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Rise of Islam rankles Malaysia's minority faiths

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By Liao Y-Sing

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KAMPUNG JIAS, Malaysia (Reuters) - Deep in the heart of a Malaysian jungle, a preacher holds a meeting under the scorching midday sun, urging followers not to lose faith after their church was demolished by the government.

The razing of their simple brick church, among a spate of demolitions of non-Muslim places of worship in Malaysia, has heightened fears that the rights of minority faiths are being eroded despite provisions in Malaysian law guaranteeing every person the freedom to profess his own religion.

"Why did the government tear down our church when they say we are free to choose our religion?" asked preacher Sazali Pengsang.

"This incident will not stop me from practicing my faith," Sazali said, as he watched children in ragged clothes playing catch in a poor village populated by indigenous tribespeople who recently converted to Christianity from their tribal faith.

The church in northeastern Kelantan state bordering Thailand is one of several non-Muslim places of worship recently pulled down by the authorities, a trend that's fuelling concern about a rise in hardline Islam in this moderate Muslim country.

State governments have charge over matters relating to Islam in Malaysia and in Kampung Jias, the authorities contend that the building was erected without their approval.

But the natives say the land on which the church was erected is theirs and no approval is required under Malaysian law to build a church on their own property.

In a country where race and religion are inextricably linked, rising religious tension also throws the spotlight on the privileges of the majority ethnic Malays, who are Muslims by birth.

Mosques are found in every nook and cranny in Malaysia but religious minorities say it is difficult to obtain approval to build their own places of worship.

Non-Muslims have also complained, mainly in Internet chatrooms, about city hall officials permitting construction of huge mosques in areas with small Muslim populations.

State television routinely broadcasts Islamic programs but forbids other religions to be preached.

Muslims make up about 60 percent of Malaysia's population of 26 million, Buddhists about 20 percent, Christians 10 percent and Hindus about 6 percent.

RACIAL HARMONY

The smoldering discontent is a worry for this multi-ethnic country which has tried hard to maintain racial harmony after bloody racial riots in 1969 in which 200 people were killed.

"If the authorities do not intervene it would indirectly encourage extreme Islamists to show their muscle and their aggression towards other religious practices," said Wong Kim Kong, of the National Evangelical Christian Fellowship Malaysia.

"That would threaten the religious harmony, national unity and national integration of the nation."

Simmering religious tensions could undermine support for the government of Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, an Islamic scholar who champions a moderate brand of the religion.

"Many people of other faiths in Malaysia view the gradual erosion of their rights," said Reverend Hermen Shastri, an official at Malaysia's Council of Churches.

"The government, which asserts to be a coalition that looks to the interests of all Malaysians, is not firm enough with authorities who ... take actions arbitrarily," he added.

Racial and religious relations have long been a thorny point in this melting pot of Malays, Chinese and Indians.

In the early 1980's, the government proposed laws that placed curbs on the establishment of non-Muslim places of worship, prompting minority faiths to set up the Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Sikhism and Taoism.

This year, Chong Kah Kiat, a Chinese state minister apparently quit in protest over the state government's refusal to approve his plan to build a Buddhist statue next to a mosque.

In 2004, federal authorities intervened after state officers in the central state of Pahang flattened a church, according to Moses Soo who pioneered the church in Kampung Jias.

Appeals to the prime minister resulted in compensation of about \$12,000 and permission to rebuild the church, Soo said.

A similar plea was made to the authorities for Kampung Jias

but unlike Pahang, Kelantan is controlled by the opposition Parti Islam se-Malaysia (PAS), which wants to turn Malaysia into an Islamic state that punishes rapists, adulterers and thieves with stoning and amputation.

APOSTATES

The issue of religion has also been controversial for Muslims. They are not allowed to formally renounce Islam, and apostates are sent for counseling and, ultimately, fined or jailed if they do not desist.

Lina Joy, a Muslim by birth who converted to Christianity, recently lost a six-year battle to have the word "Islam" removed from her identity card.

Since taking power in October 2003, Prime Minister Abdullah has espoused "Islam Hadhari," or "civilisational Islam," whose focus includes faith and piety in Allah and mastery of knowledge, with the aim of promoting tolerance and understanding.

"Malaysia is one of the Muslim countries that practices moderation in all spheres," said Abdullah Md Zin, a minister for religious affairs.

Some blame a small group of Muslim extremists for attempting to hijack the debate.

"There are enough fair-minded Malaysians in the country who are standing together to hinder the hardliners from dominating the discourse about Islam and the relationship between state and religion," said Shastri, from the Malaysian Council of Churches.

But that is little consolation for the villagers of Kampung, who will have to pray under a flimsy tent next time it rains.

(Additional reporting by Jalil Hamid)

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