

Ambiga grills Pakatan over child conversions
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Senior lawyer Ambiga Sreenevasan today took Pakatan Rakyat to task for appearing weak on the issue of unilateral conversions.

"The problem is in relation to unilateral conversions. It's an issue related to children and Pakatan Rakyat is just not coming strong enough on the matter," she said at an event organized by Opposition Leader Anwar Ibrahim's office.

Speaking on the issue earlier touched upon by Anwar at the same event in Kuala Lumpur, she said that Pakatan should push for amendment to the constitution to prevent such conversions.

"Why aren't we pushing for that legislation (to amend existing laws)?"

"We feel that Pakatan and the government squabble all the time but we just want clarification on this.

"We hope Pakatan will have a strong stand on this because people are suffering," Ambiga (left) said, not mincing words.

While the former Bar Council president did not specify which legislation, there have been calls for a constitutional amendment to substitute the word 'parent' with 'parents' in the clause dealing with conversion of minors.

Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Jamil Khir Baharom had said that the fact that the constitution uses the word 'parent' and not 'parents' means that unilateral conversion of minors are legal.

This is despite a 2009 cabinet decision prohibiting the conversion of minors to Islam without consent of both parents.

Ambiga also took Pakatan to task for taking its time to respond to touchy issues like Deputy Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin's perceived warning of the recurrence on 1969 race riots.

Anwar: Secular, Islamic are labels

She said that many had tried to water down Muhyiddin's statement as a mere "reminder".

"Sometimes we feel that the opposition doesn't speak quickly enough," she said.

Anwar had earlier spoken about the country's status, and had stressed for the discourse on the matter to continue based on knowledge.

"Issues in the country will not be settled with labels alone, of whether we are a secular or Islamic country.

"Those who are for a secular country must understand why some people are against secularism," he said.

He said some Muslim countries were governed by "cruel secular forces", citing Mustafa Kemal Ataturk's Turkey, which was "far from democratic".

"I don't want to make a conclusion on whether the country is an Islamic democracy or a secular democracy.

"We should not be obsessed with labels. What's paramount is justice and freedom," he said.

Anwar also said that the country's leaders have failed to curb the increase in racial conflicts and religious extremism.

"For the last 18 months, incident after incident have occurred which have threatened to undermine our cohesiveness as a nation.

"And they are not isolated occurrences. They are the consequence of race baiting where race and religion have been used to increase hatred," he said.

Touching on religious extremism, he stressed that the opposition was against anything that prevents freedom to practice religion.

"We do not agree with the seizure of Malay-language Bibles, the disruption of a Hindu wedding and the body of an alleged Muslim convert taken away by religious officials.

"However, with that said, we are all for defending Islam as the federal religion," Anwar said.