

Interfaith panel back in saddle next month, says new chief

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By Debra Chong

KUALA LUMPUR, Aug 20 — The Cabinet's special interfaith panel will resume meeting next month to tackle heightened Muslim-Christian tensions after a lapse of half-a-year, following the death of its first chief Datuk Ilani Isahak in February.

Her replacement, Datuk Azman Amin Hassan, said he will arrange for the 35-member Special Committee to Promote Understanding and Harmony Among Religious Adherents to meet with the two ministers in the Prime Minister's Department — Tan Sri Koh Tsu Koon and Datuk Seri Jamil Khir Baharom — by September.

"Hopefully, we can progress further despite the religious tensions that we have been experiencing lately," the director-general of the National Unity and Integration Department (NUID) was reported saying by English daily The Star today.

Ilani lost her battle with cancer in February. — File pic

"This is a very important responsibility given to me and the first thing that I need to do is to get the support of both the Muslims and non-Muslims," the 58-year-old added.

Azman, who will continue his role as Unity D-G, said he will continue the targets set by Ilani and hold more events to build up the trust between the two groups.

The mercury has been rising over race and religion in Malaysia, particularly in relations between Muslims and Christians, since Election 2008 and appears to be deteriorating ahead of the next polls, widely perceived will be called by year end.

In the latest census results released a few months ago by the Statistics Department, Malays, who are constitutionally Muslim, make up the biggest race and religious group nationwide at 61.3 per cent.

In comparison, Christians form only 9.2 per cent of Malaysia's 28.3 million population. But in Sarawak and Sabah, which is regarded as the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition's vote bank, an estimated seven out of 10 people there are Christians.

Malay rights groups and Muslim NGOs have recently accused Christians of allegedly attempting to convert Muslims to Christianity following an Utusan Malaysia editor's claims that Muslim primary schoolchildren are being taught about Jesus by Christian youths aiming to convert them, which is illegal under Malaysian law.

Following a raid by the Selangor Islamic Religious Department (Jais) on a dinner held at the Damansara Utama Methodist Church (DUMC) in Petaling Jaya early this month, the Malay newspapers have been highlighting allegations that Christian groups are on a campaign to buy over Muslims in an attempt to swell their ranks by offering cash, free food, free education and housing to poverty-stricken Malays.

The allegations were preceded by news reports by the Umno-owned Utusan Malaysia accusing the opposition DAP of conspiring with church leaders to turn Malaysia into a Christian state and install a Christian as prime minister.

Another instance was the controversial edict by the Penang Fatwa Council banning the use of loudspeakers for reciting verses from the Quran before dawn prayers. The ban had caused a furore among the Muslim community in Penang and earned much criticism in the Umno-controlled media, with political leaders claiming this as evidence that the DAP-led state government was impinging on the rights of Muslims.

Christian-Muslim relations have developed a new flashpoint over growing claims of proselytisation. — Picture by Choo Choy May
Shortly after the edict was passed, the DAP's headquarters in Penang was discovered partly charred by an unknown man who was purportedly seen leaving a stack of burning newspapers in front of its premises.

The interfaith panel, set up last year to address the Alkitab row, might have been snuffed out earlier if not for Ilani's skilful navigation of the narrow channels of communication between the Muslim and non-Muslim camps.

The four sub-committees formed by the panel have been holding meetings since Ilani's death, but sources told The Malaysian Insider they are unable to take it up with the main interfaith panel until a new head is appointed.

Azman was one of two candidates named to lead the Special Cabinet Committee to Promote Inter-religious Understanding and Harmony, replacing Ilani

The Malaysian Insider understands the other candidate was Datuk Nik Mustapha Nik Hassan, the director-general of the Institute of Islamic Understanding Malaysia (Ikim), also 58.

Azman, a Universiti Sains Malaysia graduate who majored in developmental communications, had been serving in the NUID since joining the civil service in 1977.

The Kelantan-born was due to retire in May this year but his contract has been extended.

He has been playing a key role in the interfaith panel since its inception early last year, following the firebombing of churches and other places of worship nationwide in January.

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