

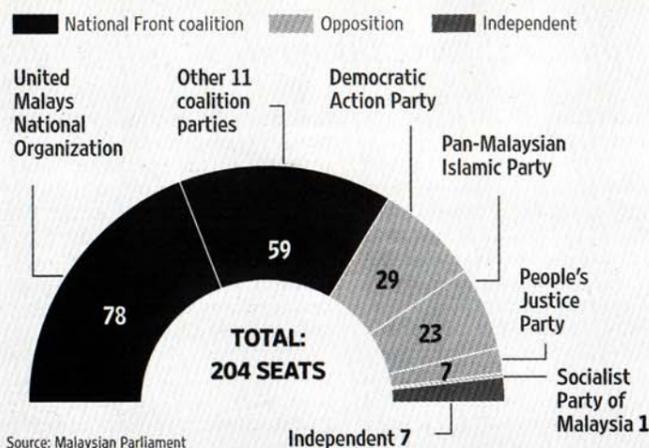


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Non-Muslims, like this young Hindu, make up around 40% of multiracial Malaysia's 28 million people.

Finding the center

Distribution of seats in Malaysia's Parliament



Malaysia Muslim party reaches out

By JAMES HOOKWAY

KUALA LUMPUR, Malaysia—A political party once bent on turning Malaysia into an Islamic state is for the first time preparing to put up non-Muslim candidates for election, in a bid to grab the political center in this divided country.

Some other Islamic-based political parties around the world have tried to make themselves more accessible to mainstream voters in recent years. Islam-based political parties in Indonesia have attempted to dig themselves a foothold in that country's young democracy. Turkey's Justice and Development Party has built a mass support-base that has twice elected Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

Now, frustrated with Malaysia's entrenched race-based government and worried about the stability of its opposition partners as speculation grows that the government may call early elections, the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party is reaching out to its non-Muslims, who make up around 40% of Malaysia's 28 million people.

It's a big change for the party, best known by its Malay acronym PAS. Many of its top leaders prefer long billowing robes and turbans to the western-style business suits favored by top government officials.

The party's founding objective was to create an Islamic state in Malaysia, a major exporter and resources powerhouse that has long been regarded in the Muslim world as a home to a modern, moderate form of Islam.

As PAS softens its old, hard-line edges, some non-Muslims are taking notice.

Alex Ong, an investment banker for 20 years who now works for an organization helping migrant workers, set up PAS's non-Muslim "supporters' club" in 2004. The 51-year-old Baptist says the party represents Malaysia's best chance of breaking its race-based political system and eliminating graft.

"PAS is the most misunderstood political party in Malaysia," says Mr. Ong. He says the party's turban-wearing leaders aren't really focused on turning Malaysia into an Islamic state, and notes that the PAS hierarchy has no problem with him eating pork or drinking alcohol.

Instead, Mr. Ong says, "we want to encourage Islamic values to help strengthen the state and push for a moral renewal."

Some PAS members, however, are cautious of alienating their predominantly ethnic Malay support base, and suggest overtures to non-Muslims could be easily reversed.

Many urban non-Muslim voters,



PAS supporter Alex Ong

too, are wary of PAS and its mostly rural roots, especially as the country has taken a steadily more Islamic direction in recent years. This year for the first time, three Muslim women were caned for engaging in extramarital sex, while the government is appealing a court ruling allowing Christians to use the word "Allah" as a translation for "God" in Malay-language publications.

But some political analysts say PAS's outreach to non-Muslims

could help alter the political landscape in this ethnically diverse nation.

Since independence from Britain in 1957, Malaysia has been governed by the National Front, an amalgamation of ethnic Malay, Chinese and Indian-based parties whose affirmative-action policies have impeded economic growth in recent years, economists say, undermining Malaysia's role as a development model for the Muslim world.

A growing number of voters have turned to a PAS-backed opposition alliance, which broke the National Front's two-thirds majority in Parliament in 2008 for the first time in decades and has since won eight of 11 special elections.

Prime Minister Najib Razak has to call a new election by the middle of 2013, but could choose to call it sooner.

PAS's move to bring in non-Muslim candidates, announced at its annual conference on June 11, appears designed to expand the party's electability. To that end, its leaders discuss defeating corruption as frequently as they talk about strengthening traditional Muslim values. Nasaruddin Mat Isa, PAS's vice-president, says the party expects to field its first non-Muslim candidate "soon."

Some analysts say PAS has little

choice but to aggressively expand its appeal. The country's main opposition leader, Anwar Ibrahim of the multiracial People's Justice Party, is on trial for the second time in a decade for allegedly sodomizing a male aide.

Mr. Anwar denies doing anything wrong, saying the allegation is a conspiracy to derail his career. The trial could drag on for months, and a conviction would deprive Malaysia's fragile opposition alliance of its most charismatic leader and leave PAS positioned to fill the void by reaching into center ground occupied by Mr. Anwar. If PAS doesn't take the initiative, it risks leaving the National Front in power for years to come.

At the same time, Mr. Najib appears to be gaining in popularity among voters, and on June 10 made a play for more ethnic Chinese and Indian support by unveiling plans to strip away decades of affirmative-action policies that favor Malaysia's ethnic Malays, who are Muslim by law.

"PAS is trying to show non-Muslims that they can engage with them, and they are being quite bold in this," says Bridget Welsh, a political science professor and Malaysia expert at Singapore Management University. "There's no question PAS now has national aspirations."