

To Umno hawks and allies, religion a trump card for party's survival
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KUALA LUMPUR, Feb 7 — Fearing a backlash over austerity measures, Umno hardliners and their religious cohorts are using faith as a “wedge issue” to shore up crucial voter support for the party among Malaysia's Malay-Muslim majority, the *Financial Times* (FT) reported.

Though Malaysia's economic prowess may hinge on Datuk Seri Najib Razak's continued leadership as prime minister, the British newspaper observed that right-wing elements within the country's biggest political party concerned with Umno's future are wielding piety as a weapon to offset the surge of unhappiness among the lower-income group after Putrajaya shaved subsidies that have sent living costs spiralling upwards in the last few months.

“My sense is that there is some kind of confluence of interest between those who are religious conservatives and right-wing elements in the political establishment to use religion to drive the Muslims who are in the middle towards Umno over perceived threats to Malays and Muslims,” the newspaper quoted Ibrahim Suffian, head of independent pollster Merdeka Center, as saying in its report on Wednesday.

Religious tensions in Southeast Asia's third-largest economy between its dominant Muslim population and minorities have been high over the last five years due to a court battle initiated by the local Catholic Church for the right to publish the Arabic word for God, “Allah”, in its weekly paper.

It spilled over last month, resulting in Molotov cocktails being thrown into a Catholic church compound in George Town, Penang — bringing with it reminders of violent assaults against houses of worship nationwide in 2010.

Though Najib has mooted a “national reconciliation” in the aftermath of divisive national elections last year that bled the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition of bigger voter support, he has been sparse on its details, the FT reported.

The British newspaper also reported that Najib has been tied up with his economic reform to lower sovereign debt now that earned praise from the International Monetary Fund but drew widespread anger at home among Malaysians who have suddenly been cut off from decades of food and fuel subsidies.

The broadsheet also observed that Najib may face greater challenges from outside his party, as his political archrival, Opposition Leader Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim has announced his contest in the March 23 Kajang by-election to pave the way for his captaincy in the Selangor government.

Citing political analysts, FT reported that Anwar, who is Permatang Pauh MP and the de facto chief of PKR, likely believes he can be more effective running Malaysia's richest state than making speeches in Parliament.

“That is going to be a game-changer for Malaysian politics,” Ooi Kee Beng, the deputy director of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore, was quoted saying.

Citing another political scientist, FT reported Umno hardliners may even be willing to cut off Najib to save the party.

“You can argue that a perfect storm is brewing against him,” James Chin, professor of political science at the Kuala Lumpur campus of Australia’s Monash University, told FT.

The daily observed that Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, Malaysia's former prime minister of 22 years, had been leading a campaign against Najib behind the scenes, similar to the 88-year-old's machinations that led to the ouster of Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi in April 2009.

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