

'Inviting Perkasa to interfaith forum absurd'

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The organiser of the interfaith forum in a Kajang church last Sunday with Opposition Leader Anwar Ibrahim as the key speaker, has said it would be happy to invite Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak for a similar event.

Arguing that more interfaith talks would be good for the country, the PKR-linked NGO Centre for Reform, Democracy and Social Initiatives countered that the "social" event was not "political activity", as claimed by Perkasa vice-president Zulkifli Noordin.

In a blog posting, Zulkifli (*right*) had charged that Anwar's visit to the church to talk about the 'Allah' issue would upset Muslims in the country, and he fumed over Anwar's apparent shameless fishing for votes.

Zulkifli challenged the event's host - the Holy Family Church (HFC) - to also permit Umno and NGOs like Perkasa and Ikatan Muslimin Malaysia (Isma) members to hold similar talks there.

In response, Centre for Reform executive director Dr Edmund Santhara said that they would invite Najib to visit the church, but not Perkasa.

"We would be more than happy to invite Najib to a similar event with 35 minutes allotted for his address and another 35 for a question-and-answer (session)," Santhara said in an email reply to Malaysiakini queries.

"As for Perkasa, it is notorious not just for its intolerant views, but for its propensity for race-baiting and incitement to religious hatred, and any suggestion of inviting them to address an interfaith forum is out of the question."

To allay misunderstandings about what took place last Sunday, Santhara said everyone can examine the speeches made at the event attended by about 1,200 people.

Church not endorsing Anwar's candidacy

Father George Harrison, a HFC priest, said that the church hosted the event as Anwar came with the good intention to [bolster ties](#) between Christians and Muslims in the country.

Harrison, however, stressed that this did not mean that HFC endorsed Anwar in his bid to become the state's assemblyperson in the Kajang polls, which is to be held on March 23.

Besides Anwar, Santhara also gave a speech at the event, which was held at the church's multi-purpose hall.

"As I said in my welcoming speech, lately the tension between the communities - especially on religious issues - has reached alarming levels, and it is the duty of community leaders to help ease the tension and promote greater understanding," Santhara said.

A former entrepreneur, Santhara quit his CEO's post in Bursa-listed Masterskill Education Group Bhd last year to pursue his interests in civil society issues.

"As to why a church hall was chosen, the answer is: 'Why not?' After all, it was a practical choice in terms of logistics, financial consideration and strategic, too, in securing attendance.

"The HFC is located near the commuter station. It is also one of the most well-known buildings in Kajang. (Also) it was available for use at a reasonable rental," said Santhara.

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