

Christians hold prayer marathon in lead-up to GE13

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By Aidila Razak

As the nation braces for what is expected to be the hardest fought election yet, Christians all over Malaysia are taking turns to bow their heads in prayer.

If things go as planned, every minute of the day from dissolution day on April 3 until polling day, at least one Christian will be praying for "truth, justice and righteousness" to prevail in the 13th general election.

"We may even extend it to until after polling day, to pray for peace after the results have been announced," Prayer United secretariat member Chrisanne Chin told Malaysiakini.

"The response has been very good so far. We even have people praying in the wee hours, but we do have trouble getting sign ups for the afternoons."

She said the idea for the prayer network, which consists of nine Christian fellowships, was first mooted two months ago as Malaysia has been undergoing a "critical period in history".

"It is also the 50th year - the jubilee anniversary - of the formation of Malaysia, and to us, this has a very important and spiritual meaning," she said, although noting that the prayer drive had not been conducted in the previous polls general.

This effort is one of many that the Christian community has undertaken in preparation for the polls.

The National Evangelical Christian Fellowship (NECF) - which is also a part of the prayer network - for example, has produced a booklet to guide its followers in their vote.

Among others, the NECF advises Christians to vote to stop the intimidation and discrimination of religious minorities, the spreading of hate against other cultures "like through Biro Tatanegara" and the undue influence of religious authorities in the administration of the state.

It also urged its followers to vote for a government which will "discipline overzealous 'Little Napoleons' ... who thwart cabinet policies aimed at protecting and enhancing inter-racial harmony and religious freedom".

On another note, the Council of Churches of Malaysia (CCM) - in collaboration with the Catholic Research Centre - has produced a video, which Chin said has gone "viral" on Youtube and Facebook to help Christians in deciding who to vote for.

In the three-minute video clip, Christians are urged to be well-informed about the issues and policies put forth, and to vote for equality, sustainability, freedom and justice.

"Christians care, therefore we vote. It is our moral duty," the video states.

Increasing political participation

In 2008, AFP reported that Malaysia's churches cautiously waded into politics by handing out brochures urging congregations to weigh the political parties on their track record of "freedom of religion, conscience and speech" before casting their ballots in the 12th general election.

The community, which makes up about 10 percent of the population, had been under the spotlight in the past few years over the ban on the use of the word 'Allah' by non-Muslims, including in Malay-language Bibles and Christian publications.

They were also under fire for alleged proselytisation of Muslims, following a Selangor Islamic Affairs Department (Jais) inspection of the Damansara Utama Methodist Church in 2011.

At a Christian Federation of Malaysia (CFM) high-tea last Christmas, Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak offered his "friendship" to Christians and assured them that the government has not "forgotten" them.

He said that the government has long engaged the community, albeit on the quiet. An example of this, he added, is the lifting of restrictions on Christian pilgrims from Malaysia to Jerusalem.

In Sabah, where there is a larger Christian population, several BN leaders had last month handed over RM4.5 million worth of goods to heads of churches.

Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS) president Joseph Pairin Kitingan, Upko president Bernard Dompok and Parti Bersatu Rakyat Sabah (PBRS) president Joseph Kurup had done so together - a rare sight among the three BN parties which represent the mostly Christian Kadazandusun Murut community.

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