

Najib: Interfaith disputes in civil marriages to be resolved in civil court
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Kow Gah Chie

The cabinet has agreed to table amendments to the law to ensure interfaith disputes involving civil marriages are resolved in civil court, Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak said today.

He said the amendment to the Law Reform (Marriage and Divorce) Act 1976 will be tabled in the next parliamentary sitting in October.

“One issue that is controversial and has courted all sorts of reaction from society is the problem of conversion, especially when a divorce takes place and one spouse has converted to Islam,” said Najib at the National Women's Day celebration in Putrajaya today.

“Cases like this arise from time to time with voices demanding that we seek a way out.”

He said there were three underlying principles to the amendment, the first being that any issues related to divorce in civil marriages be resolved in civil court.

This would ensure that issues such as child custody and child support were handled fairly, he said.

The second principle is that it would allow couples a chance to resolve their marriage dispute, and let them carry on with their lives and even re-marry, in the case of non-Muslims, Najib said.

“Thirdly, the conflict between the civil and syariah court arises when one spouse converts to Islam. (This amendment) will resolve the lacuna which exists,” he said.

Najib said the Home Ministry will table the amendment bill in the Dewan Rakyat.

Also present were Minister in the Prime Minister Department Azalina Othman Said and Women, Family and Community Development Minister Rohani Abdul Karim.

At a press conference later, Rohani said Azalina, who is the de facto law minister, will be handling the amendments.

She said the cabinet did not discuss in detail how to resolve ongoing interfaith custody cases, but added that a task force will be set up to address the matter.

The cabinet had **decided** in 2009 that a child must be raised in the faith professed by both parents at the time of the marriage.

The decision was made following news that M Indira Ghandi's estranged husband, K Patmanathan aka Muhammad Ridzuan Abdullah, had converted their three children to Islam without her consent.

However, the Conference of Rulers later that year **put the brakes** on the issue and the proposed amendments were never tabled in Parliament.

Early this year, another cabinet committee **was set up** to resolve the outstanding issue of unilateral conversions.

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