

**'Tis the season to be jolly, with a police permit**  
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**By Debra Chong**

KUALA LUMPUR, Dec 9 — Around this time for the past 30 years, Catholic church groups nationwide will bring out their song sheets, check their musical instruments and tune their voices to sing in harmony as they ready to go a-carolling.

And get a police permit. Because carolling is done in public and requires moving from one spot to another.

File photo of members of a choir from a church singing carols during a ceremony to light a Christmas tree at the Seoul Plaza in Seoul on December 3, 2011. In Malaysia, they would have to have a police permit. — Reuters pic

As Christmas approaches, parish priests or their church youth leaders seek a police permit to effectively visit their fellow church members and belt out "Joy to the World", "Silent Night, Holy Night" and even "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer".

For what is essentially a simple gathering to get into the spirit of the season and celebrate the birthday of their religion's founder, carolling organisers are required to submit their full names as per their MyKad, identity card numbers, the details of their total participants, the dates, time and general areas of their visits.

Parish priests in Klang were alarmed to receive a memo from a district police officer this past week telling them to send in a list detailing the full names and contact information of the home owners they planned to visit this carolling season.

They are also required to inform Bukit Aman and the National Security Council, said an alarmed Rev Father Michael Chua, who told The Malaysian Insider he received the news from the parish priests of the Church of Our Lady of Lourdes and the Church of the Holy Redeemer earlier this week.

The irregular condition imposed by the district police officer is casting the spotlight on a recently-passed law to provide for peaceful assemblies that many groups, including the Human Rights Commission of Malaysia, the Malaysian Bar and various religious groups, say is more restrictive and regressive than the existing law it is to replace.

"Normally, we get the permits to go carolling without too many conditions imposed," said Rev Father Lawrence Andrew, who heads the Church of St Anne near Port Klang.

"This is something new. It seems they are now trying to regulate worship," he added, voice tinged with concern.

Lawrence felt the police were trying to regulate worship by imposing the new carolling conditions.

He said he had yet to apply for a permit and would not wait for the outcome of the two churches' application before deciding his next move.

Rev Thomas Phillips, who leads the Mar Thoma church here and whose followers of the Syrian branch of Christianity also apply for carolling permits yearly, said he would be

alarmed if the police imposed such conditions on him.

"Why do they want to know the details of all the heads of households for? That's so tedious," he said, adding that the carolling groups have moved around from the city to Petaling Jaya, Shah Alam and Klang, visiting three to four houses in the areas on average per day without issue.

"We do not apply for police permits before organising Christmas parties in the various homes of our church members.

"They're private functions after all, so there's no need to do so. We eat and chat just like in any ordinary party, except that we sing Christmas carols on this occasion," an evangelical Christian from Petaling Jaya, who wished to be known only as Ms Boo, told The Malaysian Insider.

Klang appears to have a high density of Christians with the three Catholic churches there catering to an estimated 10,000 followers, Lawrence said.

Malaysia, which forged diplomatic ties with the Vatican earlier this year, has nearly a million Catholics out of its 28 million total population.

Religious groups all over the country have raised a furore after the Dewan Rakyat passed the controversial Peaceful Assembly Bill, which bans "assemblies in motion" otherwise known as street demonstrations, two weeks ago.

In their various media statements, the country's religious leaders demanded an explanation from Putrajaya over the lack of public consultation on the Bill, which was passed on the ruling Barisan Nasional's (BN) vote alone after the opposition Pakatan Rakyat (PR) pact staged a walkout.

Lawrence, who is also the editor of the national weekly Catholic paper The Herald, related that police permits for carollers came into being after the controversial Ops Lalang exercise in 1987, when the authorities cracked down on dissenters, including opposition leaders and social activists.

He said there was a lot of concern because the law had been amended to define that a gathering of five or more persons required a permit from the police, under section 27 of the existing Police Act.

Catholic Malaysians, who make up the single biggest denomination of Christians in the country, told The Malaysian Insider the police usually respond promptly and issue the required permits without imposing too many conditions.

Former Catholic church youth leaders said the police usually advise carollers to wrap up their visits by midnight so as not to disturb the neighbours who do not profess their faith, and to make sure there are no Muslims onboard their chartered buses in granting the permits.

Sometimes, the police impose on carollers a 2km distance between the house they will be performing and the neighbourhood mosque or surau, which the ex-youth leaders say is nearly impossible to adhere to in a country where over 60 per cent of the population is Muslim.

According to Chua, who is an ecclesiastical assistant in charge of ecumenical and inter-religious affairs in the Archbishop of Kuala Lumpur's office, churches had previously only needed to name the area they are visiting in their permits and only if they had chartered a bus for carollers and not if they travel in cars.

The priest said he was checking with other parish priests in the Klang Valley and outstation over the permit issue, but found the additional condition peculiar to the two Klang churches.

"It could be an over-enthusiastic police officer," he told The Malaysian Insider yesterday, before sending a church representative to meet with the police to clarify the irregular request.

Some two hours later, he texted back to say: "They didn't impose any further conditions. Matter settled after meeting."

Attempts to get further information were rebuffed.

But Lawrence believes the police officer in question was likely confused about the existing law and the new law as to the provisions for processions and assemblies.

"What pertains to religious assemblies and processions? We don't really know. Is going carolling considered an assembly? What if it happens in hotels and shopping malls?" Lawrence asked.

"We don't know. The definition is too vague and religious leaders were not consulted," he said.

He added that as a result, neither the police nor religious leaders know what to make of the situation.

Thomas said it would be a big problem if the police tried to restrict street assemblies from happening as he weighed in on the civil groups' demand for Putrajaya to consult the public before enforcing the new assembly law.

He noted that it was not just Christians who held religious parades but the Hindu and Buddhist communities too, and noted further they were tourist draws.

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