

## **'Allah' is more than just a word**

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**By Bob Teoh**

COMMENT With the Perkasa duo, Ibrahim Ali and Zulkifli Noordin, entering the fray as Umno-sponsored parliamentary candidates, racism and religious bigotry is set to rear its ugly head again, especially over the 'Allah' controversy.

A manifestation of such extremism is the extent to which fringe Malay groups like Perkasa would go to advance their agenda. Cause for concern is their incendiary speeches over the controversy of the use of the word 'Allah' to refer to God by non-Muslims. Ibrahim even suggested recently an open season for burning bibles (pesta membakar Alkitab). Nothing can be more seditious and incendiary. Yet this was tolerated by the authorities.

Perkasa president Ibrahim (left) is seeking re-election as Pasir Mas MP in Kelantan as an Umno-friendly candidate against PAS. The Umno candidate has withdrawn by not submitting his nomination papers to make way for Ibrahim. Former prime minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad is not only patron of Perkasa but it was he who suggested that Ibrahim be fielded as an Umno-BN candidate in this general elections.

Perkasa vice-president, Zulkifli Noordin, has moved from his Kulim Bandar Baru MP seat in the north to challenge Khalid Samad of PAS in Shah Alam, Selangor, on the Umno-BN ticket. Like Ibrahim, he was previously elected on the opposition ticket but later crossed over to be BN-friendly Independent MPs.

On the surface, the controversy is deceptively simple. It boils down to one thing; can non-Muslims use the word 'Allah' to refer to God. Perkasa, BN and the Muslim establishment maintain that the word is exclusive to Muslims. Their opponents in the Pakatan Rakyat coalition say they have no problem with the issue as the word existed even before the arrival of Islam.

But in the battle for the Malay heartland, PAS, the Islamic party within the opposition coalition, was forced to back away under the onslaught by Umno and Perkasa.

But the truth is that the 'Allah' controversy is more than just a word. Indeed, all states and federal territories have not only passed fatwas covering more than three dozen words that non-Muslims are prohibited from using. These fatwas which are seemingly applicable only to Muslims have been gazetted by the respective state

authorities. This in effect makes them applicable even to non-Muslims.

For instance, a fatwa was passed in Sabah under the Enakmen Pentadbiran Undang-Undang Islam 1992 and was gazetted on June 1, 2003 where 32 words are prohibited to non-Muslims. These included Allah (God), Ibadah (Worship), Iman (Faith), Rasul (Apostle or messenger), Injil (Gospel), Nabi (Prophet), Wahyu (Revelation) and much more.

The first of such fatwas was gazetted by the Terengganu state government under Umno in 1980. The following year, the Alkitab or the Malay-language Bible on grounds that it is a threat to national security by Mahathir. The ban has since been modified to a restricted ban but the Alkitab is still considered a threat to national security.

Two-thirds of Christians affected

The 'Allah' controversy is more than just a word. It is about freedom of religion and about unreasonable government policies and laws that seek to place non-Muslims under the scope of Islamic enactments and jurisdiction.

Two-thirds of the church in Malaysia is made up of bumiputera Christians in Sabah and Sarawak who use the Alkitab which contains the word 'Allah' to refer to God. They view the prohibition on the use of the 'Allah' word and restricted use of the Alkitab as infringing on their freedom of religion.

Some of their leaders have pointed out that as bumiputera Christians, they are also accorded a special position by Article 153 of the federal constitution in much the same manner as Malays and other bumiputeras.

They also point to the Sabah 20-point and Sarawak 18-point Agreements signed with Malaya upon the formation of Malaysia. The first of these is freedom of religion.

The 'Allah' controversy attracted attention at the recent Association of Churches of Sarawak biennial general meeting in Kuching. In his address, ACS chairperson the Anglican Bishop Rev Bolly Lapok, who is also the Archbishop of the Anglican Church in South-East Asia, pointed out that, "It is a grave mistake to cuddle extremism even for a minor political exigency because to do so is to expose Malaysians to something so base and so evil."

He said the time has come for the church to speak up and the "way forward is no longer found in the status quo which expects the church to remain keeping her

mouth shut."

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