

Memo to PM: Call for review of laws affecting rights of non-Muslims

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KUALA LUMPUR, Thurs In an unprecedented move, non-Muslim ministers submitted a memorandum to the Prime Minister yesterday calling for a review of laws affecting the rights of non-Muslims.

Nine of the 10 non-Muslim Cabinet members signed the memorandum. The exception was Tourism Minister Datuk Dr Leo Michael Toyad, who is abroad.

MCA president Datuk Seri Ong Ka Ting, who is also Housing and Local Government Minister, submitted the memorandum on behalf of his non-Muslim colleagues to Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi at a Cabinet meeting.

It is learnt that the MCA religious and legal bureaus took the lead in drafting the memorandum, with input from other Barisan Nasional component parties and non-governmental organisations.

An MCA source said the memorandum, among other things, called for:

- The Government to review Article 121(1A) of the Federal Constitution, which stipulates that civil courts have no jurisdiction over matters relating to Islam, which fall under the purview of the Syariah Court;
- The Government to amend laws that allow only one parent to convert children below 18 years of age; and,
- Rectifying conflicts between Syariah and civil laws.

The call for a "review" of Article 121(1A) is said to have been precipitated by instances of judges allowing the Syariah Court to handle several high-profile cases involving disputes between Muslims and non-Muslims.

The ministers who signed the memorandum were Ong, Datuk Seri Chan Kong Choy (Transport), Datuk Dr Fong Chan Onn (Human Resources), Datuk Dr Chua Soi Lek (Health), Datuk Seri S. Samy Vellu (Works), Datuk Seri Dr Lim Keng Yaik (Energy, Water and Communications), Datuk Peter Chin (Plantation Enterprises and Commodities), and Tan Sri Bernard Dompok and Datuk Maximus Ongkili (Ministers in the Prime Minister's Department).

Bernama quoted Ongkili as saying that the proposal would be studied by Minister in the Prime Minister's Department in charge of law, Datuk Seri Radzi Sheikh Ahmad, and the attorney-general.

"They will make the necessary recommendations for further action," he was quoted as saying.

Ongkili also said that this showed the Government was open and willing to consider public opinion on the issue.

Late last year, the MCA submitted a memorandum to Abdullah asking the Government to look into laws that encroached on the rights of non-Muslims.

Yesterday's memorandum followed concerns over the dispute between the widow of M. Moorthy @ Mohammad Abdullah and the Federal Territory Religious Council over the question of whether her husband had converted to Islam.

It is learnt that some ministers had held talks with inter-faith groups on the draft of the memorandum.

Rev Wong Kim Kong of the Malaysian Consultative Council on Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism and Sikhism (MCCBCHS) said some ministers met council members after submitting the memorandum to Abdullah.

"Some of them came to see us and we discussed the memorandum. They also briefed us on what happened on the matter," he said.

He said the ministers said Abdullah had responded positively, agreeing to find time soon to meet the inter-faith council. Wong said the ministers felt the matter was serious enough to be placed on record in an official document.

"It is not enough to articulate it verbally, even though they are ministers with direct access to the Prime Minister. It had to be put in black and white."

Wong said he had come to understand that a Pas Youth group planned to demonstrate outside Masjid Negara after prayers tomorrow, to protest against the debate on whether there should be legal safeguards for non-Muslims involved in Islamic affairs.

"The public debate on this matter has so far been very rational and has focused specifically on the law and Constitution," Wong said. "We are concerned that some groups want to turn it into an emotional issue.

"It is an issue regarding the law, our Constitution, and human rights. It should not be looked at as only a religious issue. It is a social issue emerging out of a religious matter."

Wong said the council wanted to make it clear that the issue was not a case of confrontation between non-Muslims and Muslims.

Source:

http://www.nst.com.my/Current_News/nst/Friday/Frontpage/20060120081709/Article/index_html