

Kongsi Raya practice to go on

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KUALA LUMPUR: The Government will continue holding Kongsi Raya celebrations and national-level open houses for festivals celebrated by the various groups in the country, as they are not considered religious events.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi said the practice, which has been observed for several years, had never caused any problems among the people.

"All these events are social in nature. They are not religious celebrations but social gatherings without any religious rituals," he told reporters after chairing the Barisan Nasional Supreme Council

annual meeting yesterday.

"At most, they will have dances and other cultural programmes. Never did we have programmes that can be considered religious rituals at such gatherings.

"These are not programmes that can weaken or erode our faith and our belief," said Abdullah.

"Let's not turn this into a polemic as it can lead to all kinds of interpretations which can create a tense atmosphere among the people of various races."

The Government, he said, had already considered all aspects before deciding to observe the practice, and all Malaysians looked forward to the events.

"The Quran clearly states 'To you your religions and to us our religions'," he said.

On Tuesday, Ulama Conference 2006 working committee chairman Datuk Seri Harussani Zakaria urged the Government to review practices such as Kongsi Raya and open houses to ensure they do not contradict Islam.

On Thursday, PAS supported the *ulama's* stand, as it believed that an Islamic celebration should not be put on par with a non-Islamic festival.

Its deputy president Nasharuddin Mat Isa had said it could be considered blasphemous from an Islamic point of view to pair a Muslim celebration with a non-Muslim one.

Meanwhile, MCA president Datuk

Seri Ong Ka Ting said the Kongsi Raya celebration was a social and cultural event and was not associated with religion.

"The Kongsi Raya celebration provides a chance for Malaysians to integrate and celebrate the festivals of different races," he told reporters at Wisma MCA here yesterday.

Ong, who is also Housing and Local Government Minister, said opinions that the celebrations were not suitable had done no good for the country's multiracial society.

MCA vice-president Datuk Dr Chua Soi Lek described Kongsi Raya as an event for the people of various races to get together and learn more about each other.

"I do not see it as going against any religion as it is more of a cultural practice," he told a press conference on Thursday evening after opening the Ipoh Barat MCA annual general meeting.

Citing Chinese New Year as an example, Dr Chua, who is also Health Minister, said it was a cultural celebration.

"There is nothing religious about it," he said.

He said the fact that Malaysians could celebrate all festivities in peace was one of the country's strengths.

"It is also in line with the Prime Minister's concept of Islam Hadhari in which, through moderation, people of various faiths can live in peace," he added.