

Religious groups told not to debate issues in public

PM: Better to talk it over

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By Sabry Sharif

KUALA LUMPUR, Tues. — Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad urged religious groups today to discuss their fears and worries with the Government rather than take them to the public, in order to preserve religious and racial harmony in the country.

The Prime Minister made this call after meeting with a 12-member delegation from the Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism and Sikhism, led by its president Rev Dr Kim Beng.

The council recently called off a signature campaign to urge the Government not to impose Islamic laws on non-Muslims.

Speaking to the Press after the two-hour meeting at his office, the Prime Minister said: "I have told the council that, by and large, the people of this country are tolerant of each other's religion. We have no clashes because we are very liberal on religious practices.

"So, it is vital that this harmony is maintained. It is not a perfect harmony but it is much better than the situation in some countries where followers of various religions are at each other's throats."

To preserve this harmony, the Prime Minister said, the religious groups should not conduct campaigns that could stir up religious or racial sentiments.

He reminded religious groups of the agreement made by the nation's founding fathers on the special position of Islam and the rights of non-Muslims to practise their religions, adding that the agreement had helped ensure religious tolerance and harmony.

"We have tried our best to live up to the spirit of the pact as enshrined in the constitution. And we will continue to do so if the people are willing to practise religious tolerance and harmony," he added.

He said the council supported the stand and pledged to settle the issue through discussions with the Government.

Last month the Prime Minister asked the council to stop its signature campaign and said he

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would hold them responsible if their actions led to racial riots.

The council did not agree that Syariah laws should be imposed upon non-Muslims in the country, in particular the Selangor Administration of Islamic Law Enactment 1989. It also disagreed with the airing of Islamic programmes on radio and television and the teaching of Islamic civilisation in institutions of higher learning.

On the fears of non-Muslims that they would lose their rights to religious freedom and on the conversion of minors to Islam, Dr Mahathir pointed out that the constitution, which provided these guarantees, was supreme.

"I pointed out to the council that despite Islam being the official religion and the Muslims forming a large portion of the population, the number of people converting to Islam is minimal."

In fact, conversions among people of other religions was greater in number, he added.

"Furthermore, it is not the Government's policy to forcibly convert people to Islam. If this is not enough an assurance, then a recent Supreme Court case should allay the fears of non-Muslims," said Dr Mahathir.

He was referring to the recent Supreme Court judgment in the case of *Teoh Eng Huat vs Kadi of Pasir Mas and the Kelantan Islamic Religious and Customs Council* in which the court ruled that a minor under 18 could not convert to Islam without the consent of his or her parents, as provided

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for in the constitution.

Asked if the Supreme Court judgment implied that all State Islamic laws which allowed the conversion of minors to Islam, as long as they had attained puberty, was now null and void, he said:

"As far as our laws are concerned, the constitution is supreme."

The Prime Minister said although the controversy had been resolved, it did not mean that the problem would not resurface, adding that there was bound to be problems with regard to the practise of religion.

"But what is important is the manner in which these problems are settled. It should not be by going to the public. This will not help," he said.

Repeating his statement in Parliament when tabling the Constitution (Amendment) Bill last month, the Prime Minister said: "One group will start a campaign and the Muslims will react by starting their own. If this happens, are we going to resolve the issue by going to the vote?"

Certainly not."

Dr Mahathir added: "So if we have a problem, let us discuss it. After all, ours is an open Government."

Describing the meeting as cordial, the Prime Minister said the council members told him of their fears and problems. He said he would look into them.

Dr Mahathir also told the council members that the Government had no plans to extend the Syariah laws to cover non-Muslims, citing as an example *khalwat* laws where no action is taken against a non-Muslim partner.

He said he would consider the council's request for permission to bring in priests from abroad to teach in the original language of the various religious texts and publications.

On restrictions placed on religious publications, he said the Government wanted to make sure that the texts were for the use of each specific religious group. This would avoid charges of one religion trying to influence the followers of others.