

ISLAM IN FOREIGN COUNTRIES

VLADIMIR KIRICHENKO. THE SHIA COMMUNITY IN MALAYSIA // *The article was written for the bulletin "Russia and the Moslem World."*

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Abstract. The article focuses on the situation of Malaysia's Shiite community. Malaysia is a Sunni-dominated Muslim state. It is natural that against the background of sanctions against Iran and pressure from Saudi Arabia, Shiites experience some discrimination.

Malaysia is a Muslim state with a population of 30 million, with almost 60% of the population being Muslim. At the same time, 300,000 Shiites live in the country. Malaysia has two parallel systems of justice: the Sharia court system, based on Islamic law, and the civil court system.

The specific nature of the national and religious composition of the population of the country – except Muslims, Hindus, Buddhist, Christian also live here, etc. – makes the authorities to fight against the spread of radical views in the

territory of the country. At the proper time, the Islamic Revolution in Iran and bringing of Soviet troops into Afghanistan contributed to the spread of fundamentalist ideas in Malaysia. However already in 1981, Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad called the population for moderation and tolerance, trying not to let radicals come into office. At the same time, Malaysia's representatives at international forums began to criticize Israel's position in the Middle East and the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. This moved Malaysia closer to the Islamic world, but when some states tried to impose hand cutting and other sharia norms as a punishment for theft, the authorities concluded that the previous traditions in legal procedures should be continued. The Malaysian government became concerned about the 2011 wave of overthrow of ruling regimes in a number of Arab States. Malaysia differs from other Muslim countries by a sufficiently high level of economic development, which avoids manifestations of discontent and mass protests.

Later it was officially announced the ban on Islamic State activities in the country. A special agency, the Jihad Clarification Committee, was established in Kuala Lumpur to explain the population genuine nature of the Islamic State and to oppose the recruitment of young Malaysian to jihad. However, 132 persons suspected in activities of the Islamic State were detained in the country. According to Malaysian counter-intelligence, at least 45 Malaysian citizens are engaged in hostilities in Syria.

In spite of the fact that the federal constitution guarantees freedom of religion, dual governance system under which state Islamic courts regulate religious affairs drastically restrict freedom of religion of both non-Muslims and Muslim minorities. The situation is also complicated by the fact that Shiism in Malaysia is prohibited and declared a "deviation from Islam."

The legislative basis for government action against Shiites can be found in the Internal Security Act of 1960. It provided for a 60-day period of detention in custody that could be extended to

two years if the accused person acted “undermining security of Malaysia.”

The official ban on Shiism in Malaysia was adopted in 1996 by the National Council of Fatwas. The council is subordinate to the government Department of Islamic Development, so its regulations are de facto laws. 10 of 14 Malaysia’s states initially agreed to perform the fatwa. The eleventh state, Kedah, introduced the fatwa in 2013 on insistence of the Sultan. It was announced that Muslims in Malaysia were allowed to follow Sunni, and that the propaganda of Shiism in the press and mass media was effectively prohibited.

According to the fatwa, Malaysian government officials subject Shiites to discrimination. In Malaysia, the authorities often severely interfere with Shiite religious gatherings. Shiites are not allowed to keep religious books in their houses. After the publication of anti-Shia fatwa, the United Malay National Organization, the largest political party in Malaysia’s parliament, announced that it would try to advance a law according to which the only direction of Islam recognized by the constitution should be Sunnism.

Malaysia’s mass media launch a campaign against Shiism in the country. Religious programs on television portray Shiites as a minority whose representatives are supposedly “followers of bloodshed and militancy.” Meanwhile, some Sunni religious figures criticized this attitude towards Shiites and called for Muslim unity, but they couldn’t stop discrimination against Shiites.

