

Vatican: Najib can't have his cake and eat it too
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The meeting today between Pope Benedict XVI and Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak at the pontiff's summer residence in Castel Gondolfo was considered important enough to draw coverage from the international press.

The International Herald Tribune's weekend edition (July 16-17) carried a fairly lengthy article on the scheduled meeting, speculating on its significance and ramifications.

The story by a staff correspondent was notable for its acceptance of the conventional wisdom, which is that the meeting reflects the Najib government's desire to mend ties with the Christian community in Malaysia, which is nine per cent of the country's 28 million population.

(The Catholic presence is about 850,000 among 2.2 million Christians.)

The article noted, correctly it would seem, that while Najib's meeting would be well received by Christians "it would not necessarily increase support" by them for the ruling coalition that the PM heads.

A Malaysian Christian family leaves a church after a Sunday service in Petaling Jaya The article broached the question of what it would take to augment that support – a stop to "harassment" of Christians and no more "church bombings", opined Farish A Noor, among local political analysts cited in the story.

The article stopped short of delving into a more critical issue which is whether the government itself would attempt to shed two traits that hinder Muslim-Christian ties in Malaysia.

The first is its pretense that the freedom of religion guarantee in the Federal Constitution exists to be honoured in the breach than in the observance.

And the second obstacle to smooth Muslim-Christian relations is the government's stance that it somehow embellishes its Islamic credentials among Malaysia's majority Muslim community - 65 percent of the population - if it is seen to stay clear of links to Christianity.

Symbolic plus but a substantive dud

Malaysia's Christians have come to regard these two features as pliable only to alterations in the mindset of those who hold them rather than to other factors, such as the establishment of ties between the Vatican and Wisma Putra, the government agency that handles the country's foreign relations.

Thus the visit of Najib to Pope Benedict is likely to be seen by Malaysian Catholics in much the same way that many Malaysians have come to view the government's slogan of '1Malaysia' – as a symbolic plus but a substantive dud.

Malaysian Christians have long been leery of a trait displayed by leaders from Umno, the dominant party in the ruling coalition, when it came to Muslim-Christian matters - being effusive in front but duplicitous behind.

A typical example of this was exhibited by the prime minister himself recently when he denounced Bersih chairperson Ambiga Sreenevasan as anti-Islam for holding a watching brief for the Muslim convert to Catholicism Lina Joy.

By the same token, Najib may as well count Pope Benedict among Islam's enemies for having baptised Egyptian journalist Magdi Allam, which the pontiff did in 2008.

Pope Benedict has made defence of the freedom of religion a cornerstone of his papacy, a right

guaranteed by the Malaysian Constitution but one for which the Najib administration and its predecessors have shown dubious regard.

To Malaysian Christians, Islam is not only the country's official religion, which the constitution affirms and Christians have not hesitated to respect, it is for all intents and purposes, the federation's supreme religion.

Christians know it in their marrow that this 'supremacy' status is important to the psyche of Malaysia's Muslims which is why they regard efforts by the government to hold interfaith meetings with the representatives of religions other than Islam with bemusement.

These meetings are doomed to failure because of the supremacist strain to the Malaysian Muslim persona.

Stalled interfaith initiative

Two examples last year served to reinforce the point.

In the first instance, an interfaith initiative organised by a representative of the Prime Minister's Department was rendered awry when the Deputy PM, Muhyiddin Yassin, in obvious placation of the unease felt by Muslim supremacists, deprecated as "small fry" the status of the interreligious panel the late Illani Ishak sought to convene, with Muslim members included.

In the second example, no less than the prime minister himself was quoted as reassuring Muslims that the supremacy of Islam's status would not be dented by his government's move to create an interfaith panel.

This time this reassurance stirred unease among non-Muslims who would be more comfortable with their membership of an interfaith panel if some uneasy facts are tacitly acknowledged rather than publicly trumpeted.

At this, one Christian representative in the interfaith panel, Rev Thomas Phillips, moved to tamp down the controversy by offering the view, in extenuation of the PM's remarks that all religions like to think that their claims to truth are indubitable.

This is true except that in Malaysia the government goes to extraordinary lengths, including ignoring the freedom of religion guarantee in the Constitution, to safeguard the Muslim supremacist position.

Aware of the oxymoronic strain to the government's attitude, Malaysian Catholics are apt to regard the today's Pope-Najib meeting with the skepticism three decades of uneasy government-church relations have schooled them to adopt: The government can have its cake in thinking that meeting will play well among the faithful, but it won't be allowed to eat it too which would be the case if Catholics, as a result, are moved to vote Umno-BN.

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