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Christians in Malaysia accept ruling on Church raid

Sultan rules insufficient evidence to prosecute Christians for evangelizing

By Jasmine Kay

Compass Direct News (09.11.11) / HRWF (14.11.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> – Following controversy over a raid on a church event in which Muslims were present, Christian leaders in Malaysia welcomed a sultan's pronouncement that neither the Christians nor the state officers who disrupted the meeting would be prosecuted.

A number of local commentators, however, have continued to express concern over the Aug. 3 raid by the officers of the Selangor Islamic Religious Department (JAIS).

The sultan of the state of Selangor, Sharafuddin Idris Shah, issued a statement on Oct. 11 saying the Muslim religious officers did not breach any state laws in the raid on Damansara Utama Methodist Church (DUMC). The sultan came to the conclusion after considering a report prepared by JAIS.

While church leaders welcomed the sultan's wish for religious harmony and his decree that there will be no prosecution against any parties involved, Dr. Ng Kam Weng, research director at Kairos Research Centre, argued that the powers granted by the state enactments "cannot be taken as license" for Muslim religious authorities to intrude or trespass onto the premises of a church.

Furthermore, Ng said, enforcement must be consistent with fundamental civil liberties and provisions of the Criminal Procedure Code (Act 593) relating to search and arrest. In Malaysia, two sets of laws exist – civil laws that govern all citizens, and Islamic laws that apply to Muslims only in matters of religion, family, property and inheritance.

In the raid, between 20 to 30 JAIS officers and police entered the Dream Centre, a facility rented by DUMC, without a search warrant at 10 p.m. Christians were holding a dinner in gratitude for the efforts of Harapan Komuniti (HK), a community-based Non-Governmental Organization that aids women and children and victims of HIV/AIDS and natural disasters. Present at the dinner were volunteers, leaders, supporters and members of the community who have benefitted from the HK's work.

Upon entering the premises, JAIS religious officers took videos and photographs. When the dinner organizers asked JAIS officers for the reason for their raid, they said they had received a complaint but were unable to produce a copy when asked for one. The Muslim religious officers also took down details of the Muslim guests before leaving, and the 12 were later asked to give statements at the JAIS office.

The sultan's ruling asserted that, based on investigations by JAIS, there were attempts made to "subvert the faith and belief of Muslims," though there was insufficient evidence for legal action to be taken against the perpetrators.

In a country where propagating one's faith to Muslims is prohibited, Bishop Paul Tan Chee Ing questioned the accusation that the church meeting was used to steer Muslims from their religion, as the sultan ruled there was insufficient evidence to prosecute the Christians.

"If there is not enough evidence, there ought to be no imputation of wrongdoing," the Roman Catholic bishop said.

The sultan commanded JAIS to provide counseling to the 12 Muslims present at the dinner in order to restore their faith and belief in Islam. He also expressed hope that all activities to spread other religions to Muslims in the state should cease immediately.

In Malaysia, the sultan is the head of Islamic affairs in all states where the sultans rule. According to local laws, evangelization of Muslims is an offense punishable by fine and/or imprisonment. Muslims who try to convert out of Islam are also subjected to all kinds of hardships, including having to attend rehabilitation camps.

In his ruling, the sultan claimed that the actions by the Muslim religious officers came within the jurisdiction of the Syariah Criminal Procedure (State of Selangor) Enactment, 2003, Syariah Criminal (State of Selangor) Enactment, 1995 and Selangor Non-Islamic Religions (Control of Propagation Amongst Muslims) Enactment, 1988.

Following the church raid and allegations of Christian evangelization of Muslims, some Muslim groups have tried to fan religious tensions. Several right-wing Malay/Muslim groups, including the Pertubuhan Pribumi Perkasa Malaysia (Organization of Strong Indigenous People Malaysia), organized a rally on Oct. 22 at the 100,000-seat Shah Alam Stadium to fight the challenge of Christianization in Malaysia. Only 5,000 people, however, turned up.

More moderate Muslim groups such as the Islamic Renaissance Front have called on Muslims not to blame others but to examine the root causes of apostasy and to consider their own shortcomings.

