

**Anwar: Dialogue ban 'a disservice to Islam'**  
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**Bede Hong**

Former deputy premier Anwar Ibrahim has criticised the government for cancelling an international Muslim-Christian dialogue, calling the action "a disservice to Islam".

The PKR advisor said that Malaysians stand more to lose, as avenues for religious discussion have been made dimmer.

The Building Bridges conference, chaired by the Archbishop of Canterbury Dr Rowan Williams, is an annual get-together of religious academics set up after the Sept 11, 2001 terror attacks in the US to foster interfaith dialogue.

Held previously in London, New York, Qatar and Sarajevo, the conference was set to be held in Kuala Lumpur this week. The Malaysian government cancelled it last week.

Anwar said the cancellation will paint a bad picture on Malaysia.

"Is this what is projected of the so-called moderate Muslim; no understanding and respect for dialogues or dissenting views even, then here it is a great tragedy for Malaysians. We stand to lose more than the organisers," he said.

"It was a very unwise and irresponsible decision on the part of the government," he told reporters after touring a photo exhibition commemorating the Malaysia's golden anniversary at the Petronas Art Gallery in Kuala Lumpur today.

### **Lost opportunity**

He said the Malaysian government had "no understanding and respect" for the archbishop: "[He] is known to be not only learned, but has a very strong passion and a great supporter of Muslim, Christian and Jewish dialogues."

The Archbishop of Canterbury is the symbolic head of the Anglican Communion. A personal witness to the Sept 11 terror attacks in New York, the Archbishop is a known advocate for dialogue with Muslim leaders.

"Because it is chaired by an extremely qualified and respectable man, and it is meant to forge understanding and bridges but we are dealing with a more intolerant and repressive order that do not value dialogue and understanding," said Anwar.

"There is no respect for the society, not only Christian who are taking the initiative in a very supportive manner, but for Muslims [as well].

"We have lost this opportunity primarily due to the incompetence and the reluctance of the government to give due accord and respect not only to the organiser, the Christians, but the capacity for moderate Muslims to articulate their views and engage in a meaningful manner," he added.

Although the interfaith dialogue would not be permitted to take place, the Malaysian

government has allowed Williams into the country to preach at the consecration of a new Anglican bishop.

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