

How Idris Jala came to be the 'Al Kitab minister'

Malaysiakini.com

May 24, 2011

Ask any Malaysian politician to handle a hot potato religious issue and most will not even go near it with a 10-foot pole.

But when the row over the Bible in the Malay language threatened discomfort among Christians and Muslims alike, many were rather surprised when Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Idris Jala was picked to solve the impasse.

It was an eyebrow-raiser since Idris is no politician in the first place. Some even went to the extent of questioning his capability in handling the row, especially when he was appointed to the cabinet to helm the Performance Management and Delivery Unit (Pemandu) and that he was a 'minister without a portfolio'.

In this third and final part of the exclusive interview, Idris Jala reveals to Malaysiakini just how he became Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak's go-to guy on the Al Kitab issue.

Following Idris around in his roadshow talk circuit, it may become obvious to one that he is extremely proud of his heritage, peppering his speeches with anecdotes of his Kelabit ancestry and Christian faith.

A prominent member of the Sidang Injil Borneo - an influential evangelical denomination in Sabah and Sarawak - tales of him leading a 'revival' in his birthplace in Bario, when still a teenager, have become stuff of urban legends.

'I was the only one left'

But the key factor of him not being a member of any political party was that which practically sealed the deal for Najib to thrust him into the spokesperson position for the Al Kitab row, beating off other federal Christian ministers such as Maximus Ongkili and Bernard Dompok.

"The PM actually wanted a non-partisan and also a Christian. So when we looked around for whoever who is not a member of any party and a Christian as well, I was the only one. I understand the Bible and I can talk about the Bible," he said.

And that was how the '10-point' solution came about - also dubbed as the 'Idris Jala Formula' by the unfamiliar - a label that he detests, saying that it was entirely a cabinet decision and consensus.

The issue of the Bible in the Malay language hit the fan in March when church groups made a very public appeal to the government to release 35,000 copies that had been impounded.

One batch of 5,000 copies was confiscated and held in Port Klang in March 2009, while 30,000 were kept in the Home Ministry office in Kuching.

The government's explanation then was that the copies of the Bible contravened a 1986 cabinet directive banning non-Muslims from using the terms 'Allah', 'Solat', 'Kiblat' and 'Kaabah'.

However, the conditions set by the government to release the Bible - pertaining to Home Ministry stamps on the copies - varied almost every week until Idris announced a '10-point solution' and the unconditional release of the 35,000 copies.

Among the solutions were allowing the Al Kitab to be printed locally in Peninsular Malaysia, Sabah and Sarawak, and that the Bible in all languages, including in Bahasa Malaysia/Bahasa Indonesia, can be imported into the country.

However, the Malay-language Bible must have the words 'Christian Publication' and the symbol of the cross printed on the front cover.

There's no pleasing everyone

While Idris said that "a majority of Christians are pleased with the solution", there were still nagging criticisms from some Christian groups. But more worryingly, it has also brought on a new wave of unhappiness among certain Muslim groups.

Most notably, Pembela, a coalition of Muslim groups, said it was mulling legal action over the 10-point solution on grounds that it violated the federal constitution and laws that protect the position of Islam.

"There was much criticism, but this is life. You can't please everyone and with certain things that you do, some people are happy or not happy. But two things have to be clear: is your conscience clear, and do you think it's the right thing?"

"We live in society where we have to respect and tolerate one another because we live in a place that is highly plural and multireligious.

"But I am glad I was part of the process and I have no regrets. You can't please everybody, but you can try to please the majority. My conscience is very clear."

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