

PM meets selected church heads as Christian unease grows

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By Debra Chong

KUALA LUMPUR, Jan 4 — Datuk Seri Najib Razak will host 14 key Christian leaders for lunch today, sources say, in what is seen as a bid to rekindle cooling ties with local churches.

However, not all church heads were invited to the private function, prompting several Christian leaders to question the selective list.

“Why only some leaders? If it has anything to do with Christianity, it should involve the entire board,” said a senior clergyman, who said he was left out of the list.

A government official confirmed the Prime Minister’s Office (PMO) had issued the invitations for the closed-door function to several church leaders in Putrajaya, but denied the government had been selective with the names

“Yes, the invitations were sent directly to a few people, but we did not decide who could attend and who could not. We left it up to the church leaders to decide,” said the source who asked not to be named.

Among those he named were the Kuching-based incoming Anglican archbishop of Southeast Asia, Rev Datuk Bolly Lapok; Catholic archbishop of Kuala Lumpur, Tan Sri Murphy Pakiam; Pastor Eu Hong Seng, the chairman of the National Evangelical Christian Fellowship; and the chairman of the Christian Federation of Malaysia (CFM), Anglican bishop Ng Moon Hing.

He said those who had confirmed they will not be attending are Catholic bishops, Anthony Selvanayagam of Penang and Paul Tan of the Johor-Malacca Diocese; and Rev Hermen Shastri, the secretary-general of the protestant Christian Churches of Malaysia (CCM).

He told The Malaysian Insider it was a follow-up to last year’s May 12 luncheon following a public outcry brought about by allegations that church leaders were conspiring with DAP politicians to install a Christian to helm Putrajaya in the next general elections.

The attack against Christians was first raised by Umno-owned broadsheet, Utusan Malaysia, in an unsubstantiated article headlined “Kristian agama rasmi? [Christianity the official religion?]” and has continued to gain momentum with various other allegations by conservative Muslim groups.

He said the government had planned the follow-up meeting for a long time, but was challenged to find a suitable date that fit the various leaders’ busy schedule.

He acknowledged that Christian unease over challenges to practise their religious rights had grown, but said, “They can bring up whatever issues they want.”

Since the May 12 meet, the Christian community has been relentlessly accused of trying to covertly convert the country’s majority Muslim-Malay community. In turn, they have charged the government of systematically eroding their religious freedom as enshrined in the Federal Constitution, the country’s supreme law, over the past year.

Recent developments have seen Pakiam criticising the government for breaching a decades-old education policy to engage in maximum consultation with the Catholic owners of mission schools when it ignored SMK Convent Bukit Nanas' recommended headmistress candidate by appointing a Malay-Muslim principal to the post.

More recently, Eu had said certain groups were abusing Article 153 to "bully" Christians.

The senior clergyman had said on Christmas Eve that the Federal Constitution's Article 153 was akin to "bullying" if it only protected the rights of one group.

Article 153 states that it is the Yang di-Pertuan Agong's responsibility "to safeguard the special position of the Malays and natives of any of the States of Sabah and Sarawak and the legitimate interests of other communities in accordance with the provisions of this Article".

In his speech, Eu had stressed that he did not have problems with rights of the Malays and the Sultans but "what irks many of us are the 'shifting rights'" of the majority.

The local Roman Catholic Church is also waiting for the Court of Appeal to decide on its right to use the word "Allah" to describe the Christian god in their publication, after Putrajaya appealed against a 2009 judgment that said the church has a constitutional right to do so.

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