The church raid incident represents yet another challenge to the local Christian community, which in recent years has had to defend its right to use the word "Allah" in Christian worship and literature as well as protect its right to print and import Malay Bibles and religious literature.

This concern was expressed by Bishop Ng Moon Hing, chairman of the Christian Federation of Malaysia, which represents most Christians in the country.

"We have witnessed an increase in incidences where Christians have been singled out and targeted with unjustified accusations and prejudice from various groups, as well as [from] certain mainline media," he said in an Aug. 4 statement.

Ng questioned the legality of the raid, describing the Muslim religious officers' actions as "high-handed and repugnant" and "an affront to the values of mutual respect and harmony."

The Christian community, which makes up 9.2 percent of Malaysia's total population of 28.3 million people, expressed alarm and concern over the church raid. The day after the incident, Daniel Ho, senior pastor of DUMC, issued a statement expressing disappointment at the Muslim religious officers' trespass and actions and at subjecting the dinner guests "to undue harassment."

In another statement on Aug. 12, Ho clarified his church's stand on community work.

"In all our community work, we seek to practice our faith and to serve the community ... regardless of creed, race or religion," he stated. "As always, DUMC ... seeks to help the poor and the needy with no conditions attached."

Malaysian 'teapot cult' woman loses Islam legal bid

BBC (19.07.2011) / HRWF (29.08.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> - Kamariah Ali, 60, says she should not be tried under Islamic law because she is no longer a Muslim.

She follows the Sky Kingdom sect, known as the teapot cult because it built a giant teapot to symbolise its belief in the healing purity of water.

But judges ruled that only Malaysia's Islamic courts could decide on the case because Ms Kamariah was born a Muslim.

Malaysia has two different judicial systems - one for Muslims and the other for non-Muslims.

The BBC's Jennifer Pak in Kuala Lumpur says Ms Kamariah's case is one of a growing number of legal challenges brought by those caught between the two systems.

Ms Kamariah had asked the civil courts to declare her freedom to worship, as guaranteed by the constitution.

But the judging panel said she had to go through the Islamic courts system in order to renounce her faith - something that is rarely granted, our correspondent says.

The dual-track system has created problems for people who want to convert to another religion from Islam, or in child-custody battles involving Muslims and non-Muslims.

The most high-profile case involved a Muslim father who secretly converted his children to Islam. He gained custody through the Islamic courts while the mother, a Hindu, was granted guardianship under civil law.

The Sky Kingdom sect, based in the strongly Muslim state of Terengganu, is regarded as heretical by the Islamic authorities.

It claims to promote harmony between religious groups, and its leader Ayah Pin believes he is the saviour of the world.

In 2005 many of its members - including Ms Kamariah - were prosecuted by the Islamic authorities. Ayah Pin is believed to have fled to Thailand.

Malaysia establishes diplomatic ties with Vatican

BBC (18.07.2011) / HRWF (29.08.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> - The Vatican and Malaysia have agreed to establish diplomatic ties, following a meeting between Pope Benedict XVI and Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak.

The move comes after years of talks between the Catholic Church and the government of majority-Muslim Malaysia.

Mr Najib's visit was said to have been intended to reassure Christians in his country, who have long complained of discrimination.

Ethnic and religious tensions have risen ahead of expected national polls.

On Monday Mr Najib met the Pope at his summer home near Rome.

In a statement, the Vatican said that during their "cordial conversations, the positive developments in bilateral relations were discussed and an agreement was reached to establish diplomatic relations between Malaysia and the Holy See".

The Vatican said the two leaders had also discussed the importance of cultural and religious dialogue for the promotion of peace, Associated Press news agency reports.

Mr Najib's meeting with the Pope is significant for Malaysia's Christian community, which makes up about 9% of the population.

Malaysia's constitution promises freedom of worship to all faiths, but a string of religious disputes in recent years has raised fears among the country's religious minorities that their rights are being eroded, says the BBC's Kuala Lumpur correspondent Jennifer Pak.