Shiites are often arrested and raided. In December 2010, more than 200 Shiites, including Iranians, Indonesian and Pakistani, were detained and accused of breach of Islamic laws. In early August 2013, two Shiites were arrested, then in September of the same year other six Shiites were also arrested. At the same time, the head of law enforcement agencies of the Islamic religious administration of Perak state Ahmad Nizam Amiruddin said that Shiites should be eliminated. In March 2014,

Perak authorities arrested more than 100 Shiites. The arrests were carried out at a time when Shiites were celebrating the birthday of Zeinab – the daughter of Ali, the fourth guided calif and granddaughter of Prophet Muhammad.

In 2019, Malaysian police detained dozens of Shia Muslims during the Ashura celebration in Selangor State. All detainees were soon released, but fears remained that they could face litigations in religious courts.

Arrests of Shiites were also carried out in Penang. At the same time, Penang's mufti, Van Salim Van Mohd Nur, stated that Shiites should be given the freedom to manifest their religious beliefs. The religious leader noted that Shia Muslims should conduct their rituals in concealed form, as holding them in the street among predominantly Sunni Muslims could undermine Muslim unity.

Despite external interreligious and inter-ethnic harmony, observers note that in the political sphere there is an increasing divergence between fundamentalists associated with Saudi Arabia and more moderate Muslims.

Other minorities – ethnic and religious ones – also suffer some disadvantage from the authorities. Associations of Chinese and Indians repeatedly accused the Government of undemocratic cultural policies. Marriages between Muslims and non-Muslims are considered illegal. Between 2006 and 2007, several Hindu temples in different parts of the country were demolished by order of government, that lead to discontent in Hindu population.

Iran and Malaysia

Despite negative attitudes towards Shiites in Malaysia, Iran, where Shiites make up the majority of the population, and Malaysia maintain rather good relations. Diplomatic relations between the states were established in 1984. In the 1980s and 1990s, many Malays and Indonesian, mostly Sunni, who

converted to Shiism, studied in the Shiite theological centers of Kum, Iran.

Both states are jointly involved in the construction of a number of large-scale industrial projects, many of which are related to energy. In December 2007, the countries signed an agreement worth \$6 billion. For the Development of Iran's Naval Gas Fields. In April 2009, the National Iranian Oil Engineering and Construction Company and the Malaysian SKSD created a joint company to build an oil refinery in Kadh, Malaysia. In June 2009, the Entrepreneurs Council of Iran and Malaysia was established in Kuala Lumpur. At the same time, Seyed Nureddin Shahnazizade, Iran's deputy oil minister met Malaysia's Datuk Mustapa Mohamed, the minister of international trade and industry, to discuss strengthening of relations in energy development.

Malaysia participated in the Iranian Gas Forum on September 26-27, 2009, together with Germany, Great Britain, Japan, the Netherlands and South Korea. In February 2010, the head of the Offshore Oil Company of Iran, Mahmoud Zirakkianzade, announced that Iran had reached an agreement with a Malaysian company to help develop oil fields. Although energy relations between two countries turned to be stable, fear of US sanctions made Malaysian oil company Petronas decide to suspend petrol supply to Iran. The decision came into operation in March 2010. Despite Petronas actions, in April 2010 Noharuddin Nordin, the head of the Malaysian External Trade Development Corporation (MATRADE), claimed that anti-Iranian sanctions had little impact on Malaysia-Iran trade relations.

In May 2010, Iranian Finance and Economy Minister Seyed-Shamseddin Hoseini and Malaysia's second Finance Minister Ahmad Husni Hanadzlah met to discuss ways to expand economic cooperation. During the conversation, Hosseini noted that Iran's energy and banking sectors are open for Malaysian investment.

The active cooperation between Malaysia and Iran in a number of economic sectors nevertheless hasn't affected the Shia situation in Malaysia. The authorities scrupulously monitored all attempts to promulgate Shiism. For example, in 2013, after several Shiites, including an Iranian citizen, were arrested and accused of violating fatwa prohibiting Shiism propaganda, this incident led to the boycott of Malaysian goods by a group of Iranian trading firms. Although the boycott was not formally sanctioned by the Iranian government, the campaign temporarily damaged bilateral relations. For their part, Malaysian officials have made efforts to re-establish relations and tried to calm the concerns of their Iranian counterparts. Despite some tensions between Iran and Malaysia, goods exchanges between these two countries were 532 million US dollars in 2015, Iran, in its turn, is extremely interested in continuation of economic cooperation.

