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A 'strange creature' in court

Chow Kum Hor

KOO Chin Nam does not stand out in a crowd of lawyers. But this 54-year-old certainly does when he "goes to court". In his case, more often than not, the Syariah Court.

In the Syariah Court, he handles, among others, divorce cases. Koo quotes provisions in the syariah laws and in the civil laws with equal ease.

Koo, a member of the MCA's legal bureau, is one of five non-Muslim syariah lawyers in the country.

Describing himself as a "strange creature", Koo said his reason for becoming a syariah lawyer was inspired by the Iranian revolution in the late 70s.

Khoo's interest in Islamic principles and the syariah was fired by the political developments in Iran then.

"When I saw how the revolution overthrew the Shah, I was very concerned about the rise of the Islamic movement. In the 1980s, Malaysia started to introduce Islamic values in its administration.

"I was very curious to know more about this Islamic movement. This prompted me to enrol in IIU to study syariah law," said Koo, who is also Federal Territory MCA religious bureau head.

Koo was a Bachelor of Humanities graduate from Universiti Sains Malaysia and possessed a certificate in education from a teaching college in Penang when he decided to enrol in the International Islamic University in 1984.

He was among the second batch of students pursuing their law degrees (LLB). Koo spent seven years in the university, graduating with a Diploma in Syariah Law and Masters in Comparative Law besides his LLB and would have continued with a PhD if his wife had not advised him against it.

The emerging issue of Islamic state in the country has made many non-Muslims concerned. For the MCA, Koo undoubtedly is the right man for the job to explain the issue.

Koo has been actively going round the country to give his views on the recent announcement that Malaysia is an Islamic country.

His background often makes people curious and he is invariably asked what it was like for a non-Muslim and a Chinese to be in a Muslim environment.

He tells you that he faced no problems getting along with his majority Muslim varsity mates, who numbered about 50 then.

Koo is a Christian (Methodist) and this fact has made people more curious about his accomplishments. He said that he did not see any conflict between his religion and his profession.

Building on the understanding and respect for Muslims which he developed in campus, Koo now has five Muslims in his firm. The only other non-Muslim in the firm is his legal assistant who handles civil cases.

Koo's office is located in Wisma Methodist at Lorong Hang Jebat, Kuala Lumpur, which also houses the national Methodist secretariat. Methodist is one of the most influential Christian denominations in the country.

He said that there is nothing wrong with being a Christian and a syariah lawyer.

"Both religions have the same roots. In fact, there are a lot of similarities between the Bible and the Quran", said Koo who speaks a little Arabic, a language he picked up in university. His command of the language has deteriorated over the years, but Koo still retains a working

command of Arabic.

Whether quoting provisions in the Civil Law Act 1984 or syariah laws of the respective States, Koo has no problems arguing his case in both courts.

At present, he handles mostly civil litigation cases involving companies and at times works together with lawyers from other firms.

In syariah courts, Koo claimed his clients include VIPs involved in divorce, custody of children and inheritance cases but refused to divulge the names of some of the high-profiled people.

"I have also handled cases where Muslims were charged with drinking liquor or gambling. I have no problems. They come to me although I am a non-Muslim," he added.

Koo's family also has no objections to his involvement in what is perceived to be a "Malay-Muslim" field. In fact, one of his sons is following in his footsteps and is pursuing a law degree in the IIU.

"I have no objections. They can be whatever they want as long as it is not illegal or immoral."

But Koo's main concern now is Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's announcement that Malaysia is an Islamic country.

"I understand the Prime Minister probably made the announcement to help Umno overcome Pas' growing influence, especially in the rural Malay areas.

"What I am worried is that there may be overzealous civil servants who go overboard in the implementation of Islamic values. Look at the attempt at renaming Jalan Koo Chong Kong to Jalan Tabung Haji," he said.

But whether the country would go the way of Iran or retain its status quo depends very much on the outcome of the next general election, scheduled in 2004, Koo said.

"I am sure the voters are mature enough and I believe as long as Dr Mahathir still leads the country, Malaysia will be safe," he added.

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