Pigs heads

In 2009 the authorities tried to enforce a ban on Christians using the word "Allah" when referring to God in the Malay language - Christian leaders said the word had been used in their bibles for decades.

The authorities' efforts heightened tensions, leading to arson attacks on churches and tit-for-tat defacing of mosques, including the leaving of pigs' heads at doorways to Islamic prayer halls.

Ramon Navaratnam, who works for a Malaysian inter-faith council, said earlier that forming ties with the Vatican would give the concerns of Christians a better hearing.

"We now will be saying things the way we have, what is right, what is wrong, what we like, what we don't like about religious freedoms or the lack of it, and we know we will have somebody in the Vatican who would be able to at least talk to them, the government, privately and say 'look, we can't accept this. Please moderate your views'," he said.

Mr Navaratnam said the government could no longer ignore religious minorities, most of whom are ethnically Chinese and Indian.

However, some Malay Muslim groups have become more vocal in demanding privileges and support from the government.

In 2008, Chinese and Indian minorities across Malaysia, who are mainly Christians, Hindus and Buddhists, abandoned the government and voted for the opposition.

Many complained of racism and a lack of religious freedom.

Christians seek to end restrictions on Malay Bibles

Federation calls for removal of 'every impediment' to importing and printing Scripture

By Jasmine Kay

Compass Direct News (06.04.2011) / HRWF (07.04.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> - Christian importers of Bibles that Malaysian officials detained are balking at conditions the government has imposed for their release, such as defacement of the sacred books with official stamps.

The Home Ministry stamped the words, "This Good News [Malay] Bible is for use by Christians only" on 5,100 Bibles without consulting the importer, the Bible Society of Malaysia (BSM), which initially refused to collect them as it had neither accepted nor agreed to the conditions. The Home Ministry applied the stamp a day after the government on March 15 issued a release order for the Bibles, which had been detained in Port Klang, 38 kilometers (24 miles) southwest of Kuala Lumpur, since March 20, 2009.

Another 30,000 Bibles detained since Jan. 12 on the island of Borneo remain in port after the Sarawak state Home Ministry told the local chapter of Gideons International that it could collect them if the organization would put the stamp on them. Gideons has thus far declined to do so, and a spokesman said yesterday (April 5) that officials had already defaced the books with the stamp.

The government issued letters of release to both organizations on March 15 under the condition that the books bear the stamp, "Reminder: This Good News [Malay] Bible is for use by Christians only. By order of the Home Minister," and that the covers must carry a serial number, the official seal of the department and a date.

The Home Ministry's stamping of the BSM Bibles without the organization's permission came under fire from the Christian community. In a statement issued on March 17, Bishop Ng Moon Hing, chairman of the Christian Federation of Malaysia (CFM), described the Home Ministry's action as desecration.

"[The] new conditions imposed on the release of the impounded Bibles ... is wholly unacceptable to us," he added.

Ng described the conditions imposed by the Home Ministry as tantamount to treating the Malay Bible as a "restricted item" and subjecting the word of God to the control of man. In response, Home Minister Hishammuddin Hussein has said the act of stamping and serialization was standard protocol.

Government Overtures

In the weeks following the March 15 release order, the government made several attempts to try to appease the Christian community through Idris Jala, a Christian from Sarawak state and a minister in the Prime Minister's Department.

Idris issued the government's first statement on March 22, explaining that officials had reduced earlier conditions imposed by the Home Ministry to require only the words, "For Christianity" to be stamped on the covers of the Bible in font type Arial, size 16, in bold.

Idris informed BSM that the Bibles could be collected in their present state or arrangements could be made to have stickers with the words "For Christianity" pasted over the imprint of the stamps made by the Home Ministry officials. In the event that this was not acceptable, the minister pointed out that BSM had the option of having the whole consignment replaced, since the government had received an offer from Christian donors who were prepared to bear the full cost of purchasing new Bibles.

In response, the CFM issued a statement on March 30 saying, "The offer made does address the substantive issues," and called on the government "to remove every impediment, whether legal or administrative, to the importation, publication, distribution and use of the [Malay Bible] and indeed to protect and defend our right to use the [Malay Bible]."

