

Not for PM to say one religion superior to another
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COMMENT Bernama recently commented that I have "gone off the rails" because of my Feb 8 op-ed in the Asian Wall Street Journal.

To prove its point, the news agency gave just two examples. First, that I was wrong in saying that Malaysia's needs to grow by eight percent annually over the coming decade to achieve Vision 2020 and higher income status.

In my defence (Who's off the rails, Bernama? Part 1), I revealed the source of my 'error' - a speech and report from Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak. Bernama also took me to task for saying that racial and religious tensions in Malaysia are higher today than when Najib (right) took office and are worse than at any time since the riots of 1969. It pointed out that one week after my article appeared, Najib attended a meeting of the Malaysia Interfaith Council to commemorate World Interfaith Harmony Week.

My crystal ball obviously was out of order, because I did not know that the prime minister would attend that meeting and express his support for the group's work. Bernama is right; he should be praised for doing so.

But Bernama's crystal ball also was out of order, because it did not know that just four days later, Najib would undercut his good deed when he warned against religious pluralism and said that other religions are not equal before Allah.

Asma Uddin, a Muslim attorney in Washington, who is the editor-in-chief of Altmuslimah, has pointed out that there are four different views of religious pluralism among Muslims.

A few, she says, see non-Muslims as the enemy. Others view non-Muslims as people to whom the message of Islam must be preached.

Still others see people of other faiths as deserving of tolerance and mutual respect, while still believing that Islam is superior to other religions. Another group goes beyond mere tolerance and believes that other faiths are equally valid theologically to Islam.

With his comments that other religions deserve respect but are not equal before Allah, Najib appears to hold the third view - that Islam is superior to other religions.

When Islamic scholars and a government think tank said the same thing last December, (Minister in the Prime Minister's Department) Nazri Aziz (left) disagreed and said, "I cannot accept [that]. I believe Islam does not ask you to say things like that."

Nazri told The Malaysian Insider, "You should have enough faith to be confident of your own beliefs and not belittle the beliefs of others. It all comes from inferiority complex."

But it's OK for the prime minister to say that Islam is superior, says Rev Thomas Phillips, president of the Malaysian Consultative Council for Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Sikhism and Taoism. Followers of every faith believe that their religion is the best, he says, and the prime minister is just taking a theological stand.

Phillips is correct that the leaders and adherents of every religion believe that their faith is better than all others. In 2006, Pope Benedict XVI asserted that Christianity is superior to other faiths, and within Christianity, Catholicism is superior to Protestantism.

Even within Islam, there are disagreements. Malaysia recognises only the Sunni form of Islam, and last December religious police arrested over 200 Shiites who were praying on the Day of Ashura.

But the prime minister of Malaysia is not a theologian or religious figure. He is the leader of the government. The constitution simply says that "Islam is the religion of the federation;" the constitution does not say that Islam is superior to all other religions.

It says that other religions "may be practised in peace and harmony". In asserting his views on what should be left to religious leaders as a theological issue, Najib, who says that Malaysia's goal is to enhance the nation's unity, has demeaned the religious beliefs of 40 percent of his fellow citizens who are not Muslim and told them that they are not equal before God.

Jakim to explain

The prime minister reportedly said that he will call on government Islamic agencies such as Jakim to explain the issue of religious pluralism to Muslims.

But even before it could try to explain the issue, Jakim has been told by the Prime Minister's Office that its first act is to identify groups in Malaysia and overseas that are trying to promote pluralism, so it does not take root and "destabilise the country".

Jakim, of course, is the agency that has been on a crusade against Valentine's Day and issued the guidelines that Hardev Kaur enforced when she "recommended" that crosses be removed before the prime minister came to the Catholic archbishop's Christmas Day open house.

Those guidelines even said that Muslims should not attend events where people wear "red costumes like Santa Claus or other garments that reflect religion".

That is the first time I have heard that a Santa Claus suit is a religious garment.

As for Valentine's Day, Jakim's head Wan Mohamad Sheikh Abdul Aziz (right) said that it "is associated with elements of Christianity", and "we just cannot get involved with other religions' worshipping rituals".

Here's a message for Wan Mohamed: When I give my wife chocolate and roses on Valentine's Day, it's about my wife, not Jesus.

When Jakim - an arm of the Malaysian government and part of the Prime Minister's Department - displays this level of ignorance, it casts doubt on their ability to provide guidance and educate Muslims about other peoples' religions.

It also demonstrates the need for a genuine interfaith dialogue in Malaysia.

When he attended the Interfaith Council gathering, Najib said its discussions should be kept private because they are too sensitive for public debate.

Perhaps what is needed is the opposite. If religion is a sensitive issue, then why are people like Siti Nor Bahyah allowed on the airwaves to disparage other religions? Why does Wan Mohamed utter the words "Christianity and vice activities" in the same sentence?

Is it not possible to conduct an informed interfaith dialogue in public in order to strengthen understanding and reduce religious tensions in Malaysia?

Does Najib really believe that Islam is superior to all other religions? Would he really be offended if he entered a room where a crucifix is displayed?

In my Wall Street Journal op-ed, I said that Najib and his government are doing and saying these things to shore up their political base in the Malay community. And I stand by my opinion.

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