

Malaysian government plays the communal card

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With the tacit support of the government, Muslim hardliners in Malaysia are continuing to stoke communal tensions over the use of the word “Allah” by non-Muslims. The United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), the main component of the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN), is exploiting the issue to try to divide the opposition Peoples Alliance, which includes both the Islamist Parti Islam se-Malaysia (PAS) and the ethnic Chinese-based Democratic Action Party.

The issue first erupted after the High Court ruled on December 31 that the *Herald*, a Roman Catholic newspaper, could use the word Allah to refer to God in its publications. The weekly has a circulation of 14,000 and prints in four languages among the nation’s 850,000 Catholics, who are largely ethnic Chinese. Of the country’s population of 28 million, 60 percent are Muslim, 19 percent Buddhist, 9 percent Christian and 6 percent Hindu.

UMNO, which presents itself as the champion of Malay rights, has increasingly postured as a defender of Islam to buttress its waning support. Although formally secular, Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad declared in 2001 that Malaysia was an Islamic state. Constitutionally all Malays are Muslim by definition and it is illegal to try to convert them to another religion. Sharia courts have extensive powers to impose reactionary sharia law on the country’s Muslims in a number of areas, particularly in religious and family matters

The government reacted immediately by lodging an appeal against the court decision. Prime Minister Najib Razak personally visited King Tuanku Zainal Abidin, the country’s head of state, on January 6 to obtain his support for the appeal. Whether or not UMNO was directly involved, the government’s actions only encouraged anti-Christian protests and violence.

From January 8, eleven Christian churches were

firebombed, along with a Sikh temple. Several mosques were subsequently vandalised—according to police, by the same groups that attacked the churches. The government, which regularly enforces bans on opposition demonstrations, took no action against rowdy protests against the High Court ruling. The government only condemned the use of violence after the attacks on churches threatened to escalate.

The government played the communal card again on February 9 when three young women were caned for having extra-marital affairs. Home Minister Hishammuddin Hussein himself announced the sentences, which were ordered by a sharia court. Such sentences have been brought down in the past, but generally have been reversed on appeal before the punishment was carried out.

The stirring up of communalism is part of a broader UMNO campaign to undermine the opposition coalition, which made significant inroads at the March 2008 national elections. The Peoples Alliance increased its seats from 19 to 82 in the 222-seat national parliament and won power in five of the country’s 13 states. Crucially, the ruling BN lost the two-thirds majority needed to amend the nation’s constitution.

Opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim pitched the campaign to growing hostility not only among ethnic Indians and Chinese, but also ethnic Malays, toward the government’s discriminatory policies that favour Malays for government jobs, in business and in education. Many urban Malays, who regard these policies as benefiting a tiny Malay elite voted for PAS or Anwar’s Peoples Justice Party (Keadilan). UMNO’s partners—the conservative Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and Malaysian Indian Congress—were badly hit as ethnic Chinese and Indian voters deserted them in droves.

Speaking to CNN on March 4, Anwar said UMNO had hoped “that by taking a hard line [on the Allah issue] it will

curry favour with an increasingly radical right wing upon which the party is increasingly based. The recent caning of individuals for illicit sexual relations is likewise part of an effort to boost the perceived Islamic credentials of the government and portray the opposition as soft on morals and subservient to international pressure.”

The issue has had an impact. In February three Keadilan parliamentarians quit the party and announced they would become “independents”. On March 6, Keadilan announced that it was expelling another MP, Zulkifli Noordin, who had filed a police complaint against fellow party members for saying that non-Muslims should be able to use the word Allah. Media reports indicate UMNO is targetting another 11 opposition parliamentarians and encouraging them to defect.

The PAS leadership has stood behind the opposition’s stance in support of the High Court ruling. On March 22, PAS president Abdul Hadi Awang called on the government to view the use of the word Allah by non-Muslims positively, saying that “true Muslims” would not be confused. Opponents of the court decision argue that the use of the term is a ploy to convert Muslims to Christianity.

However, UMNO’s communal tactics are also creating divisions in the ranks of the ruling coalition. The government threatened legal action against the *Star* after its editor P. Gunasegaram wrote a comment on February 19 criticising the canings. The newspaper is owned by the MCA, which is desperately seeking to recover from its 2008 electoral losses and appears to be taking a slightly critical line on issues of concern to ethnic Chinese.

The Home Ministry found the offending article threatened “public order” and gave the *Star* 14 days to apologise. The country’s tightly controlled newspapers have to renew their licences to publish each year. The paper removed the article from its website and issued an apology. The *Star* also pulled a regular column written on March 3 that was critical of the canings. The author, Marina Mahathir, daughter of former Prime Minister Mahathir, criticised the newspaper’s decision and called for a debate on the sharia laws.

The issues may also create difficulties for UMNO’s allies based in Sarawak and Sabah, on the island of Borneo. The proportion of Christians in these two states is far higher—47 percent—than on the Malay Peninsula. The *Asia Times* website reported in January that Borneo-based religious leaders, activists and academics had expressed anger over what they saw as UMNO’s contempt for Christian voters.

Currently the ruling coalition holds all but a handful of the 56 federal seats from Sabah and Sarawak.

The communalism also cuts across the government’s pitch to international investors that it is gradually dismantling the discrimination in favour of Malays. Prime Minister Najib announced changes to investment laws last year that ended the requirement for publicly traded companies to set aside 30 percent of their equity for ethnic Malays.

Speaking in Hong Kong on Tuesday, Najib said his government would continue to roll back policies favouring ethnic Malays and sell stakes in state-owned companies to encourage investment and boost the stock market. “Whether we do away completely with affirmative action is something we will have to consider very carefully,” he said. “Affirmative action will be more market friendly, more transparent and will be more merit-based.”

The reasons for the investment push are obvious. The Malaysian economy shrank by 3.6 percent in 2009 and the International Monetary Fund expects it to grow by no more than 2.5 percent in 2010. According to UN estimates, foreign direct investment in Malaysia in 2009 was just \$US2.7 billion, down from \$8.1 billion in 2008.

The government remains caught between economic imperatives, and the communal politics on which it has always rested and continues to exploit to shore up its flagging popular support.



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