Bishop Ng, however, left it to the two importers to decide whether to collect the Bibles based on their specific circumstances.

On March 31, BSM collected the mishandled Bibles "to prevent the possibility of further acts of desecration or disrespect." In a press statement, BSM officials explained that the copies cannot be sold but "will be respectfully preserved as museum pieces and as a heritage for the Christian Church in Malaysia." The organization also made it clear that it will only accept compensation from the Home Ministry and not from "Christian donors," a term it viewed suspiciously.

On Saturday (April 2), Idris issued a 10-point statement to try to resolve the impasse. Significantly, this latest overture by the government included the lifting of present restrictions to allow for the local printing and importation of Malay and other indigenous-language Bibles into the country.

In Sarawak and Sabah, there would be no conditions attached to Bibles printed locally or imported. There also would be no prohibitions and restrictions on residents of these two states carrying such Bibles to other states. A significant 64 percent of Malaysian Christians are indigenous people from Sabah and Sarawak states who use the Malay language in their daily life, and having the Bible in the Malay language is considered critical to the practice of their Christian faith.

In the case of West Malaysia, however, in view of its larger Muslim population, the government imposed the condition that the Bibles must have the words "Christian publication" and the sign of the cross printed on the front covers.

Christian Response

Most Christians responded to this latest overture with caution. Many remained skeptical, seeing it as a politically motivated move in view of Sarawak state elections on April 16. Nearly half of Sarawak's population is Christian.

Bolly Lapok, an Anglican priest, told the online news agency Malaysian Insider, "It's an assurance, but we have been given such assurances before." BSM General-Secretary the Rev. Simon Wong reportedly expressed the same sentiments, saying the Home Ministry already has a record of breaking its word.

The Rev. Thomas Phillips of the Mar Thoma Church, who is also president of the Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Sikhism and Taoism, questioned the timing of the proposal: "Why, after all these years?"

The youth wing of the Council of Churches rejected the proposal outright, expressing fears that the government was trying to "buy them over" for the Sarawak election, and that it would go back on its word after that.

Bishop Paul Tan, president of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Malaysia, called the proposal an "insidious tactic of 'divide and rule,'" referring to its different requirements imposed on Malaysians separated by the South China Sea. Dr. Ng Kam Weng, research director at Kairos Research Centre, stressed that the proposal "does not address the root problem of the present crisis, i.e. the Allah issue."

Muslim Reactions

The 10-point proposal has also drawn the ire of Muslim groups, who view it as the government caving in to Christian pressure.

Perak Mufti Harussani Zakaria expressed his disappointment, reportedly saying, "If the government does this, just cancel the law," in reference to various state Islamic enactments that prohibit the use of the word "Allah" and other so-called Islamic terms that led to the banning of the Malay Bible. Malay Bibles have not been allowed to be printed locally for fear that they will utilize "prohibited" words.

The Muslim Organizations in Defense of Islam (Pembela) threatened to challenge the 10-point proposal in court if it was not reviewed in consultation with Muslim representatives.

On the same day Pembela issued its statement, the government seemed to have retracted its earlier commitment. The Home Minister reportedly said talks on the Malay Bibles were still ongoing despite Idris' 10-point proposal, which purportedly represents the Cabinet's decision.

As a result, James Redas Noel of the Gideons said yesterday (April 5) that he was confused by the mixed messages coming from the government and will not make a decision on whether to collect the Bibles until he had consulted church leaders on the matter, according to the Malaysian Insider.

The issue with the Malay Bibles is closely tied to the dispute over use of the word "Allah" by non-Muslims.

In a controversial court ruling on Dec. 31, 2009, judge Lau Bee Lan had allowed *The Herald*, a Catholic newspaper, to use "Allah" for God in the Malay section of its multilingual newspaper.

The Home Ministry filed an appeal against this decision on Jan. 4, 2010. To date, there is no indication as to when the case will be heard.

Christians make up more than 9 percent of Malaysia's nearly 28 million people, according to *Operation World*.

