

Worrying tensions in Malaysia

11T-16/11/2006

Religious and ethnic strife prompts warning of crackdown

By Thomas Fuller

Malaysia's prime minister, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, said Wednesday that frayed relations between the country's religious and racial groups had reached a "worrying" level and warned that the government would not hesitate to crack down to preserve peace between them.

"Freedom has its limits," Abdullah said in a nationally televised speech to his party that serves as an annual state of the union address for the country. "I would like to warn those who abuse this freedom that I will not for a moment hesitate to use the law against them."

Abdullah's threats were a marked shift in tone for a prime minister who previously portrayed himself as more conciliatory and compassionate than his predecessor, Mahathir bin Mohamad.

At a time of both political and ethnic tensions, a number of recent incidents and court cases have soured relations between Malay Muslims and the rest of the country's 25 million people: Christians, Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs and others.

The head of a Christian evangelical group said in an interview Wednesday that tensions between communities were higher than at any time in recent decades.

"I think generally there is a feeling by Muslims of being under siege by Western civilization as well as people of other faiths — they feel that they are being cornered," said the Christian leader, Wong Kim Kong, secretary general of the National Evangelical Christian Fellowship in Malaysia.

"Political tension, religious tension and racial tension have culminated at the same time."

With such a diverse population

Malaysia has long been seen as a barometer of racial relations in multi-ethnic Southeast Asia. One particularly contentious case involves an appeal to Malaysia's highest court by a Malay Muslim woman, Lina Joy, who converted to Christianity but has been banned from officially changing her religion on her identity card.

But the broader context of Abdullah's warning is economic and political, analysts say. The Malay Muslim majority is under pressure to scale back economic privileges they enjoy under an affirmative action program introduced more than three decades ago to dilute Chinese control over the economy.

Malaysians are locked in a divisive debate over the fate of the program following a recent report that said Malays had surpassed their ownership

MALAYSIA, Continued on Page 8

Malaysia issues warning: Freedom 'has its limits'

MALAYSIA, From Page 1

target of 30 percent of companies in the country. On Wednesday, Abdullah said the report was "grossly incorrect" and sought to end the discussion by warning that failure to trust the government's calculations, which show much lower ownership levels, would be the "same as accusing the government of lying."

Opposition leaders say Abdullah is using national security as a pretext to quash debate on the issue.

"More and more issues are being categorized as sensitive and now there's this threat of an iron fist," Lim Kit Siang, the leader of the opposition, in an interview. "There should be room for rational discussions."

Lim also accused members of Abdullah's party, the United Malays National Organization, of hypocrisy on the question of race relations.

"They are telling people not to play the race card while they are playing it to the hilt," Lim said.

Members of Abdullah's party have been particularly strident and explicit in their criticism of Chinese and Indian parties, with whom they share a coalition, at the party's general assembly, which is being held this week.

One party member, Ramli Simbok, was quoted in the local press as having said, "When we, the Malays, are weak, the Chinese will take advantage."

Another party member, Azimi Daim,

warned Chinese and Indians to stop questioning the special rights of Malays.

"When tension rises, the blood of Malay warriors will run in our veins," Azimi said.

The prime minister has been under attack from Mahathir, his predecessor, over many issues ranging from management of the economy to corruption and nepotism within government.

Even though Mahathir was not present — he suffered a minor heart attack last week and is resting on doctor's orders — analysts said his presence could be detected in Abdullah's often defensive tone.

"Internally they are being assaulted by their former president. This has weakened the party," said Hishamuddin Rais, a political columnist for several Web sites. Mahathir was party president and prime minister from 1981 until 2003, when Abdullah succeeded him.

Abdullah's party "in a time of internal crisis is always looking out for foreign enemies," Hishamuddin said.

In his speech Abdullah responded to much of Mahathir's recent criticism.

He said he was aware that economic sentiment was soft but said reining in government spending had been necessary to reduce the budget deficit from 5.3 percent of gross domestic product in 2003 to 3.5 percent today.

"We are now in a better position to spend," he said.

The government will build more schools in rural areas, he said, and will focus on strengthening its reputation as a center for Islamic finance and halal food production.

In response to accusations that Abdullah had lowered the country's profile compared to Mahathir, whose acerbic often anti-Western comments kept the country in the news, Abdullah said he preferred "artful diplomacy."

International Herald Tribune