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Churches Attacked Amid Furor in Malaysia

By [SETH MYDANS](#)

BANGKOK — An uproar among Muslims in [Malaysia](#) over the use of the word Allah by Christians spread over the weekend with the firebombing and vandalizing of several churches, increasing tensions at a time of political turbulence.

Arsonists struck three churches and a convent school early Sunday, and black paint was splashed on another church. This followed the firebombing of four churches on Friday and Saturday. No injuries were reported, and only one church, Metro Tabernacle in the capital, Kuala Lumpur, had extensive damage.

The attacks, unlike anything Malaysia has experienced before, have shaken the country, where many Muslims are angry over a Dec. 31 court ruling that overturned a government ban on the use of the word Allah to denote the Christian God.

Though that usage is common in many countries, where Arabic- and Malay-language Bibles describe Jesus as the “son of Allah,” many Muslims here insist that the word belongs exclusively to them and say that its use by other faiths could confuse Muslim worshippers.

That dispute, in turn, has been described by some observers as a sign of political maneuvering, as the governing party struggles to maintain its dominance after [setbacks in national and state elections](#) in March 2008.

Some political analysts and politicians accuse Prime Minister Najib Razak of raising racial and religious issues as he tries to solidify his Malay base. In a difficult balancing act, he must also woo ethnic Chinese and Indians whose opposition contributed to his party’s setback in 2008.

“The political contestation is a lot more intensified,” said Elizabeth Wong, a state official who is a member of Parti Keadilan Rakyat, an opposition party. “In Malaysia the central theme will always be about the Malay identity and about Islam. The parties come up with various policies or means to attempt to appeal to the Muslim Malay voters.”

Mr. Najib condemned the violence, saying the government would “take whatever steps it can to prevent such acts.”

In an interview, the main opposition figure, [Anwar Ibrahim](#), implied that the government was behind the current tensions. “This is the last hope — to incite racial and religious sentiments to cling to power,” he said. “Immediately since the disastrous defeat in the March 2008 election they have been fanning this.”

The government has appealed the court decision and has been granted a stay. The dispute has swelled into a nationwide confrontation, with small demonstrations at mosques and passionate outcries on the Internet.

The tensions are shaking a multiethnic, multiracial state that has tried to maintain harmony among its citizens: mostly Muslim Malays, who make up 60 percent of the population, and minority Chinese and Indians, who mostly practice Christianity, Hinduism and Buddhism.

About 9 percent of Malaysia’s population of 28 million people are Christians, most of them Chinese or Indian. Analysts say this is the first outright confrontation between Muslims and Christians.

But race has become a staple of political discourse in recent years, and religion has been its vehicle, said Ooi Kee Beng, a fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore.

“Religion has become a much more useful tool for parties who depend on playing on ethnic divisions,” Mr. Ooi said. “They find it difficult to talk about racial issues but possible to talk about religious issues. We are seeing the result of that political opportunism over the last two decades.”

The line between race and religion is blurred in a country where the Constitution equates Muslim and Malay identities, said Jacqueline Ann Surin, editor of The Nut Graph, an analytical Malaysian news site.

“Malaysia is peculiar in that we have race-based politics and over the past decade or so we have seen an escalation of this notion that Malay Malaysians are superior,” she said. “That has been most apparent from consistent attempts by the U.M.N.O. leadership to promote the notion of [‘ketuanan Melayu,’](#) or Malay supremacy or dominance.” The United Malays National Organization is the governing party.

“So it’s a logical progression that if the Malay is considered superior by the state to all others in Malaysia, then Islam will also be deemed superior to other religions,” she said.

In [a widely quoted speech](#) given Thursday, Razaleigh Hamzah, a former finance minister, said the governing party, founded on a formula of communal power sharing, “had ossified into what appeared to be an eternal racial contract, a model replicated at every level of national life.”

He called the 2008 election “a watershed in Malaysian politics” as the ruling Barisan Nasional coalition lost its dominating two-thirds majority in Parliament and lost five states to the opposition.

“The entire political landscape had changed overnight,” Mr. Hamzah said, and has left the formerly

invincible Malay-based party seeking to redefine its electoral base and political rationale.

The political uncertainty comes against the backdrop of a flagging economy in a country that once had ambitions to lead the economies of Southeast Asia.

[In a speech in December](#), the second-ranking finance official, Ahmad Husni Hanadzlah, said: “Our economy has been stagnating in the last decade. We have lost our competitive edge to remain as the leader of the pack in many sectors of the economy. Our private investment has been steadily in decline.”

He called for changes in an economic system that gives preferential treatment to Malays, saying that all Malaysians should be given “equal opportunity to participate in the economy.”

At the same time, the country has had a rise in political Islam, along with continuing ethnic and religious tensions.

Hindus have protested the destruction of some temples, and in November Muslims [paraded a severed cow's head](#) in the streets of Shah Alam, capital of Selangor state, to protest the construction of a new one.

On New Year's Day, the Islamic morality police [arrested 52 unmarried couples](#) in budget hotels — mainly students and young factory workers — who were expected to be charged with the offense of close proximity.

Last year, a Muslim woman was [sentenced to a public caning](#) for drinking beer in a hotel. The sentence has not yet been carried out, with the authorities saying that they have not found a woman trained to carry out a caning.

In this atmosphere, there is a danger that the furor over religious language will feed on itself, said Marina Mahathir, daughter of former Prime Minister [Mahathir Mohamad](#), who is a newspaper columnist and social activist.

“It's only a few people who are inflamed about it, while the rest of the country is going on as if normal,” she said in an interview. “But if you keep stoking and if you keep giving these people leeway, sooner or later more and more people will think, ‘Oh, maybe we should be upset as well.’ ”

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