

'Allah ban rooted firmly in politics'

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COMMENT The Home Ministry first banned the Al-Kitab, or Christian Bible in Malay, on December 22, 1981. This little Christmas gift was posted to churches barely four months after Dr Mahathir Mohamad took power as premier, and Musa Hitam became home minister.

The ministry's letter thundered that the Al-Kitab "is prejudicial to the national interest and security of the federation and is prohibited absolutely throughout Malaysia," according to a chronology provided by the Christian Federation of Malaysia, or CFM.

church christian in kuala lumpur 1Yet the government revised its ban four months later, in March 1982, declaring that the ban would not apply to the use of the Al-Kitab by Christians in church.

The ban was loosely applied. Despite the so-called threat to national security, there were no body searches by riot police, crouched under the eaves of churches, to check that worshippers had not smuggled their bibles out.

It took another four and a half years before Mahathir decided they had to defend "Allah" again. Mahathir elbowed Musa Hitam out of the home ministry and took over the portfolio in March 1986.

On Dec 5, 1986, the home ministry announced a ban on Christians' use of four Arabic words: "Allah", "Kaabah" (the sacred Muslim shrine in Mekah), "Baitullah" (house of God) and "solat" (prayer).

Objection not theological

The Umno-led government's vacillations have made it clear that its objection to the use of "Allah" was not theological.

The government would have been relentless in pursuing its ban, had it truly believed that Muslims' understanding of "Allah" as a unitary divine figure would have been "confused" by Christians' worship of the Trinity, united in one God.

Instead, its enthusiasm for the ban has oscillated with its political fortunes.

azlanUmno has insisted on a monopoly on a shopping list of Arabic words. Umno's political and economic strategies have been based on monopolies since 1969, for instance, through Telekom, Tenaga, Bernas, Pos Malaysia, PLUS, and any number of businesses headed by its corporate champion, Syed Mokhtar Al-Bukhary.

In 1988, Selangor, led by Umno's Muhammad Muhammad Taib, enacted a legislative ban on the use of 25 Arabic words by non-Muslims, including "Allah", "Nabi" (prophet) and, inexplicably, "Haji".

All state assemblies at the time – including Kelantan – were run by Umno, except for Penang under Gerakan, and Sarawak under Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu (PBB).

All Umno states followed Selangor with similar legislation. Prior to 1988, only Terengganu, under Umno's Wan Mokhtar Ahmad, had quietly passed a ban on non-Muslim use of "Allah", in 1980.

Despite Umno's legislation, no action was taken against non-Muslims. The word "Allah" continued to be used to mean "God" in Arabic, as it has been since the sixth century, and in Malay, as it has been since 1629.

Meanwhile, Islam has continued to grow in Malaysia. A so-called Christian conspiracy to convert Malays using the word "Allah", as alleged by Mahathir, has yielded no appreciable results. Christians in Sabah and Sarawak, and Sikhs everywhere, have used the word "Allah" with respect, in their own rituals and sacred texts.

The alleged conspiracy was imaginary, because Malays are not as child-like and easily "confused" as Umno pretends.

There have also been effective laws forbidding other religions to proselytise among Malays since the inception of Malaysia, and repeated public reassurances by Christian leaders that they respect Malaysia's laws.

Championing religion when under threat

Mahathir's campaign to establish this monopoly on selected Arabic words began in 1981, when he was consolidating power. His fervour then lapsed over the next few years, as he grew more comfortable in office, after cowing the Rulers' Council.

NONEMahathir's redoubled efforts in 1986 to enforce a ban on "Allah" coincided with rising internal dissent in Umno, and a challenge to his leadership of the party.

He survived these battles by jailing opponents, and by championing religious and racial divisions.

In 1998 and 2002, the home ministry issued its first two letters to the Herald, instructing the Catholic newspaper to stop using the word "Allah". However, the ban was soon rescinded on appeal.

Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, the new premier and home minister, did not need to pursue the ban vigorously, as his initial popularity produced a historic triumph in the 2004 general election.

Finally, on May 11, 2006, the home ministry issued a circular allowing the use of "Allah" in bibles in Malay, as long as they were stamped with a cross, and the words "For Christians", in Malay.

But in the same year, as Abdullah was being shaken by Mahathir's sniping, the home ministry wrote to the Herald, threatening that the newspaper's annual publication permit would not be renewed if the word "Allah" continued to appear in print.

After exhausting all avenues of official appeal, the newspaper turned to the courts. On New Year's Eve, 2009, the High Court overturned the "Allah" ban, declaring it unconstitutional.

In 2010, in the throes of election campaigning, Hishammuddin Hussein spoke publicly of his regret for the ban, blaming it on his predecessor as home minister.

NONEBut he saw no reason to drop the appeal of the High Court decision: he must have known the case would be dragged out, until after the 13th general election, or GE13.

In April 2011, Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak then negotiated a vague "10-point plan" with Christian churches in Sarawak, just before a crucial state election. The churches went meekly along, despite disenchantment with previous promises of Sabah's 20-point and Sarawak's 18-point agreements.

Hishammuddin's and Najib's political statements certainly suggested a profane political motivation for the on-again-off-again ban on "Allah", rather than the ineffable holy struggle of jihad that the Islamic Development Department (Jakim) has suggested.

Umno's electoral calculations

Now that Sarawak and Sabah have delivered power to BN again in GE13, the Umno government feels secure enough to press on with the appeal against the High Court decision. The verdict of the appeal will be announced next month.

Since BN gained only 47 percent of the popular vote in the May elections, Umno desperately needs to ramp up religious and racial sentiment, to bolster its core Muslim-Malay support in Peninsular Malaysia.

herald allah case government appeal 100913 1On the other hand, Umno appears fairly confident that rural voters in Sarawak will continue to support its BN proxies in the next state election, scheduled for 2015.

If Umno succeeds in its appeal, the ban can be loudly trumpeted in peninsular Malaysia, and quietly underplayed among Sarawakian and Sabahan Christian voters.

Najib is trying also to shore up his personal ethno-religious credentials, ahead of the uncertainty of Umno elections at the end of the year.

If Umno succeeds in its appeal, it may also try to force PAS to review its principled stand against the ban on "Allah", in an effort to drive a wedge between the ulamas and technocrats in the party muktamar in November.

The "Allah" ban is rooted firmly in politics, and Umno's desire for power. Theology, linguistics, constitutional rights to freedom of religion and expression, shared humanity – and common sense – be damned.

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