local Producers Say Malaysia," Astro Agro Lestari, January 26, 2009, accessed June 28, 2023, <https://www.astra-agro.co.id/en/2020/01/27/eu-bans-palm-oil-to-protect-its-own-oil-seeds-local-producers-say-malaysia/>.

Malaysia has carried the colonial legacy into the postcolonial era. Among the legacies of the colonial era are a number of outdated laws and a constitution drafted by a British-appointed commission. Additionally, the modes of governance for the multiethnic and multireligious population were established during this time. The very diversity created during the colonial period was used to effectively control Malaya's territories through the divide and rule principle, ensuring that the population did not present a united front against the colonial master. This diversity has been exploited by the postcolonial elite, preventing the process of effective nation building. The special status of the Malay majority, as stipulated in the constitution, was further solidified by the New Economic Policy (NEP) in 1971, which was introduced in response to the racial riots of 1969. Initially intended to address economic inequality, the NEP instead exacerbated divisions. The NEP did not significantly improve the situation of economic inequality because it was formulated as an assertive policy in favor of the Malay majority, which was portrayed as economically disadvantaged, rather than adopting a needs-based approach. Over time, the Malay middle class grew, not due to increased productivity and efficiency, but as a result of the patronage system. This system and the mindset behind it reached new heights during Mahathir's first term.

Political competition was closely linked with Islamization, which helped the ruling elite to contend with opposition groups represented by Islamists who advocate for greater Islamic approaches in both domestic and foreign policies.

Despite Malaysia's stated priority of exercising sovereignty in both its domestic and foreign policies, the realities of being an aspiring middle power imposed serious limitations. Since Southeast Asia has become another arena for the US-China rivalry, both great powers have engaged in efforts to influence Malaysia's policies at all levels. Thus, while Malaysia aspired to overcome all forms of dependency on foreign powers during the postcolonial period, the country finds itself in a situation where it is dominated by neocolonial masters. Attempts to re-evaluate the analysis of policies pursued by smaller states suggest a reliance on cultural peculiarities and historical details, but the constraints placed on the room for maneuver by the rivalry of the great powers still force any analysis towards brutal political realism.

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Неоколониальная политика Малайзии: особенности политического процесса

АННОТАЦИЯ

Целью настоящей работы является изучение Малайзии в контексте постколониальных исследований. Во введении приводится обзор научной литературы в области постколониальных исследований, после чего анализируются проявления постколониализма в Малайзии: дискурсы, ценности и общественные настроения. Автором были выделены основные вехи эволюции внешнеполитического курса государства и проведен сравнительный анализ его реализации в разные исторические периоды. В заключении дается оценка современных тенденций, связанных с геополитическим противостоянием Китая и США в Юго-Восточной Азии. Главная мысль автора заключается в том, что процесс деколонизации Малайзии не завершен. Политическая элита сохранила некоторые колониальные инструменты для поддержания своего господствующего положения, а позднее государство оказалось втянуто в геополитическое соперничество между США и Китаем, которые разными способами стремятся к установлению доминирования над государством. С момента обретения независимости историческое развитие Малайзии не привело к формированию консолидированной нации, поскольку на него оказывалось иностранное влияние, которое способствовало расширению пробелов в национальном сознании и способах государственного управления.

КЛЮЧЕВЫЕ СЛОВА

Исламизация, Малайзия, неоколониализм, Новая экономическая политика, постколониализм

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