

Aussie PM hits new roadblock in 'Malaysia Solution'

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CANBERRA, Sept 19 — Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard's controversial plan to send asylum seekers to Malaysia hit a new hurdle today when conservative opponents said they would not back her changes to immigration laws in parliament.

In a fresh blow to Gillard's troubled one-seat government, which is struggling in opinion polls, opposition leader Tony Abbott said a compromise offered by Gillard to win his support after the high court blocked the Malaysia pact was inferior in its human rights safeguards.

"The proposals the government put to us last Friday amounted to offshore dumping, not offshore processing," Abbott told reporters, pushing Gillard's Labor into a corner as it tries to turn around growing public perceptions of incompetence.

Gillard, who has been fending off speculation about her leadership after the high court ruling last month left her immigration policy in disarray, said the government would change migration laws to circumvent the court's objections.

But Abbott said he would instead unveil alternative amendments that would bar any pact with Malaysia, as it has not signed UN refugee conventions.

"The Australian people are entitled to conclude that this is political hypocrisy. He doesn't want a deal, because it's not in his own political interests," Immigration Minister Chris Bowen said.

Australia, a nation of about 23 million people, receives up to a few thousand asylum-seekers by boat each year, stirring intense political debate over border security.

Under the deal informally called the "Malaysia solution", Australia plans to send 800 asylum seekers to Malaysia where their refugee claims would be assessed in return for accepting 4,000 refugees from Malaysia.

The arrangement was designed to deter people smugglers who traffic people on leaky fishing boats on an often dangerous journey from Indonesia, as those arriving by boat would have no guarantee of eventually settling in Australia.

Gillard's previous plan, for an offshore processing centre in East Timor, was abandoned when Dili refused to take part.

The high court declared on August 31 the deal was invalid, because Canberra could not ensure protection for asylum seekers sent to Malaysia.

The plan to change the migration laws faces a difficult passage through parliament, and would need support from Abbott's conservatives, who instead want a detention centre on the tiny Pacific island nation of Nauru.

Nauru is near impossible for Gillard to adopt, as Labor was highly critical of its use as an asylum detention centre under Australia's former conservative government and acceptance

by Gillard would be a politically fatal turnaround.

The move by Gillard to revive the policy comes as polls show her approval rating is the lowest for a prime minister in 17 years and that Labor would be swept from office if an election were held now. The next election is due in 2013. — Reuters

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