Malaysia's gov't softens stance on seized Bibles

AP (23.03.2011) / HRWF (28.03.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> - Malaysia's government has reversed its decision to stamp a seized shipment of Malay-language Bibles with serial numbers and government seals, softening its stance after Christians slammed the move as desecrating their holy book.

A dispute over the distribution of Malay-language Bibles containing the word "Allah" as a translation for God has caused authorities to hold 35,000 Indonesian-made Bibles at two Malaysian ports since 2009. The government in this Muslim-majority country bans the use of "Allah" in non-Islamic texts, saying it could confuse Muslims or even be used to convert them.

Malaysian Christians say the Arabic word "Allah" is a common reference for God that predates Islam and in Malay language it has been used for centuries by both Muslims and Christians. They say the ban is unconstitutional and threatens the religious freedom of minorities.

Last week, the government agreed to release the Bibles on condition they are stamped with serial numbers and seals with warnings that the books are meant for Christians only. The Christian Federation of Malaysia, which represents most of the country's churches, said that would amount to desecrating the Bibles.

Late Tuesday, the Prime Minister's Department offered what it called a "fair and reasonable solution" to resolve the dispute.

The Bibles will be released with only the words "For Christianity" stamped on them, the department said in a statement. For books already stamped with serial numbers and seals, it said Christian donors have offered to replace them with new imported Bibles.

It reiterated that the serialization of the Bibles was standard practice and not meant to deface the books. The government will issue a directive to allow future imports of all Malay-language Bibles as long as the books contain the stamp "For Christianity," the department said.

The Christian federation said it would issue a statement after church leaders meet next week to discuss the government's offer.

While the government's proposed release of the Bibles aims to ease religious friction, it also attempts to assure Muslims that their interests will not be undermined in an ongoing court case on whether non-Muslims have the constitutional right to use "Allah."

The government is appealing a December 2009 court ruling that religious minorities - mostly Christians, Buddhists and Hindus - have the right to use "Allah." The verdict caused a brief surge in tensions last year, when 11 churches were attacked amid anger among some Muslims.

Malaysian Christian lawyer barred from Shariah courts

BBC (17.03.2011) / HRWF (22.03.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> - Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- A Christian lawyer in Malaysia has failed in her attempt to be allowed to practise in the Muslim Shariah courts.

Victoria Jayaseele Martin said she wanted to appear for non-Muslim clients fighting in such courts, to provide them with fairer representation.

An increasing number of cases heard in the Islamic courts involve both Muslims and non-Muslims.

Malaysia runs two parallel legal systems.

The civil courts cater to its non-Muslim citizens while the Islamic system decides issues affecting the fate of the country's Muslim majority.

A judge in Kuala Lumpur dismissed her challenge to the decision of a religious council that all lawyers in Islamic courts must be Muslim.

Ms Jayaseele Martin, who says the bar is unconstitutional, plans to appeal against the judge's decision.

Fairness

Ms Martin's lawyer, Ranjit Singh, said it was difficult for non-Muslims to find legal counsel, who may not want to defend cases that conflict with their own faith.

One of the lawyers for the Federal Territories Islamic Religious Council, Mr Abdul Rahim Sinwan, said it was "not a problem" for non-Muslims to find Muslim lawyers to defend them.

"It goes one step further because it's a question of faith. Because when the Muslim holds the opinion held by the judge, it's a question of faith, in which non-Muslims doesn't (have it)," he said.

The BBC's Jennifer Pak says he added that there was a "misunderstood perception that non-Muslim cannot find justice in the Shariah court", calling it a "fallacy."

There have been several cross-faith court cases, in which one partner to a marriage converts to Islam while the other does not, sparking custody battles.

Last year, the Malaysian government agreed to appoint women judges to its Islamic courts for the first time, something the Sisters in Islam (SIS) group said it had been demanding for many years.

The group has campaigned for reform of the Islamic legal system, saying it is not always administered and implemented properly and fairly.

The civil judiciary has long had female judges, covering a range of major cases.

