

Himpun ready for dialogue, but says interfaith panel ineffective
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By G Manimaran

KUALA LUMPUR, Oct 20 — Putrajaya's inter-faith panel is not effective in solving issues related to Islam and this is one of the reasons for "Himpunan Sejuta Umat" (Himpun), its chief organiser Mohd Azmi Abdul Hamid said today.

The government has asked the organisers to consult the Cabinet's Special Committee to Promote Inter-religious Understanding and Harmony to iron out issues between the various faiths.

"Yes, it is one of the factors why this rally is held ... there are other factors as well, but this is one of it, there was a dialogue but there was no outcome," he said when asked why Himpun did not utilise the two-year-old panel to discuss the issues which are on Himpun's agenda, in Shah Alam, on Saturday.

Among others, Himpun focuses on issues related to the desertion of one's religion. The group is expected to come out with a declaration urging that there be specific laws related to those who become apostates.

Mohd Azmi, who is also "Teras Pengupayaan Melayu" (Teras) president, said Himpun does not reject dialogues with the committee but its suggestions did not bring about the results they had hoped for.

There are several other Himpun Secretariat leaders who are also on the committee.

"We want to have dialogues, we respect the space for them but we want to find the best solution. Yet, there is no outcome from the discussions ... the problems relating to Islamic issues cannot be resolved, there are issues to be brought up to the courts, there are polemics through the media ... these issues continue to drag on without a solution.

"This is why we want to convey the message that we, the Muslims, have our own role to play in defending Islam and at the same time, at the rally, we will convey the message that we respect other races who are not Muslims," Mohd Azmi said.

He also said that Islamic organisations have failed to play the role it had hoped they would, including enforcement.

Mohd Azmi said, as the Teras president, he hopes to have a special forum in the organisations related to Islam, either in the National Fatwa Council or in Islamic councils to allow such issues to be brought up by both Muslims and non-Muslims.

"This step is required to cater to the need to strengthen the enforcement of Islamic agencies," he said, adding that the forum should focus specifically on the discussion of Islamic issues.

"Both Muslim and non-Muslims can give their views to be discussed at the meeting and for the Muslims with a strong point to make, it has to be accepted by the non-Muslims, as

should be the case for the non-Muslims with constructive opinions and views being accepted by the non-Muslims.

"I am not sure what is the role of this committee, so I suggested organising a special forum to discuss issues related to Islam," he said.

Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Tan Sri Koh Tsu Koon defended yesterday the Himpun Secretariat's move to have the rally at the Shah Alam Stadium this Saturday to discuss issues related to apostasy despite concern among certain quarters.

Koh, who is in charge of unity and performance management, said Himpun is acceptable as long as the organisers and the participants voice their views in a peaceful manner and adhere to the principles of Rukun Negara and the 1 Malaysia concept.

He stressed that any group seeking to voice their opinions has to consider the reality of Malaysian society, which is complex, and hoped that the rally this weekend will not result in racial tension, but promote understanding instead.

He also said it would be better if the issues to be discussed were raised to the interfaith panel for further discussion.

In a separate statement yesterday, MCA President Datuk Seri Dr Chua Soi Lek had urged Himpun organisers to cancel their campaign against Christians, who have been accused of challenging the Islamic faith, to avoid religious tension.

"Whether it proceeds or not, I think the police will know what to do, but personally, I think there should not be any rally (of that sort)," Dr Chua said.

Christian leaders see the Himpun rally as irrelevant and have expressed hope that the group will not stoke religious tension.

They reminded the organisers that their actions could create an uncomfortable situation among communities of other religions, as well as jeopardise the relations between the Muslim and Christian communities, and affect the ongoing efforts by the government and religious leaders to promote understanding and harmony among all Malaysians.

"I think it (the effort) is unnecessary because everybody knows there is no solid evidence regarding apostasy cases," National Evangelical Christian Fellowship Chairman Rev Dr Eu Hong Seng said yesterday.

Council of Churches Malaysia (CCM) president Rev Dr Thomas Philips, however, does not think the rally should be cancelled as everyone in this country has the right of expression and assembly.

Mohd Azmi also said that his group is open to discussions with all parties, including the panel, while rejecting the suggestion that his group will be aggressive during the rally on Saturday.

"I can guarantee that this rally will be peaceful. We do not want to make enemies with anyone whatsoever. We will work to get support from the security forces so that nobody will take advantage of the situation," he said.

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