

Returned Bible renders the coast clear for Azmin

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COMMENT It is hard to resist the impulse to congratulate Selangor Menteri Besar Azmin Ali on his success on Nov 14 at having the copies of the Bible that were seized from the Bible Society of Malaysia returned to their rightful owners.

It is Azmin's most notable achievement since taking over as Selangor CEO in mid-September from his controversy-ridden predecessor, Abdul Khalid Ibrahim.

While Khalid had seemed constipated and constrained by bureaucracy, his replacement, from the start, struck observers as intent on shedding its coils.

In contrast to the office-bound Khalid, Azmin darted among the hoi polloi, jumping onto rubbish trucks, peering down clogged drains and canals, wading into rice paddies, and bicycling along footpaths in the semi-rural parts of the state - all in the euphoric hope that activism was its own absolution.

The news of the release of the seized Bibles to their owners capped a run of good notices for the newfangled administration, earned by an MB seemingly intent on doing the right thing.

A consignment of 351 Malay and Iban language Bibles was seized from the premises of the Bible Society of Malaysia (BSM) on Jan 2 by officers of the Selangor Islamic Affairs Department (Jais).

The seizure was highly controversial and, coming as it did a year after Perkasa chief Ibrahim Ali had threatened to burn Bibles using the term 'Allah' for God, conjured up images of a nation teetering on the brink of religious convulsions.

The consignment of Bibles seized by Jais was said to have been in violation of laws promulgated in the mid-1980s when a host of Islamic terms such as 'Allah' were deemed exclusive to Muslims.

The Al-Kitab and Bup Kudus - the Malay and Iban language Bibles respectively - make liberal use of the 'Allah' term for God in their texts. Possession and distribution of these texts are permitted in Sabah and Sarawak but not in the peninsula.

Jais held that BSM's possession of these copies was a violation of laws Selangor and a slew of other states in the peninsula had enacted in the mid-1980s that made a series of religious terms, including 'Allah', exclusive to Muslims.

Religion is a state matter in Malaysia which was why Jais could ignore the attorney-general

who several months after the seizure announced that the possession of the Bibles by BSM was not in violation of the 10-point agreement worked out between the federal cabinet and Christian groups in Sarawak and Sabah in April 2011.

The agreement was forged just before the Sarawak state polls that month and was instrumental in averting potentially damaging consequences to the ruling BN by the majority Christian voters in the state reacting to a perceived violation of their right to practice their faith freely.

The agreement allowed Sarawakian and Sabahan Christians to continue using the term 'Allah' in their rituals of worship and faith education. Those among them resident and employed in the peninsula could continue to possess Bibles using the 'Allah' term. However, peninsula-born and domiciled Christians were denied use of the term, lest it cause confusion among Malaya's Muslims.

Succeeded in abating tensions

For what it was worth, the agreement succeeded in abating tensions stemming from a High Court decision handed down on the last day of December, 2009, that allowed Catholic weekly the Herald to use the term 'Allah' in the Bahasa pages of the publication.

This decision was overturned by the Court of Appeal last year, a development that gave rise to renewed tensions over the issue amid worldwide derision that a generic term for God in the Arabic language was reserved to the exclusive use of Malaya's Muslims.

The seizure of the Al-Kitab and Bab Kudus from BSM by Jais on Jan 2 invited more bad publicity to Malaysia such that the Pakatan Rakyat state government in Selangor was painted into an embarrassing corner by the action.

Try as then MB Khalid did to wriggle out of the corner, he couldn't. Combined with an host of problems - from disputes over Selangor's water assets, planned tolled highways, and his own problems over a bank loan - Khalid was a leader under siege by his party PKR, his coalition Pakatan and sundry critics.

After months of wrangling, Khalid was sacked from PKR and forced to resign. Azmin took over at the behest of the Selangor palace which did not seem to want as MB the PKR president, Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, who happened to be the choice of a majority of the state's legislators.

The return of the Bibles seized by Jais in Selangor was seen as a litmus test of the fitness for office of Azmin who had long wanted the MB's post and had regarded Khalid as an interloper.

Riding a 'new broom' wave, Azmin began his administration with activist flair, focusing on action in areas where Khalid had been languid.

This of course caused the adrenaline to course down the veins of a state that was held in a stupor because of the crisis over whether Khalid was to go as MB or to stay. And who would take over from him if he went.

The crisis badly damaged the bona fides of Pakatan as a federal government-in-waiting. Thus when Azmin took over and purposefully strode into action, first relief and then jubilation returned to PKR and Pakatan ranks, for the paralysis of the preceding months was seen as aberrant, not systemic.

New MB Azmin proceeded to publicly opine that the seized Bibles must be returned to their owners. At this there was a palpable intake of breath because of doubt as to how Jais and its advisory body, Mais, could be persuaded to return the items.

Apparently, His Highness the Sultan of Selangor played a mollifying role in ensuring the matter was effected to the general satisfaction of all parties.

Inevitably, a cascade of praise descended on Azmin, with the Selangor palace issuing a corrective to the public impression that the MB was the key player in the overall settlement.

With no diminution to the chivalric code, the palace gently reminded that a settlement would not have been feasible without a substantive contribution from His Highness, in keeping with his role as a unifying symbol to Selangorians.

Perceptible from the palace was a wry nod to the garnering political mileage from the settlement by the MB. The palace hinted that that was familiar behavior by politicians, understandable in the circumstances.

It was edifying to see that a rather sorry episode was brought to a genial conclusion, with participants preferring to see the lighter side of things.

As for the newly-minted MB, it was a case of all's well that begins well. Now for the business of removing all doubt of his fitness for an office to which he has long aspired.