

PM meets S'wak church leaders as polls loom
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Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak today initiated a meeting with Sarawakian Christian leaders to listen to their grouses concerning the state's Christians, who make up half the population.

The one-hour meeting comes just three days before Sarawakians go to the polls, amidst widespread discontent over an initial attempt by the Home Ministry to bar a Bahasa Malaysia version of the Bible from entering the state.

This is the first time ever a prime minister had held an official meeting with the Association of Churches in Sarawak (ACS), led by Kuching Anglican archbishop Bolly Lampok.

"The prime minister invited the heads of churches to come to this dialogue," said Bolly when met after the meeting at a hotel in Kuching.

Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Idris Jala, who was also present during the meeting, told reporters that Najib had given his assurance that the impounding and the Home Ministry stamping of copies of the Bible will never happen again.

He said that this assurance was conveyed in writing to the Christian Federation of Malaysia (CFM) and copies of the letter were shown to the 14 ACS leaders present today.

He added that the meeting today was part of the 10-point solution formulated by the government in response to the unhappiness by Christians towards the impounding and stamping of the copies of the Bible.

In a prepared statement, Bolly (left) said that the 10-point solution was a "statement of regret and appeal for forgiveness" by the federal government over the impounding and stamping of the Bahasa Malaysia Bible.

Bolly said that the CFM, the umbrella body for almost all churches in Malaysia, received the 10-point solution "with all the sincerity which they are offered".

"We believe the government's proposals represents a basis for further dialogue and engagement towards a viable long-term and comprehensive solution," he said.

Idris believes that the CFM now accepts the 10-point solution and that the discussions with ACS have proven that the premier was honouring his word by opening up discussions beyond the controversy which arose from the impoundment.

'Very good starting point'

"Today is a very good starting point. Najib said that under the 10-point solution, Christian ministers, including myself, would have regular meetings and dialogues with all the Christian leaders as to look at issues outside the Bible (impoundment).

"(This includes) mission schools, teaching of subjects and others. All those other things will be dealt with through this process and these will take time. You will not resolve this in one

day," he said.

Idris said that while the premier offered no solutions to the ACS today, the premier had taken into considerations the matters raised by the church leaders.

Asked if the meeting today would have an affect on the state election, ACS secretary-general Head Elder Ambrose Linang (right) declined comment, adding that the association was non-partisan.

The controversy over the Bahasa Malaysia Bible erupted earlier this year after the importers in Kuching and Selangor went public over the impoundment of 35,100 copies of the holy book.

The Home Ministry responded by lifting the impoundment after taking a unilateral decision to place a Home Ministry stamp on the books which included serial numbers, angering Christian groups further.

However, on April 2 the federal government, represented by Idris, announced the 10-point solution which would allow the Bahasa Malaysia copies of the Bible to be distributed freely in Sabah and Sarawak and promised that the government would engage in dialogues to resolve other issues raised by the Christian community.

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