

Bishop's place in Najib's team to Vatican unseemly
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COMMENT In the wake of grave developments on the political front, the Archbishop of Kuala Lumpur Murphy Pakiam must give serious thought to the propriety of his being part of the delegation that will be led by Prime Minister Najib Razak for a visit to Pope Benedict XVI on July 18.

Political developments in the country, especially in connection with the controversial Bersih march, affect the credibility of the Najib administration in ways the Catholic community cannot be indifferent to.

Hence the titular head of Catholics in the archdiocese of KL, the biggest in the country, cannot remain unconcerned about these developments, not only because of their weightiness but also for their connection to matters of deep concern to practitioners of the faith.

The PM's call on Pope Benedict at the latter's summer residence outside Rome has been reported as foreshadowing the establishment of diplomatic relations between the Vatican and Malaysia.

But sources say the visit has more to do with Pope Benedict's desire to promote Christian-Muslim dialogue than with the setting up of diplomatic ties.

It appears the PM's Department would like to put the most favourable spin on the visit - as presaging the establishment of ties.

With a general election on the cards, it is said that news of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Malaysia and the Vatican would draw good vibes from the nation's 850,000 Catholics, a community whose political awareness makes it highly sensitive to the delicacy of its position in a Muslim-dominant nation.

Malaysia has about 2.2 million Christians in a population of 28 million. The Catholic composition of this sector is large, not just by dint of number but by its heft in the educational and care-giving sectors, two areas of traditional concern to the faithful.

Malaysia is one of 17 countries in the world that does not have diplomatic ties with the Vatican. Sources say the establishment of such ties entails a more involved process than just a visit from one head of state to another could accomplish.

The demonisation of Ambiga

But the Najib administration, with an eye to the photo opportunity that a call on the Pope would entail, albeit in connection with Christian-Muslim dialogue and not the establishment of diplomatic relations, may want the highest placed Catholic cleric in Malaysia in the picture, presumably for the impact it would have on Malaysian Catholics.

That impact would be favourable had it not been for the kind of duplicity that has come to characterise the administration in matters to do with Muslim-Christian relations in Malaysia.

For example, in Kota Baru several days ago, the PM, at a gathering estimated at 20,000, described Ambiga Sreenevasan, chairperson of Bersih, the pressure group for electoral reform, as "anti-Islam" for the watching brief she held as the then president of the Bar Council in the Lina Joy case a few years ago.

Lina Joy was a Muslim who converted to Catholicism before marrying a member of the faith. She filed a case against the Registration Department for maintaining that her religious confession in her MyKad be marked as Muslim when she had converted out of the religion.

She lost the landmark case at every stage of its adjudication in the courts in what many felt was a

violation of the freedom of religion guarantees in the Federal Constitution.

Najib's tagging of Ambiga as "anti-Islam" was an astonishing misconstruction of her professional role as legal counsel in the Lina Joy case. But this is precisely the kind of distortion that has come to mark the PM's deportment in matters of grave concern.

Pope Benedict has made the defense of freedom of religion a foundational plank of his papacy. He is certain to look askance at a leader who has little or no grasp of professional legal norms, let alone constitutional ones.

Crackdown on Bersih

In connection with the controversy-ridden Bersih 'March for Democracy', the PM's conduct was equally questionable.

The pressure group had wanted to hold a street march. But, in deference to the king who intervened to head off a confrontation between what would have been rival marchers from Bersih and other strident bodies, Bersih opted to hold a rally in the Stadium Merdeka.

Bersih's right to hold a street rally was affirmed by the Malaysian Consultative Congress of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Sikhism and Taoism, of which Archbishop Pakiam is a member of repute.

Initially, Najib was on record as saying that Bersih would be allowed to hold a stadium rally but he later denied this.

Flummoxed, Bersih went ahead and insisted on their right to hold their rally at Stadium Merdeka.

This led to a situation where a ham-fisted police force came down hard on Bersih supporters, detaining several political activists even before the rally planned for July 9.

A few days before the Bersih gathering, the PM, speaking to a gathering of silat groups, made strident allusions to Bersih, holding forth in tones that held eerie echoes of his deportment at a another rally, nearly a quarter century earlier, when he led an inflammatory Umno Youth demonstration in a stadium in Kuala Lumpur that heightened racial tensions in that fraught time.

Archbishop Pakiam does not need lessons in moral theology to know that licentious conduct, if not repented, begets the same.

The PM may have whispered into Pakiam's ears in an unctuous chat about his early days in a Catholic school at an Open House hosted by the Archbishop on Christmas Day, a function that later became controversial because of untoward arrangements requested by a flunkey from the PM's Department.

But if education in a Catholic school has any meaning, it is for its emphasis on value-formation.

From the start of his papacy in 2005, Pope Benedict has demonstrated in speeches and encyclicals that few moral theologians are his equal in the cogency of his arguments for the link between Christian values and universal values.

To a leader of the Pope's intellectual mettle, it would be an embarrassment for Pakiam to play the role of equerry on behalf of one who needs to do some serious thinking about universal values, the promotion of which is the aim of Benedict's push for dialogue between Muslims and Christians.

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