

Bar Council's forum: More shelling for police, protesters
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Twelve non-governmental organisations today signed a joint statement, denouncing the high-handed action taken by Muslim protestors and the police to stop an open discussion on legal issues related to the conversion to Islam.

MCPX

Organised by the Bar Council and held last Saturday, the open forum entitled 'Conversion to Islam' was forced to end early on the advice of police after an unruly demonstration outside the meeting hall threatened to get out of hand.

conversion forum protest 090807 big crowd "The blatant double standards employed by government and police in dealing with the protestors and the forum subject raises questions about the even handed and fair treatment accorded to all religions," the NGOs said in their joint statement.

The NGOs also blasted the police for bowing to pressure from the protestors instead of protecting the Bar Council.

Some Muslim groups have vigorously opposed the dialogue on the fear that it could be used as a platform to provoke sensitivities and criticise their religion. The government too has been reluctant to promote open interfaith dialogue on the grounds that it could incite racial discord.

group or association joint support to bar council 120808 The NGOs however rebutted that while it was necessary for Malaysians to be mindful of religious sensitivities, extreme acts aimed at curbing legitimate public discussion should not be condoned.

"In the Bar Council's case, the forum was aimed at helping clarify legal and administrative provisions on religious conversion issues which could have provided useful inputs on helping resolve recent controversial developments," the group said.

"In fact, the organisers had taken the initiative to invite distinguished speakers from the Federal Territory Religious Affairs Department and Institute of Islamic Understanding Malaysia, although both withdrew after the forum was demonised by some quarters," the NGOs lamented.

The group also expressed disappointment that parliamentarians from PAS (Sallahudin Ayob) and PKR (Zulkifli Nordin) were actively involved in the protest.

"Finally, we note with concern and condemn the petrol bombs attack directed at the previous house of Bar Council president Ambiga Sreenevasan. We hope that there is no connection between that act and the role of the Bar Council in organising the seminar and call on the authorities to fully investigate that action and bring the perpetrators to book," said the NGOs.

Abusive language 'un-Islamic'

Meanwhile, Pergerakan Progresif Mahasiswa Islam (Promis) and Jaringan Rakyat Tertindas (Jerit) have also condemned the aggressive nature of the demonstration.

"The use of abusive language, aggression and threats to halt the forum are un-Islamic,

undemocratic and goes against the principles of Islam," Promis said in a statement.

"We also condemn the act of passing judgment on the forum based on assumptions only."

bar council islamic forum controversy incident 090808 04Promis said instead of disrupting the dialogue, the protestors should have first attended the forum to find out if it was really aimed at insulting the religion.

"If they (the leaders) were not even inside, how would they know if the forum was aimed at attacking Islam. It would have been better if the protestors attended the forum and gave their own views and opinions instead of sullyng the image of Islam," it added.

In a separate statement, Jerit said: "Freedom of religion is fundamental human rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 18) and guaranteed by the Federal Constitution (Article 11).

"This basic constitutional right should not be overruled by the authorities or by mainstream interpretation of religion."

Criticisms from MCA

MCA politicians also spoke out against the conduct of the protestors, with the party's Wanita deputy chief Chew Mei Fun stating that issues should be allowed to be discussed.

"We cannot just treat every issue as sensitive. In fact, the Bar Council forum was a platform for various groups to engage in discussion in a peaceful manner in seeking a solution.

"The organisers did not intend to confront anybody but to hear the different perspectives and sought to find a solution to avoid these issues from repeatedly occurring," said the former PJ Utara MP.

conversion forum protest 090807 mini postersMeanwhile, MCA publicity bureau chief Fu Ah Kiow was of the opinion that the government had taken too long to resolve the various religious conflicts in the country.

"This issue has been in existence even before the Shamalah case and the government has taken too long to resolve this issue. People want to see action. They don't only want to hear promises by the government.

"Where a spouse or family member has embraced Islam, the conversion effectively has an effect on the non-Muslim family members since it involves human rights with regards to the welfare of family members who have not converted.

"There are custodial problems where minor children are involved, and inheritance issues too," said the former deputy minister.

MCA Youth legal bureau head Gan Ping Sieu said their movement strongly supported the Bar Council in holding such forums.

"The bureau hopes that Bar Council will continue to conduct similar programmes to discuss conversion issues in the future and it is not afraid to state its stand on the matter.

"At the same time, the bureau also advises political leaders not to issue irresponsible statements in trying to distort the real issue at hand," said Gan.

conversion forum protest 090807 angry manFormer MCA vice-president Chua Jui Meng said the protests which shortened the forum was an embarrassment to the political leadership and police force of the country.

"The fact remains that on one side the Bar Council was lawfully holding a forum in its own premises and on the other was a mob hurling racial abuses which were seditious and unlawful," said Chua.

"The rakyat will also wonder why the police force, which have proven so effective in dispersing demonstrations of over 10,000 people before were this time unable to contain a 300-strong mob.

"The rakyat will certainly expect to see arrests and prosecutions being made against those involved in this protest," said the former health minister.

Pua critical of MCA reaction

However, Petaling Jaya Utara MP Tony Pua took a swipe at MCA leaders.

In his statement, the first-time MP said: "We have read with interest that the MCA leadership has come out strongly via statements to the media the party was "extremely upset at the protesters' actions".

But Pua noted that following last Saturday's incident both the prime minister and his deputy had spoken out against the forum.

"The prime minister, the deputy prime minister and other top leaders from Umno has been unapologetic and even threatening in their condemnation of the forum conducted by the Bar Council," said Pua.

"Therefore, while we welcome MCA's views on the controversy, they must face up to their responsibility to challenge the views of the prime minister and Umno, who are clearly abusing the race and religious card recklessly to create an atmosphere of fear.

"It is noteworthy that while the protesters were condemned, no comments were forthcoming on the opposing views espoused by the Umno leaders."

Pua argued that without doing so, it would appear that Barisan Nasional is perpetuating its system of divide and rule, where Umno stokes the racial and religious sentiments of Malays while MCA plays its subservient role to placate the minority communities.

"That will only strengthen the case that MCA has lost its total relevance in Barisan Nasional."