

Malaysia keeps ethnic preferences official, and tensions rise

By Thomas Fuller

Indonesia and Malaysia have much in common: language; a border that slices across Borneo; overlapping ethnic groups. But the two countries are moving in opposite directions on the fundamental question of what it means to be a "native."

With a new citizenship law passed this year, Indonesia has redefined "indigenous" to include its ethnic Chinese population — a radical shift from centuries of policies, both during colonial times and after independence in the 1940s, that distinguished between natives and Indonesia's Chinese, Indians and Arabs.

Malaysia, meanwhile, is sticking to its longstanding policy that Malay Muslims, the largest ethnic group in the country, are "bumiputras," or sons of the soil, who have special rights above and beyond those of the country's Chinese and Indian minorities.

Maintaining this controversial policy has led to what one commentator calls a retribalization of Malaysian politics, with rising assertiveness on the part of the country's Malay Muslims — who constitute about 65 percent of the population — and a push back by the Chinese and Indians, who make up about 26 percent and 8 percent, respectively.

The Malaysian prime minister, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, warned last week that race relations had become "brittle."

"We must eliminate all negative feelings toward each other," he was quoted in the Star newspaper as saying.

Both Indonesia and Malaysia have suffered race riots in recent decades. Indonesia's were much bloodier and more far-flung. Yet today, ethnic tensions are more likely to make headlines in Malaysia than Indonesia.

Malaysia's Chinese community was angered by the recent demolition of a

Taoist temple in Penang. Both Muslims and non-Muslims are upset about a series of disputes over whether Shariah or secular law should take precedence.

And a nationally televised meeting of the Malay governing party last month shocked many Malaysians for its communalism, including comments by one delegate who said the party was willing to "risk lives and bathe in blood in defense of race and religion." He was subsequently reprimanded, but only after an outcry from Chinese and Indians.

Early in November, the chief minister of the southern state of Johor, Ghani Othman, went as far as to question whether a Malaysian nation actually existed, describing it as a "rojak," or mish-mash of races, that was diluting the Malay identity.

The government's apparently indefinite extension of an affirmative action program for the Malays, a policy that has been in place since 1971, has stirred impatience among the country's

Chinese and Indians. The policy, backed by a special clause in the Constitution guaranteeing preferential treatment for Malays, imposes a 30-percent bumiputra equity quota for publicly listed companies and gives bumiputras discounts on such things as houses and cars.

Terence Gomez, a Malaysian academic who has written widely about Malaysian politics and the ethnic Chinese, and who is now a research coordinator at the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development in Geneva, says the notion that one race should have supremacy is an anachronism in a country where ethnic identities are becoming less important in everyday life.

"The idea of being Malay or being Chinese or Indian is not something that is part of their daily thinking or discourse," Gomez said. The political elite, he said, "seems to be caught in a time warp."

Paradoxically, some in Malaysia, which has long been wealthier and more politically stable, are looking admiringly at developments in Indonesia.

Azly Rahman, a Malay commentator on the widely read Web site Malay-siakini, said poor Indians and Chinese are neglected under the current system.

"A new bumiputra should be created," he said. "Being a Malaysian means forgetting about the status of our fathers. We need affirmative action for all races."

The government says the affirmative action program, which was promulgated after race riots in 1969, is still needed to narrow the overall income gap between the Chinese and Malays, the original justification for the policy. But determining which race has the highest ownership levels in the country is also now a point of contention, involving disputes over how assets should be calculated.