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In the spotlight again over 'Allah' issue

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Religion has moved to the political centrestage again with the revival of the 'kalimah Allah' controversy.

POLITICS runs through Lim Guan Eng's veins and his speeches at almost every event, including religious occasions, is about politics, politics and more politics. The Penang Chief Minister's Christmas message last month was no different - he mentioned Lynas, the AES issue and money scandals.

But it was his call for the term "Allah" to be used in Bahasa Malaysia Bibles that landed his Pakatan Rakyat partners with a giant headache. It has made him a hero among the Christians but the matter stunned many Muslims who are not comfortable with the development.

Religion has once again moved to the political centrestage with the revival of the "kalimah Allah" issue.

On Tuesday, PAS president Datuk Seri Hadi Awang appeared at a press conference with PKR leader Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim and DAP strongman Lim Kit Siang where Hadi read from a brief statement that appeared to endorse

Guan Eng's Christmas message. Basically, Hadi said that Islam does not forbid non-Muslims from using the term "Allah" although it may not be equivalent to the actual meaning of the original Quranic word.

The three leaders looked rather tense and seemed in a hurry to get it over with. None of them were really comfortable about the subject matter and who can blame them?

The press conference was taking place on the same day as a no-nonsense statement from the Selangor Palace reminding everyone in the state that there is a fatwa decreeing that the term "Allah" is sacred and exclusive to Muslims. The Selangor fatwa was gazetted on Feb 18, 2010, shortly after the controversy over the Bahasa Malaysia language Bibles.

The Pakatan leadership appears to be going against the Palace and the state fatwa, whichever way one looks at it. For instance, a Malay daily had the following headline: "Sultan larang, Hadi benarkan" (the Sultan disallows, Hadi allows).

Actually, Hadi was being consistent in the sense that he had said more or less the same thing at the height of the issue in 2010. His problem is that a number of the leading ulama in his party do not agree with him.

Datuk Tuan Ibrahim Tuan Man, the party's Pahang chief and the man seen as Hadi's likely successor, had just a couple of weeks ago said that the "kalimah Allah" was meant only for Muslims. The view is shared by Dewan Ulama chief Datuk Harun Taib and the party's leading theologian Datuk Dr Haron Din.

In 2010, when Hadi was being hailed by

Christians as an "accommodating leader," many in PAS had disagreed with his stand but they kept their peace. The mood has shifted and the conservatives are less willing to hold their tongue this time around.

Hadi's latest statement has not gone down well with the party and the deafening silence on the part of Harakah daily on the issue says it all.

It has to be remembered that this is a party some of whose members are not even comfortable with wishing Christians "Merry Christmas" and which has protested against Muslims celebrating Valentine's day on the grounds that it has Christian connotations and encourages proximity between the sexes. PAS leaders are against cinemas which are seen as venues for vice activities and the unisex hair salon issue in Kelantan is still hanging in the air.

Some in Pakatan are upset with Guan Eng for stirring up this polemic issue so close to the general election. Even the Sultan of Selangor had

expressed "shock and regret" over Guan Eng's Christmas message. They said DAP was already assured of the bulk of the Chinese and Christian votes and there was no need to hurt PAS on the Malay ground.

"PAS loses votes every time the Pakatan Rakyat Council makes a decision," said a Selangor PAS member.

It was quite obvious Guan Eng was sealing in the DAP support in Sarawak and Sabah where there is a large Christian population. But the issue is a perception disaster for PAS which is seen as having lost its original ideals.

The next few months will be all about winning the undecided or the middleground. The issue is going to cost PAS among the undecided Malays and some are even talking about this being the turning point for Umno in Kelantan.

Hadi did not blame Guan Eng for raising the issue. Instead, Hadi accused Umno of turning the "kalimah Allah" into an election campaign issue and for allowing the mainstream media to report on it without considering the multi-religious nature of the country.

The party's powerful Syura Council which comprises all the top ulama is meeting on Saturday to deliberate the issue and many are bracing for a showdown between those who are for and those who are against the uninhibited use of "kalimah Allah".

Hadi is up against the wall. He is still under pressure to explain the controversial "Amanat Haji Hadi" where he had deemed Muslims who supported Umno as "kafir" or infidels; now he has to explain his stand on the "kalimah Allah" to his party.



Analysis

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