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New Malaysia Rule on Islamic Conversion

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By JULIA ZAPPEI
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KUALA LUMPUR, Malaysia -- Malaysia will soon require non-Muslims to inform their family before converting to Islam, a move welcomed Friday by minority religious groups who said it will help ease ethnic and interfaith tensions.

The planned rule is aimed at preventing the kind of religious disputes that have frequently erupted in this multireligious country after the death of ethnic Chinese or Indian converts. In many cases families were unaware of the conversions, and were angered when Islamic authorities seized the bodies for Muslim burial.

Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi announced after meeting Islamic authorities Thursday that the government wanted to avoid such controversies.

"If people want to convert, there is nothing wrong, why must they hide?" he was quoted as saying by The Star daily.

Anger over religious discrimination, including the destruction of Hindu temples by the state, partly led to the ruling National Front coalition's heavy losses in last month's general elections.

Abdullah said Muslim converts would have to produce documents stating they had told their family members. He didn't say when the new rule will come into force.

"We do not want the religious department saying the deceased was a Muslim but the family members disputing it because he or she converted on the quiet," Abdullah was quoted by the national news agency Bernama as saying.

Abdullah's aides could not immediately be reached Friday.

Minority religious groups cautiously welcomed the announcement.

"It's a move in the right direction," said A. Vaithilingam, president of the Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Sikhism and Taoism. But he expressed caution about the policy before knowing "the real details."

Islam is Malaysia's official religion, but non-Muslims _ mostly ethnic Chinese and Indians _ make up 40 percent of the population and generally practice their religions freely. However, non-Muslims have often complained that Islamic authorities refuse to look at interfaith disputes with compassion while flaunting their powers over minorities.

Vaithilingam also said the new requirement won't address other issues, such as conversions out of Islam, which are rarely granted, and the dual system of Shariah law and secular courts for civil matters.

In interfaith disputes involving Muslims, the Islamic Shariah courts often get the last word, which has infuriated non-Muslims who say they do not get fair justice in those courts.

The new move is apparently aimed at showing the minorities that the government cares about them even though large numbers of Chinese and Indians voted against it in the March 8 elections.

The historic polls returned Abdullah's National Front coalition to power but with a greatly reduced majority. It lost 82 of 222 parliamentary seats and five of 13 states in its worst showing since independence in 1957.

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