

Wikileaks: Najib's Islamic moderation lip service
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Prime Minister Najib Razak, while attempting to portray Malaysia as a moderate voice in the Muslim, is doing just the opposite in his attempts to woo Malay support, according to a leaked US embassy cable.

Commenting on Najib's administration's handling of the 'Allah' and other religious issues, the embassy conveyed scepticism as to how far the PM would go to show that Malaysia was indeed tolerant of religious freedom.

"There has long been conflict between the ruling party's commitment in principle to freedom of religion and toleration of diverse views in practice," read a US embassy cable sent to the US State Department on Jan 12 last year.

"Najib's public relations efforts to downplay differences among the races and religions and promote the concepts of toleration and moderation notwithstanding, he appears to have hardened popular views since the advent of his administration given the steps hardliners in the ruling party have forced on their fellow Umno members."

Posted on Wikileaks last week, the cable cited the 'Allah' and Kartika issues and the cow's head incident and other issues related to the practice of religious freedom that had cast doubt on the PM's sincerity on the issue.

"Despite its extensive efforts to reassure expatriate and foreign audiences, the Malaysian government has focused only on protection of property and persons, foregoing an opportunity to make a clear statement on the maintenance of freedom of religion in the country," it said.

According to the cable, it was believed that Najib was primarily interested in gaining the support of the Malay electorate at the expense of creating a true environment of religious freedom.

This, it said, was evident in how the government had used the judiciary to intervene on the 'Allah' issue and how it manipulated public statements including those of the Agong and the Selangor sultan, to send a message that the BN would not back down on the 'Allah' ban.

This contrasts with the PM's statements abroad, such as his lecture at Oxford in May titled 'Coalition of Moderates and Inter- Civilisational Understanding' where he sold the idea of Malaysia as a moderate nation that celebrated its diversity.

"Malaysians accept their diversity. We do not merely tolerate each other but we also embrace and celebrate," Najib had said during his visit to the United Kingdom, at the invitation of the Oxford Centre of Islamic Studies (Oxcis).

Mere 'rhetoric'

The US cable said that the PM has not shown any effort towards achieving moderation aside from "rhetoric".

PM Najib Razak speaks to the press outside the gutted administrative block of Metro Tabernacle church 1"(Najib's) failure thus far to record much in the way of tangible results, beyond more forward-looking and liberal rhetoric, leads to popular suspicion.

"The conventional wisdom among most non-ruling coalition Chinese and Indians, for example, seems to be that the ruling party has orchestrated the 'Allah' issue so as to increase support among Malay voters by fomenting division between Muslims on one side and Christians or secularists on the other in the opposition coalition," it said.

It added that Najib's earnest in implementing significant political reform was "debatable" and questions if it is mere "lip service" to win back conservative Malay support after serious setbacks in 2008.

It noted widespread cynicism and "distrust" amongst the non-Muslims at the PM's sincerity on religious tolerance.

"The popular view is widely and deeply held among non-Malay, non-Muslims that the government is antagonistic toward other religions and is engaged in a long-term effort to expand Islam's primacy in Malaysian society," it said.

Religious controversy continues to blight Malaysian politics as the 13th general election looms, from the 'Christian PM conspiracy' tacked on the DAP to the recent Jais raid on a church in Damansara Utama, Selangor over alleged conversion of Muslims, that has spun off an apostasy sideshow.

Even Penang's Islamic authorities attempts at exercising tolerance recently, through their ban on loudspeakers at dawn, has become fair game for BN politicians.

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