In 2019, Malaysian ambassador in Iran Dato Rustam bin Yahaya stated that there was very ground for Malaysia to invest in various industrial enterprises in the Iranian province of Alborz (north-west of Tehran). This province, including 3,6 thousand production and industrial factories, about 68 thousand fertile gardens and agricultural land, in addition to large research and scientific centers, is one of the most productive and scientific centers in Iran. Over the past four years, more than 200 foreign delegations visited the Iranian province to analyze prospects for economic and trade cooperation.

On April 30, 2019 it transpired that Malaysia and Iran intend to establish cooperation in the field of security and defense. The issue was discussed at a bilateral meeting between Malaysia's Defense Minister Mohamad Sabu and Iran's Defense and Logistics Minister brigadier Amir Khatami. The meeting took place during the working visit of the Malaysian Prime Minister to Tehran (26 April - 1 May 2019). He was accompanied by the Malaysian ambassador in Iran, Datuk Rustam Yahaya, and several senior officials of the Ministry of Defense and the Malaysian Armed Forces.

Malaysia and Saudi Arabia

Diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and Malaysia were established in early 1960. Malaysia and Saudi Arabia cooperate closely in the economic sphere. Bilateral trade increased from \$260 million in 1990 to \$3,66 billion in 2012, Saudi Arabia became one of Malaysia's largest partners. Since 1990, Saudi Arabia's investment in Malaysian economy reached tremendous 2,6 billion Malaysian ringgits. The countries successfully cooperate in banking sector: in 2006 Malaysia launched Al-Rajhi Bank, the world's largest Islamic bank and one of the largest corporated enterprise in the Kingdom. There were opened many of its branches throughout Malaysia. Malaysia also successfully attracts Saudi tourists, more than 20,000 tourists from the kingdom come to the country every year since 2001. Malaysian companies are actively looking for opportunities to do business in Saudi Arabia. They have, for example, taken part in major development projects, including an independent water and electricity supply project in Shuaib, the construction of Al Faisal University in Riyadh, and King Abdullah University of Science and Technology in Tuwal. Malaysian firms were involved in the reconstruction of the Jamarat Bridge and adjacent areas in Mina, and in the construction of the Kingdom Tower in Riyadh.

However, close relations with Saudi Arabia do not prevent Malaysian religious leaders from confronting the impact of Wahhabism in the country. Wahhabism, unlike Shiism, is not prohibited in Malaysia. Nevertheless, Malaysian religious authorities tended to minimize its influence. Thus, in 2015, the National Council of Fatwas stated that Wahhabism have no place in Malaysia, because its followers like to call other Muslims recreants just because they don't adhere to Wahhabism teachings.

"They consider every practice that Prophet Mohammed did not commit as a *bida* ("unnecessary innovation" – V. K.), and a deviation from Islam," said Dr. Tan Shri Abdul Shukor Husin, chairman of the National Council of Fatwa. He also stated that

each state should restrict Wahhabis teachings through fatwas or religious decrees, and admitted that Malaysia's outlook of Wahhabism should not influence the bilateral relations between Malaysia and Saudi Arabia.

Earlier, the mufti of Negri-Sembilan state Datuk Mohd Yousof Ahmad announced that the Wahhabis movement was declared haram (prohibited) in the state because it contradicts Sunni teachings.

In fact, Malaysia's religious establishment considers Wahhabism no less threat to the country's security than Shiism. This does not prevent Saudi Arabia from providing financial support to religious structures in Malaysia. This support takes various forms, including funding religious and educational institutions; distribution of the Quran texts and religious literature; granting scholarships to Malaysians to study in Saudi Arabia. In 2006, Riyadh founded Al-Madina International University in Malaysia. In December 2016, the authorities arrested two foreign students studying at Al-Madina University under suspicion of any ties with ISIL. The incident fueled concern, especially among non-Muslims in Malaysia.

