

Najib to meet pope, eyes ties with Vatican
Malaysiakini.com
July 5, 2011

Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak is due to meet Pope Benedict XVI in mid-July as Malaysia embarks on a plan to establish diplomatic relations with the Vatican, a top official said today.

“The meeting with Pope Benedict XVI is set for July 18. The meeting with the pope is to show that Malaysia respects all religions,” the official told AFP on condition of anonymity.

About nine percent of Malaysia's 28 million people are Christian, including 850,000 Catholics. The majority community of Malays are Muslim.

The official said Najib would be accompanied by a delegation of senior ministers and Catholic officials led by Kuala Lumpur's Archbishop Murphy Pakiam.

Najib was expected to meet the pope in the Vatican City after he wraps up a visit to London, the official said.

Last month Najib met with Malaysian church leaders in a bid to ease religious tensions stirred by a report that alleged Christians wanted to replace Islam as the official religion.

The row is one of a string of religious disputes in recent years that have raised fears among minorities that the country is being “Islamised” and that their rights are being eroded.

Religion and language are sensitive issues in multi-racial Malaysia, which was hit by deadly race riots in 1969.

According to another government official, previously Malaysia did not see a need to establish ties with the Vatican and there were political concerns such a move would be criticised by the opposition Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party.

Neighbouring Indonesia and other mainly Muslim countries including Pakistan have decades-long diplomatic ties with the Vatican.

The planned meeting with the pope comes as Najib ponders calling a snap election in the next few months.

The ruling Barisan Nasional coalition is struggling to regain support from ethnic Chinese and Indian minorities who swung towards the opposition in landmark 2008 general elections.

Last year there was a spate of attacks on churches after the High Court decided to lift a government ban on non-Muslims using “Allah” as a translation for “God”.

The government has strongly criticised the attacks, but has been accused of stoking Malay nationalism so as to protect its voter base after the opposition gains.

In 2002 former prime minister Mahathir Mohamad met Pope John Paul II for talks on Christian-Muslim relations at the Vatican.

- AFP