

NGOs meet PM on religious issues

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PETALING JAYA: In view of the religious issues that have been making the news in recent years, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) representing Muslims and non-Muslims met the prime minister last week to discuss their concerns.

One of these is the need to set up an institution of contemporary Muslim scholars to resolve certain misconceptions on Islam, which happen from time to time, the Muslim Consumers Association of Malaysia said.

Such an institution is meant to be a referral centre for Muslims with a structured approach in dealing with religious issues so that decisions made are in line with modern international views, the association's secretary-general Datuk Dr Maamor Osman said, when asked to comment on the NGOs' meeting with Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi in Putrajaya last Friday.

Representatives of 25 Muslim NGOs had a two-and-a-half-hour meeting with Abdullah and religious authorities, including parliamentary secretary in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Dr Mashitah Ibrahim and Islamic Development Department director-general Datuk Mustafa Abdul Rahman.

Among the other participating NGOs were the Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia, Syariah Lawyers Association, Malaysian Ulama Association and Malaysian Chinese and Indian Muslim Associations.

The meeting was set up by the Prime Minister's Department following requests by the Muslim NGOs to hold a dialogue with Abdullah.

This is the second meeting between them. The first was held during the first six months of Abdullah's administration, and it involved both Muslim and non-Muslim NGOs.

Maamor said they have also decided to have such meetings at least twice a year and the next meeting would be in August or September.

"We want a group of authorised Muslim scholars who have a more contemporary approach in their views. We want our *fatwa* (religious ruling) to be recognised and accepted internationally.

"It is just like in the ICT (information and communication technology) field where we can have contributions from renowned experts like Microsoft, we also would like to have prominent Islamic figures like Sheikh Dr Yusuf Al Qardhawi and Sheikh Mohd Sayed Tantawi in our discussions," Maamor told *theSun* yesterday.

He said the formation of the institution would be the next step the prime minister should consider.

"Sometimes, Muslims in this country have different interpretations of certain issues like the *kongsi-raya* for example. So, we want to know how the international Muslim scholars see it," he said.

The meeting also discussed matters pertaining to the media, Syariah court, morality, social problems, relations with non-Muslims and international and universal issues, he added.

Just a day before that, the Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Sikhism and Taoism (MCCBCHST), led by president Datuk Chee Peck Kiat, met Abdullah for two hours to raise the issues faced by the non-Muslim community.

A council spokesman said Abdullah had expressed surprise at "quite a number of grievances," including matters relating to conversions and places of worship being torn down by local authorities.

"It was very cordial and a very good meeting where we brought up issues. Some seemed very new to him but he said he would look into them.

"He was aware that local authorities in Selangor and every part of the country were demolishing temples - some more than a century old - without having consulted the proper religious bodies.

"We expressed the need for Hindu Sangam, Christian and Buddhist bodies to register their places of worship and for local authorities to gazette and recognise these buildings," the spokesman said.

"The prime minister understood our view points and we explained that we were not demanding, especially about conversions and the Syariah courts' jurisdiction," he said, adding that Abdullah said he would look into the concern about non-Muslims being summoned to the Syariah court.

"We are appreciative of his effort to look at both sides of the coin," he added.