

Malaysia Minorities Fear Islamization in Allah Row

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

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KUALA LUMPUR, Malaysia (AP) -- A dispute over the use of the word "Allah" by Christians in Malaysia is the latest sign of growing hard-line Islamic influence in what has been a relatively moderate Muslim-majority country.

The dispute has spawned attacks on 10 churches and has hardened a long-standing sense of alienation among the non-Muslim minority, threatening 40 years of ethnic peace and stability that underpins Malaysia's economic success.

Tensions rose further Thursday after lawyers representing Christians in their legal fight for the right to use "Allah" discovered their office had been ransacked and a laptop was missing. Also Thursday, a church in the southern state of Johor was found to have been vandalized with red paint.

"We are continually treated as second-class citizens," said Benjamin Poh, a 47-year-old executive who is ethnic Chinese. He added that he is saving money so his son, now 10, can attend university overseas to escape discrimination at home.

The church attacks over the past week -- most were firebombed -- followed a Dec. 31 court decision overturning a government order that forbade a Catholic newspaper from using the word "Allah" as a translation for God in its Malay-language edition.

The opposition parties have been quick to blame the government for inflaming tensions with policies that pander to Muslims to win votes.

"Although the fire-bombing of churches alarmed Malaysians, it underscored the magnitude of the real problem," said Charles Santiago, an opposition member of Parliament.

"It showed that after 52 years of living together, nation building and national unity is in tatters. The church attacks shattered notions of Malaysia as a model secular Muslim nation in the eyes of the international community."

Prime Minister Najib Razak, who inherited the friction that grew largely during his predecessor's 2003-2009 tenure, strongly condemned the church attacks and vowed to protect the minorities.

"As a multiracial community we must practice respect for one another ... it cannot come under threat from anybody," he said.

A separate statement by his office said, "Malaysians of all faiths are angered by these incidents and stand together in solidarity. These are criminal acts committed by individuals and are not representative of Malaysia."

A nation of 28 million people in Southeast Asia, Malaysia is a multicultural mix. About 60 percent of the population is Malay, who are required to be Muslim by the Constitution. Another 25 percent are ethnic Chinese, mostly Buddhist, and about 8 percent are Indians, who are mostly Hindu.

Most of the Christians are indigenous people living on Borneo, a remote island about 3 hours by flight from Kuala Lumpur. While the "Allah" debate has puzzled and upset them -- they have been using the word for decades -- they have been largely watching the controversy in mainland Malaysia from afar.

The nation's current policies on race stem from violent riots in May 1969 in which Malays attacked the generally more prosperous Chinese. The government responded in part with an affirmative action program for Malays in jobs, housing and other areas. There are exclusive schools and colleges for Malays, while minorities fight for limited university places under the program.

While some minorities grumbled about the policies -- and sent their children overseas to study and work -- they generally accepted the preferences for Malays.

In the last three years, cracks have begun appearing in this carefully nurtured harmony.

While Malaysia remains much more moderate than such conservative Muslim societies such as Saudi Arabia, the church controversy is one of many religious disputes that have reinforced the feeling that Malaysia is slowly coming under the influence of radical Islam.

Take the examples of last year alone:

-- Dozens of Muslims paraded with the bloodied head of a cow, a sacred animal in Hinduism, to protest the proposed relocation of a Hindu temple in their neighborhood;

-- An Islamic court sentenced a Muslim woman to caning for drinking beer;

-- on [New Year's Eve](#), Islamic morality police arrested dozens of unmarried couples on suspicion of engaging in sexual activities.

The conflicts are often cast as a battle between Malays and non-Malays, blurring the lines between race and religion.

Since taking office in April 2009, Najib has implemented several reforms to increase opportunities for minorities in education and other areas. But decades of built-up resentment has been hard to erase.

The frustrations have been partly responsible for migrations. About 140,000 Malaysians took up residence in other countries in 2007, though it's unclear how many were non-Malays.

Shae Yew, a 20-year-old ethnic Chinese studying in Britain, said he has no intention of returning to Malaysia "unless I have no other options."

"I ... hated the policies which protected certain races and excluded the others. Over here, at least everyone is equal," he said.

The Constitution guarantees freedom of religion but permission is rarely given for building new churches or temples. Many ethnic Indians have complained in recent years of demolition of Hindu temples on sites declared illegal by authorities. Most Malay women have begun wearing head scarves, not part of their traditional attire.

Protests by minorities are declared illegal and demonstrators arrested swiftly, as in November 2007 when tens of thousands of Indians took to the streets to demand racial equality.

Though demonstrations last week by Muslim groups over the "Allah" controversy were declared illegal, the government said it could not stop popular protests held inside mosques. As a result, fiery speeches were delivered from within mosque compounds.

"Like it or not, Islam is the official religion and we are numbed to the special treatment given to the Malays," said Chong, a 37-year-old ethnic Chinese Christian, who would only give her surname. "But we are disappointed with the government's mild reaction to the church attacks. It's as if they are protecting the Malays in this issue."

Analysts lay part of the blame for the Islamization on the United Malays National Organization, the political party that heads the coalition that has ruled since 1957.

Ooi Kee Beng of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore said it appears the government played up the "Allah" ban to appeal to Malay voters.

"It is retrogressive and a setback to nation-building," he said. "It's not a question of religion. It's a political game ... a dangerous game."

http://www.nytimes.com/aponline/2010/01/14/world/AP-AS-Malaysia-Feuding-Over-Allah.html?_r=1&pagewanted=all