

## **Bumi churches hit back at anti-Christian campaign**

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**By Bob Teoh**

Stung by the incendiary anti-Christian campaign in the run-up to polling day, bumiputera churches in Sabah and Sarawak are hitting back with unprecedented vigour.

A "pastoral communiqué" on the 'Allah' issue has been hammered out to be circulated on Friday, just two days before polling to all city and interior churches.

The move is unprecedented in its unusually hard hitting language uncharacteristic of bumiputera pastors and church leaders who have traditionally maintained a cordial relationship with the government.

NONE "We, the native Christians of Sabah and Sarawak have kept silent for a considerable length of time. Some have taken our silence to mean something else. Therefore, the time has now come for us to speak," the communiqué said in its opening line.

"Surely the way forward is no longer found in the status quo which expects the bumiputera Church in Sabah and Sarawak to remain silent," it added.

"Two-thirds of the Church in Malaysia is made up of bumiputera Christians in Sabah and Sarawak. In this respect, we speak with pastoral and moral responsibility and authority against religious bigotry, racism and extremism in any form.

"But we are not alone as our non-bumiputera brothers and sisters in Christ have also expressed similar concern over the 'Allah' issue on other occasions. We, therefore, speak as one voice," the communiqué said.

Call on EC to act swiftly

Meanwhile, their non-bumiputera counterparts in the peninsula issued an equally hard hitting statement yesterday.

The Christian Federation of Malaysia (CFM), the umbrella Christian body, issued a strongly-worded statement at what they call a "despicable and heinous" anti-Christian message on election campaign boards and demanded the Election Commission (EC) act swiftly to douse the sparks of such religious fear-mongering from catching fire once more.

seremban church door burned 110110 02 "These fears are real given the recent history of Church burnings and threats to burn the Bible in Bahasa Malaysia," said Rev Eu Hong Seng, chairperson of CFM, and its executive committee.

"The message pits one community (Muslims) against Christians by spreading fear through scare tactics using the issue of 'Allah' which the High Court had allowed as a right to freedom of religion."

(The decision is under appeal by the government to be heard on May 8, three days after polling day). BN has since denied the allegations and claimed they did not put up the advertising boards.

Clearly upset with Najib Razak's flip-flop over the 'Allah' and Alkitab controversy, the bumiputera communiqué pointed out that, "when the caretaker prime minister first mooted the Global Movement of Moderates, we were enthusiastic in extending our support for the initiative.

But ironically, the movement is being incessantly and blatantly distracted by unscrupulous elements from within its own ranks, whose strange proclivity is leaning more towards racism and extremism."

Authorities' tolerance of bigotry hit

"A manifestation of such extremism is the extent to which fringe groups within our midst would go to advance their racism and religious bigotry over the controversy of the use of the word 'Allah' to refer to God by non-Muslims.

"They have even suggested an open season for burning Bibles (pesta membakar Alkitab). Nothing can be more seditious and incendiary. Yet they were tolerated by the authorities," it added.

It argued that the 'Allah' controversy is not really about religion as such but about unreasonable government policies and laws.

"In the face of such unreasonableness we cannot and should not remain silent. The time for us to speak has come," it said.

It was also careful to point out that, "Indeed, in speaking we are mindful to extend love to those who may not agree with us. The essence of God is love (1 John 4:8) thus we are compelled to love even our enemies (Matthew 5:44)".

The outrage has been simmering for a while but it was at the recent biennial general meeting in Kuching of the Association of Sarawak Churches, the umbrella Christian body in the state, that its chairperson, Rev Bolly Lapok, the Anglican Archbishop of Sarawak as well as the newly appointed Archbishop of the Anglican Church in South-East Asia, delivered his no holds-barred address.

Those involved in drafting the communiqué revealed that the body of the text was largely taken from the Archbishop address with his consent.

It was known as the "three Ks initiative" with members of the drafting committee including their lawyers drawn from Kuching, Kota Kinabalu and Kuala Lumpur scrutinizing the numerous drafts.

Meanwhile, most churches, especially those in the remote interior are shifting the Sunday worship to Saturday to ensure their members vote in time as polling there closes earlier at 1pm.

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