The Islamic legal system focuses on family law, frequently tackling issues such as divorce, polygamy and custody battles.

Christians issue rare rebuke against Muslim-majority Malaysia's gov't for seizing Bibles

By Sean Yoong

AP (10.03.2011) / HRWF (21.03.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> - The main Christian grouping in Muslim-majority Malaysia said Thursday it was "fed up" with the government's refusal to allow the distribution of tens of thousands of Bibles, saying this was an affront to religious freedoms.

The rare rebuke by the Christian Federation of Malaysia signals growing impatience among the religious minority in a years-old dispute over the government's ban on the use of the word "Allah" as a translation for God in Malay-language Bibles and religious texts.

The federation's chairman, Bishop Ng Moon Hing, said authorities are currently holding 30,000 Malay-language Bibles at a port on Borneo island. This was one of the latest attempts by Christians to import such Bibles, mainly from Indonesia, but none has been successful since March 2009. There are no similar problems with English-language texts. Christians were "greatly disillusioned, fed up and angered by the repeated detention of Bibles," the federation said in a statement. "It would appear as if the authorities are waging a continuous, surreptitious and systematic program against Christians in Malaysia to deny them access to the Bible" in the Malay language.

Home Ministry officials were not immediately available for comment, but the government has repeatedly denied being unfair. In another recent incident, the ministry acknowledged it had barred the entry of imported Bibles but denied they were seized, saying the importer had simply failed to claim them from the port.

The trouble stems from the government's stance that the use of "Allah" in non-Muslim texts could confuse Muslims and even entice them to convert. Nearly two-thirds of Malaysia's 28 million people are Malay Muslims, while 25 per cent are ethnic Chinese and 8 per cent are Indians. Ethnic minorities are mostly Christian, Buddhist or Hindu.

A court ruled in December 2009 that Christians have the constitutional right to use the word "Allah." The government has appealed the verdict, but no hearings have been scheduled.

The dispute caused a brief surge in tensions in January 2010, when 11 churches were attacked by firebombs amid anger among some Muslims over the court ruling.

Malaysia bans Shiites from promoting their faith

AFP (09.03.2011) / HRWF (14.03.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> - Malaysia said on Wednesday that Shiites in the country, who have been termed a "deviant" sect, are barred from promoting their faith to other Muslims but are free to practise it themselves.

Some 200 Shiites were arrested in December by religious authorities who accused them of threatening national security in multicultural Malaysia, where most of the 16.5 million Muslims are members of the Sunni sect.

"We don't prohibit Shiite adherents to practise but there are (laws) that don't allow preaching to adherents of Sunnah Wal Jamaah (Sunnis)," Islamic affairs minister Jamil Khir Baharom told parliament according to state media.

Jamil Khir said the government had made "various efforts" to halt the spread of the faith in the country, including issuing fatwas against the sect and the "monitoring and control of materials promoting Shiism."

Mohammed Khusrin Munawi, a former religious department head in Selangor state who led the December 16 raid, has said that Shia Islam represents a threat because "fanatical followers of the sect consider other Muslims infidels".

Shiite community leader Kamil Zuhairi Abdul Aziz said Wednesday that Shiites in Malaysia do not preach to other Muslims.

"Although we keep a very low profile, live in harmony with Sunnis and non-Muslims and practise our religion within our community, we have been persecuted by the authorities for many decades," he told AFP.

"In fact, we are not the ones who are spreading our faith. By arresting us and making this an issue, the state religious authorities are giving us the publicity and spreading our teachings."

The split between Sunnis and Shiites dates back to a dispute over succession after the death of the Prophet Muhammad in 632.

The estimated 40,000 Shiites in Malaysia are one of several Islamic sects under close watch by religious authorities, who crack down hard on so-called deviant groups.

A 1989 Islamic law and a 1996 fatwa by Malaysia's top Islamic clerics banned Shiism, declaring it a deviant ideology.

Malaysia has a dual-track legal system, with civil courts running in parallel with Islamic Sharia courts where Muslim Malays can be tried on religious and moral charges.
