

## ABDULLAH: NO NEED TO MAKE CHANGES TO ARTICLE 121 (1A)

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### **Sub-clauses relating to religious conversion can be reviewed**

**The debate is over; truncated by the usual burst of emotion, rash language and point-scoring that follows every discussion on race and religion in Malaysia.**

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi stepped into the fray today to bring reason to the swirling talk over the jurisdiction of civil and Syariah Court. He shut the door on amending Article 121 (1A) of the Federal Constitution to give the civil courts power in hearing matters on Islam. But he said that sub-clauses relating to religious conversion could be reviewed.

"If there are laws that seem to create difficulties or misinterpretations, then we can look into whether they should be changed," he said. He also reminded the nine ministers who signed a memorandum calling for a review of laws affecting the rights of non-Muslims that there was a proper forum for such issues — at the weekly Cabinet meeting.

His comments today were aimed at ending a debate that started after the tussle over the religious status of M. Moorthy @ Mohammad Abdullah in December. In recent days, this discussion on Article 121 has threatened to enter that all-too-familiar territory of incendiary language and emotional outburst — a stark reminder that having a mature, public discussion on matters of race and religion in this multi-racial country is as tricky as a jog through a minefield. Abdullah, aware of the sentiments on the ground, cautioned that Malaysians should not do anything to upset racial stability.

"If we are emotional, it will create a situation which is not so good. Nobody wants such a situation which could be threatening. Political stability is important."

He said that there was no confusion on the powers of the civil and syariah courts.

"There is no question of which court should be above which. There is also no clash of powers," he noted, adding that both formed different branches of the law in the country.

The lightning rod for the call to amend Article 121 was the controversy surrounding the Moorthy case. After the former army commando died, the Federal Territory Islamic Affairs Council said that he had converted and wanted to give him a Muslim burial. His widow S. Kaliammal argued that he was a practising Hindu.

The Syariah Court ruled in favour of the council in an ex-parte application. The widow took the matter to the High Court but the court ruled that it could not disturb the findings of the Syariah Court, citing Article 121. One of the issues arising from the Moorthy case was whether non-Muslims had legal redress on matters relating to Islam.

Abdullah today said non-Muslims had recourse in the Syariah court.

"Non-Muslims can attend the Syariah court but they are reluctant to do so," he said.

He said Article 121 (1)(A) had drawn all sorts of reaction and views from the public.

"But the article need not be amended," he said at a Press conference after launching a book on poem anthology by Datuk A. Samad Said at the National Archives here.

Abdullah today also clarified his statement several days ago where he was quoted as saying that laws of the country have to be made clear on religious conversions.

"When I said the laws had to be clear I was not referring to conversion. I said if there were any laws that brought hardship to the people or if there was room for misinterpretation, then we will look at it if it needs to be amended. I was not referring to any specific Act or law," he said.

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