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Muslim Official Visits Church, Temples

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KUALA LUMPUR, Malaysia -- A lawmaker from Malaysia's Islamic opposition party said Wednesday he made rare visits to a church and temples to help assure non-Muslim minorities about their religious rights.

Khalid Abdul Samad, a Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party lawmaker, said he wanted to ease suspicions among non-Muslims that his party seeks to curb their religious freedoms.

"It's time to set the record straight," Khalid told The Associated Press. "We respect the rights of non-Muslims. There's no plan to stifle other religions or create problems for them."

Non-Muslims have been upset in recent years about how the government has handled religious issues, including the demolition of Hindu temples, a ban on the word Allah from Malay-language Christian literature, and court judgments favoring Muslims in disputes with non-Muslims.

Khalid's visit to the Christian church and two Hindu temples last week was a rare move by a Muslim politician. Many of Malaysia's Muslim public figures have been wary of appearing in places of worship other than mosques, fearing criticism by conservative Muslims. A few politicians have made such visits discreetly.

Khalid's party has long alienated minorities with its call for a hard-line theocratic state. But it toned down its religious rhetoric and allied itself with two secular, multiethnic opposition groups for elections last month.

Together, the three parties won more than one-third of the parliamentary seats and the control of five state legislatures in an unprecedented setback for the ruling coalition.

The result was partly attributed to frustrations among minorities including Buddhists, Christians and Hindus _ who comprise about 40 percent of Malaysia's 27 million people _ about what they considered an erosion of their freedom of worship.

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