

Christians used as 'pawns' for votes, say church leaders

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By Clara Chooi

KUALA LUMPUR, Dec 13 — Many Christians feel victimised and are convinced they are being used as political pawns to win Muslim votes in the next general election, a number of church leaders have said.

The church leaders told the New York Times in a report published today that there was generally a feeling of Christian-bashing among the community which makes up less than 10 per cent of the population and consists of most major denominations.

File photo of people attending morning mass at St Francis Xavier Catholic church in Petaling Jaya. Many Christians feel they are being used as political pawns. — Picture by Choo Choy May

"I think Christians are generally feeling that there is kind of a Christian-bashing going on," Council of Churches Malaysia (CCM) vice-president Rev Thomas Philips told the newspaper.

The report pointed out that recent events had worsened religious tension here, particularly after the controversial August 3 raid on the Damansara Utama Methodist Church (DUMC) in Petaling Jaya.

During the incident, Islamic religious authorities had moved in on a dinner function held at the church premises after receiving complaints that Christians were proselytising to Muslims there.

While no concrete proof was found and no action taken, Muslim politicians here and Muslim group Himpun had continued to claim of a plot by opposition parties and Christian organisations to Christianise the country.

The NYT pointed to Himpun's series of planned nationwide rallies to "save and protect" Islam and cited Umno information chief Datuk Ahmad Maslan's recent statement as examples of the continuing accusations causing "unease" in the Christian community even as they prepare for Christmas.

During the just-concluded Umno annual general assembly, Ahmad had warned that Islam would be "lost" if Pakatan Rakyat (PR) made significant gains in the polls and had called the DAP "agents of Christianisation".

Under fire for his words later and dubbed as "Hitler" by his opposition foes, Ahmad chose to stick to his guns, insisting that his statement was nothing but the truth.

"It's unfortunate that the authorities don't take the relevant action against those making such wild allegations. We are upset about that. There's a sense of justice is not done. We have not done anything wrong," the NYT quoted Bishop Jason Selvaraj of St Mary's Anglican Cathedral as saying.

The daily noted that although Malaysia's Constitution provides for freedom of religion and designates Islam as the religion of the federation, Muslims here are free to proselytise to

others while those of other faiths are barred from doing so to Muslims.

But Christians here, it said, have denied attempting to proselytise.

"The present climate and mood is more political than anything else. They are thinking that it will unite the Muslims together, but I don't think that any Malaysians buy it. It's a political game," Catholic weekly The Herald's editor Rev Lawrence Andrew told the newspaper.

But according to political analysts interviewed by the daily, capitalising on religious sensitivities in this manner could prove detrimental to the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition in the long run.

Quoting Nanyang Technological University political science professor Farish Ahmad Noor, the daily wrote that the move could alienate Umno's non-Muslim affiliates in BN as well as ward off Christian support.

"If this (conservative) fringe in Umno thinks this is the only way they can secure the Malay vote, they have to understand that the coalition as a whole has to secure the votes of as many Malaysians as they can, and that includes Christians," he said.

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