

Church leaders led round the bush again

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COMMENT Christian church leaders were once again led a merry dance around the bush when Prime Minister Najib Razak hosted a lunch for them yesterday.

The Najib administration, with 13 cabinet ministers including the deputy prime minister in attendance in an ostensible show of collegiality on matters affecting the community, gave vent to the usual saccharine assurances of solicitude for Christian concerns while leaving the deeper misgivings of the community unappeased.

The mainstream newspapers this morning gave the expected photo play to the occasion with accompanying articles that conveyed the point that Christian concerns were addressed by the PM's assurances.

With a general election imminent, the objective of the lunch meeting was to assure Christian leaders and their followers that their concerns will not suffer from government neglect.

Najib assured them the government would consult with mission schools before deciding on the appointment of principals; that the teaching of the catechism of the faith would be allowed in mission schools after hours; and that tax exemption would be granted on monies raised by Christian charities.

None of these assurances is in any way new, though in recent instances, one or the other was honoured in the breach than in the observance.

Nothing of substance

Christian leaders who attended the meeting yesterday did not go in the hope of being reassured on matters they consider de rigueur; they had gone to raise concerns in which they had hoped to hear of decisive action taken to remove their tension-igniting causes.

A lunch meeting of church leaders with the PM in May last year was similarly laved in a public relations glow but issued in nothing of substance to tamp down growing tensions between Christians and the government.

NONE In fact, last May's meeting was followed by reports in Umno-supporting blogs and the Umno-owned newspaper, Utusan Malaysia, that Christian groups were plotting the dethronement of Islam as the official religion of the country.

Subsequent police investigations into the matter drew a blank. But reports of Christian proselytisation of Muslims did not abate.

Last August, Christian groups were reported by Jais (Selangor Islamic Affairs Department) to be attempting to convert Muslims through the provision of charity to poverty-stricken members of the faith.

Like the earlier reports of Christian plans to dethrone Islam, Muslim-led investigations did not unearth evidence in support of Christian proselytisation claims.

Anglican Bishop Ng Moon Hing, chairperson of the Christian Federation of Malaysia, had prepared a speech for delivery on the occasion of the PM's hosting of the lunch yesterday. He did not get to air it, for good reason.

The text alludes to matters - the need to build more places of worship, the need for burial grounds, the

removal of a government ban on the use of the term 'Allah' in Christian publications, and the necessity of a ministry to handle matters concerning non-Muslim religions - that church leaders have raised in countless discussions with the authorities in the past, but with no discernible success.

The Muslim lady who spoke in church

There is mounting puzzlement in the Christian community as to why its leaders persist in believing that anything substantive would come from meetings between church leaders and Umno-BN top brass except as acknowledgment of the wisdom that it is better to "jaw-jaw" than to skulk in silence.

church christian in kuala lumpur 1But this charade of periodic public expressions of Umno-BN solicitude for Christian concerns followed by covert indifference towards the same has disabused the Christian faithful of illusions their leaders may continue to suffer from as to the actual realities on the ground.

They know from long experience from which to distill an indisputable conclusion that Muslim leaders who think that they can run with the hares of inter-religious goodwill, when it suits them, and hunt with the hounds of Islamic supremacy, when that's expedient, are not to be trusted.

They would prefer to place their trust in such Muslim leaders as the one who on Christmas Day, quietly slipped into a church in the Klang Valley and before the service started, was invited by the parish priest to briefly address the congregation.

She went up to the pulpit, wished the parishioners a blessed occasion, and spoke of what she intimated would be imminent deliverance of the country from the duplicity and chicanery of the powers-that-be.

Heartfelt applause resounded in the church as the tudung-wearing lady wafted out, like the angelic apparitions that greeted the shepherds two millennia ago on the birth of what Christians regard as the Prince of Peace.

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