

Bishop denounces 'rabble rouser' Dr M
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Catholic Bishop Dr Paul Tan Chee Ing described Dr Mahathir Mohamad's imputing ulterior motives to Christians in wanting to use the 'Allah' term as "a rabble rouser's intervention in the ongoing debate".

"Wasn't he prime minister when Christians were accused of complicity in an alleged plot to turn Sabah into a Christian state in the final few days before the October 1990 general election?" queried the outspoken head of the Catholic Church in the Malacca-Johor diocese.

"The mendacity of that campaign, its inflammatory nature was enough to get him indicted for sedition," claimed the prelate.

In the immediate prelude to the eighth general election (GE8) in October 1990, a threatened voter swing to the opposition Gagasan Rakyat, which grouped Semangat 46, PAS, DAP, Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS) and Parti Rakyat Malaysia, and led by Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, was countered by a BN campaign that portrayed a vote for Gagasan as spur for a Christian conspiracy to rule the country.

The eleventh-hour bolting of PBS from the Mahathir-led BN stable triggered the BN campaign in the government-controlled media (this before the days of the Internet) which painted the Christian-led PBS as the vehicle for a Vatican-inspired play for political power in Malaysia.

The propaganda was widely believed to have been effective in checking an anticipated swing in the Malay-Muslim vote to Gagasan.

Recalling that episode, Bishop Paul Tan (left) argued: "When you pause to think of the sorry sequel to that entire episode - today's changed demographics of Sabah which is the object of a royal commission of inquiry - and consider who may plausibly be responsible for that, the indictable range moves from sedition to treason.

"Now from that contemptible range emerges the accusation that Christians are being devious in wanting to use the term 'Allah'. This only goes to show how muddled things have become in our political sphere."

Bishop Paul Tan was reacting to comments made by Mahathir after the former prime minister had delivered a talk at Pusat Islam last Friday.

Mahathir was reported to have told the press that Muslims had not had problems with Christians in this country in a long time but in raising the Allah issue now, the former PM claimed Christians harbored an ulterior agenda.

"If he just confined himself to saying that Christians have no valid reason to use the term - that would be one view in a whole range of opinions being tendered in the ongoing debate," remarked the Jesuit-trained prelate.

"But in going on to ascribe ulterior motives to Christians for wanting to use the 'Allah' term - that is an attribution wanton in its irresponsibility."

'Encourages folk to abandon restraint'

Bishop Paul Tan said if the imputation of motive is done by "lesser" individual participants in the national debate on the Allah issue, he would find that understandable.

"But when it's done by people of the stature of a former prime minister, it's going to encourage people to abandon the restraint that should properly attend discussion on matters of an emotive nature."

He said that after a 22-year premiership "which was protracted in itself," he contended that Mahathir in his retirement has tagged on "a 10-year period of a sort of alternative government which has put itself to purposes as base as in this instance - imputing ulterior motives to a community whom he has already maligned once before."

"I suppose those who forget history are condemned to repeat it and the rest of us are helpless at the receiving end," mused the prelate.