

Bishop astonished by Muslim NGOs' reaction

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By Terence Netto

Catholic Bishop Dr Paul Tan Chee Ing said he was astonished at the umbrage felt by some Muslim NGOs over Vatican envoy to Malaysia Archbishop Joseph Marino's support for the local church's campaign to use the term 'Allah' in faith education and in their rituals of prayer and worship.

In his first interview with the local media, the papal nuncio - the Vatican's equivalent of an ambassador to Malaysia - said that although he recognised the ongoing court case on the use of the 'Allah' term as an internal matter, he supported Christian Federation of Malaysia's arguments for the use of the term as "quite logical and acceptable".

Archbishop Joseph Marino's (left) remarks have drawn fire from Malay rights groups Jati and Perkasa which have demanded that Marino apologise and withdraws his remarks within seven days, failing which the government should close down the embassy.

"The nuncio's remarks should not be seen as an interference in Malaysia's internal affairs any more than the demand of some demonstrators at some embassies in Kuala Lumpur recently that our government reject the goings-on in Egypt and Syria constitutes interference in those nations' affairs," said Bishop Paul Tan, who is the head of the Catholic Church in the Malacca-Johor diocese.

"Certain issues are of such spiraling resonance that they transcend the boundaries within which they are properly dealt with such that comment on them by parties seemingly attenuated from the fray cannot be regarded as exceeding the bounds of propriety," argued the Jesuit-trained prelate.

Marino's disclaimer of intent

"The events in Syria and Egypt are of that nature and likewise the use of the term 'Allah'. Try as we might, these are matters that cannot be confined within the parameters of their particular jurisdictions.

"They have an international resonance and comment and concern expressed about them are as inevitable as concern from Indonesia's neighbours would be on the question of open burning on the island of Sumatra," expatiated the bishop.

"You will notice the nuncio uttered a disclaimer of intent to interfere in our internal affairs before giving an opinion on the logic behind arguments for the use of the 'Allah' term."

Bishop Paul Tan described as "gimmicky sabre-rattling" the demand of some agitated NGOs that the government close down the Vatican's embassy if the envoy does not apologise and retract his remarks on the Allah issue.

NONE"Rash talk is cheap especially on the part of those who do not have the responsibility," said the bishop.

Marino, 60, arrived in Malaysia in mid-April as the first papal ambassador to Malaysia, two years after Malaysia established diplomatic ties with the Vatican.

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