

Malaysia trading 4,000 non-Muslims for 800 Muslims in asylum swap, says top Aussie paper
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By Shannon Teoh

KUALA LUMPUR, Aug 22 — The refugee swap deal with Australia is one of several immigration initiatives by Malaysia that will benefit the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN), says Australia's top-selling broadsheet.

Chris Kenny, a senior journalist with The Australian, wrote in his column yesterday that as the majority of Muslims support the Umno-led coalition, the deal, which will see 800 Muslims who arrive by boat in Australia being swapped for 4,000 non-Muslim Burmese, plays into "Malaysia's explosive ethnic-religious divide."

"In the ethno-religious politics of Malaysia, this is seen as a swap of 4,000 non-Muslims for 800 Muslims; as squeamish as we may feel about describing the equation in those terms, it is clearly one way in which the deal supports the interests of the ruling Muslim majority," he wrote.

Most of the arrivals to Australia, including an initial batch of 54 whose fate is being decided by its High Court, are Muslims from Afghanistan and Pakistan via Indonesia and have "the unspoken advantage (of) their Islamic faith" which will "bestow on them social welfare benefits and financial advantages," wrote Kenny.

With the Najib administration reiterating its commitment to the "Bumiputera Agenda" — affirmative action for the indigenous community and Muslim Malays — last weekend while the federal opposition pushes for a needs-based welfare system, the move will likely play to BN's advantage.

Kenny also noted that critics of Datuk Seri Najib Razak's government see the current amnesty on illegal immigrants — its deadline was recently lifted indefinitely — "as a way of fast-tracking more Muslims on to government benefits and the electoral rolls, with the asylum-seekers from Australia expected to join that preferential queue."

"The refugee swap plays directly into Malaysia's explosive ethnic-religious divide, a fracture that continues to define the federation's politics and deliver injustice to the country's non-Muslim population," he wrote.

"In recent weeks, protests for cleaner and more equal democracy — in part, code for an end to Muslim preference — have been met by government crackdowns and arrests," Kenny wrote, referring to tens of thousands who flooded the capital in the July 9 Bersih rally but were dispersed by water cannons and tear gas as police arrested nearly 1,700.

The federal opposition has most recently charged BN of giving at least 1,600 foreigners citizenships and the right to vote, questioning further the Home Ministry's motives for its current amnesty programmes.

Although Najib announced a parliamentary select committee to improve electoral practices last week, Home Minister Datuk Seri Hishammudin Hussein has said that he believes

these allegations to be "baseless."

But the opposition has claimed that the parliamentary panel is just a political ploy ahead of a general election that must be called by early 2013.

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