However, it is important to note that the establishment of Al-Madina University is a part of the longstanding and extensive social and cultural cooperation between Malaysia and Saudi Arabia in the field of education. The university was established fully compliant with the rules and norms established by the Ministry of Higher Education. Like all other institutions of higher education, the university has been tested by the Malaysian Qualifications Agency to ensure that the level and its educational program content go along with Malaysia's national education policy.

The Malaysian authorities concern about the entry of Wahhabism into the country is not baseless. It should be noted that several religious movements in Malaysia may be considered to be influenced by Wahhabism: Ahl as- Sunna (Arab. "Sunna people") of Perlis, Sunni Johor Movement, Orang Sunna (Malay.

“Sunna people”) from Pahang and so on. These movements do not usually identify themselves as any of the four Islamic (Sunni) law schools. At the same time, their leaders disagree that they are called “Wahhabites.” However there are some similarities between these movements and Wahhabism, including their drive to incorporation of elements of the notion “salafiyi” into their daily lives. It is also worth noting the desire of these movements to eradicate all that they consider superstitions (hurafat) and innovations (bida), especially in the sphere of worship (ibadat), for which Shiites are often blamed. Nevertheless, in Iranian media there is often information about money flows from Saudi Arabia aimed at spreading Wahhabite ideology.

Relations among Malaysia the U.S. and Russia

U.S. diplomatic relations with Malaysia were established on August 31, 1957, when the United States upgraded the status of Malaysia's Consulate General in the United States to embassy status.

In 2019, the Ministry of International Trade and Industry of Malaysia stated that bilateral trade with the United States increased by 1,2% in 2018 to 155,76 billion Malaysian ringgits, representing 8,3% of Malaysia's overall volume of trade this year. Similarly, exports to the US increased by 2,4% to 90,81 billion Malaysian ringgits, reaching the highest level marked since 2008.

In December 2018, for a total 809 manufacturing projects were carried out in Malaysia with the participation of the United States with a total investment of 74 billion Malaysian ringgits. These projects created 204,536 workspaces. Meanwhile, in the first half of 2019, the volume of American investments in the Malaysian manufacturing sector amounted to 11,7 billion Malaysian ringgits.

The USSR established diplomatic relations with Malaysia on April 3, 1967. In November 1967, a Soviet trade office was founded in the country. In 1972, the countries signed the

Agreement on Economic and Technological Cooperation. The Embassy of the USSR in Kuala Lumpur was opened in April 1968, and the Embassy of Malaysia in Moscow was opened in November of that year. Traditionally, trade and economic relations between Malaysia and the Russian Federation are regulated by the economic cooperation agreement signed in 2000.

In 2013, on the initiative of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of the Russian Federation, the Business Council for Cooperation with Malaysia was established. The goals of the Council include facilitating information exchange between the business circles of Russia and Malaysia, promoting the interests of Russian business in Malaysia and Malaysian business in Russia, organizing cooperative activities, facilitating bilateral trade, etc. As at December 2017, volume of trade between Malaysia and Russia amounted to 2,2 billion U.S. dollars 55% of which were oil and gas-related goods, 20% were fertilizers, the rest were consumer goods, and electronic components. In the first 8 months of 2018, the turnover between both countries increased significantly - by more than 60%.

Russia and Malaysia cooperate in the scientific, technical and military-technical spheres. The Russian Federation regularly participates in exhibitions of marine and aviation equipment held in Malaysia. Representatives of the Ministry of Defense of Malaysia, in turn, take part in the international Moscow Aerospace Salon MAX.

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Summarizing, Malaysia's Shiites are short of religious freedoms and are often attacked by the authorities. We can hope that the situation will change for the better, and Malaysia's leadership will be able to minimize the influence of radical groups and preserve Malaysia's reputation as a country of "moderate Islam."

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