

Religious issues hurting Najib's chances

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KUALA LUMPUR, Sept 11 — A raid on a church by Muslim authorities has raised religious tension in Malaysia and could cost Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak votes in an election set for 2013 but which many expect to come much earlier.

The raid has sparked an angry verbal battle between Christians and the majority Muslims, forcing Najib to seek what may be an elusive peace between the ethnic Malays and minorities, both of which believe the government isn't doing enough to safeguard their rights.

Conservative Muslims want the government to crack down on what they say is growing boldness by Christians to try to convert Muslims, which is an offence in Malaysia, while ethnic minorities worry their rights are being eroded.

Analysts say Najib (picture) is caught in a bind and will have to tread extremely carefully to avoid being seen as favouring either side in his efforts to mediate.

"Najib is caught between wanting to secure a conservative Malay-Muslim electorate and a political reality where he is losing ground among minorities who are more mobilised and politically aware," said Bridget Welsh, a Malaysia specialist at Singapore Management University.

The next general election is not due until 2013 but there is increasing speculation that it could take place by early 2012.

Analysts see little chance of the ruling National Front coalition losing the next general election but caution that Najib needs to win a convincing two-thirds majority if he wants to avoid a revolt within his Umno party, long accustomed to majorities by that margin.

Race and religion have always been touchy subjects in a country split between ethnic Malays, Chinese and Indians but analysts say the latest quarrel is coming at a delicate time for Najib, whose popularity has been sliding since May 2010.

"The religious discord will cause the ruling coalition to lose some Chinese majority seats while concerns over inflation may allow the opposition to hang on to the rest of their urban and suburban seats," said Ibrahim Suffian, director of the independent opinion polling outfit Merdeka Center.

"All this will be on the back of a much strengthened and better-resourced opposition. So in short, it's not going to be easy for Najib."

Islamic enforcement officers raided a Methodist church near the capital last month on suspicion that a meeting was being held to evangelise Muslims. The meeting's organisers, a non-governmental organisation, denied the allegations and said the gathering was a charity affair. The authorities are still investigating the matter.

Damned if I do, damned if I don't

Traditionally, Malaysian leaders have trod a careful line in dealing with religious issues after violent race riots in 1969 redefined the Southeast Asian country's ethnic and economic landscape.

Still, race and religion are often the strongest tools for politicians to win support on pledges to distribute economic opportunities along ethnic lines.

Ethnic Malays, who are by birth Muslims in Malaysia, make up about 60 percent of the population of 28 million. Ethnic Chinese and Indians, many of whom are Buddhist, Christian and Hindu, account for most of the rest.

Last month's church raid is the latest in a series of rows between the Malays and the minority Chinese and Indians.

In recent years, a spate of church bombings, the government's seizure of a shipment of bibles, a legal battle by Catholics to use the word "Allah" and complaints of marginalisation by Indians have cast a cloud over the government's attempts to build racial harmony.

Racial unity is a cornerstone of Najib's plans but many Malaysians have derided his efforts to create a "1 Malaysia" that is not drawn along racial lines. Recently, Najib also extended an olive branch to unhappy Christians by establishing official ties with the Vatican but the gesture has been largely dismissed as no more than a symbolic measure.

"In recent times, we have witnessed an increase in incidents where Christians have been singled out and targeted with unjustified accusations and prejudice," the Christian Federation of Malaysia, which represents 90 per cent of churches in the country, said in a statement.

A survey last month by the Merdeka Center polling outfit found the percentage of respondents agreeing that Malaysians of differing ethnic groups were growing closer to each other had fallen by nearly half to 36 percent compared to 64 percent in 2006. — Reuters

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