

Hindu Endowments Board not a religious entity
MalaysiaKini.com
February 4, 2012
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The Hindu Endowments Board, Penang (HEB) is not a religious entity as claimed by a recent letter by 'one panthal operator' (Malaysiakini January 26).

The said operator seems to be ignorant of the objectives and functions of the HEB. The board, being a statutory body, is only a trustee to manage the endowments in the form of 'money' and 'land'.

Religious affairs, restricting music nor songs, donations, including the building and consecrations of temples are not their mandatory businesses. The board could be sued for such abuses and encroachments in religious affairs.

Section 7 of the HEB Ordinance, Chapter 175 empowers the board to collect incomes (not donations) derived from the assets and properties vested with the board.

The thaneer panthals (free drinks stalls) and business stalls meeting on Jan 18 for this year's coming Thaipusam festival should have been conducted by Hindu NGOs established for Hindu religious purposes.

The call for the presence of its chairperson or commissioners and the board secretary, who is a civil servant, to such panthal meetings is legally unwarranted and uncalled for.

As a former government officer and its HEB assistant secretary I wish to state that neither its chairperson nor any commissioner had ever attended such meetings in respect of Thaipusam nor other festivals celebrated in the endowments.

In the past the stall panthal operators individually sought permits from Majlis Perbandaran Pulau Pinang (MPPP) and the council had charged a certain fee for removal of rubbish in the city.

In order to benefit the board financially, the then MPPP secretary, the late P Rajendra, who was also a board commissioner, delegated to the board the functions to collect the said charges for the services rendered in the removal of rubbish at stall panthals.

The board's involvement did not go further than that in the past. Its commissioners did not take any part in the religious business of the Hill Top Bala Thandayuthapani temple nor any other situated in the trusts under its jurisdiction.

To my mind such meddling and interference are prima facie acts of abuse of power according to the HEB Ordinance and Article 11 of the federal constitution and that the DAP had sued the board for legal court remedies and had also obtained certain court injunctions.

The current board and its management committee's constant interference in religious affairs has become a habit of certain board commissioners lately and misconceptions related to the conduct of the religion and burial rites of Hindus have been 'illegally' encouraged by the board to a greater extent.

Perhaps, the HEB and its commissioners should absolve themselves from the religious affairs of temples than to be the target of onslaughts and unwarranted statements from the Hindu public.

I strongly believe that the current religious encroachments and abuses perpetuated by the commissioners of the board, if left unchecked, would cause great damage and liability to the Pakatan Rakyat government's sustenance and credibility that once plagued the former BN state government.

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