

Be fair, Asri tells Thaipusam visit naysayers
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KUALA LUMPUR, Feb 19 — A former Perlis Mufti has accused critics of the prime minister's recent visit to Batu Caves of practising double standards, noting that they had kept mum on a similar visit by Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim in conjunction with Thaipusam.

Dr Asri Zainul Abidin said that while a picture he put up on Facebook of Datuk Seri Najib Razak's Thaipusam visit to the Gombak temple complex had elicited hundreds of negative comments, a shot of the opposition leader celebrating the same Hindu festival in Ipoh was deemed fake.

"I received close to 1,000 comments claiming the prime minister's presence went against the (Muslim) faith, plus all kinds of politically-motivated fatwas," Utusan Malaysia quoted him as saying yesterday at the Himpunan Ulama, Cendekiawan Islam dan Penulis Maya here

"However, when I uploaded a picture of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim at a similar celebration in Ipoh, they said the photo must be examined as [Anwar's image] might have been superimposed."

Asri (picture) said it was clear that such critics of Najib were using religion to further their own agenda and cautioned this minority group of Muslims that it was a "big sin" to exploit Islam to support their political biases.

Such activity would have a major impact on Muslims and represented a threat to Islam, the outspoken Oxford Centre for Islamic Studied fellow added.

Yesterday, Islamic affairs minister Datuk Seri Jamil Khir Baharom said Najib's visit to Batu Caves on February 7 had been in accordance with guidelines issued by the National Fatwa Council.

"Najib was not involved in any religious ritual or event and so, the question of his faith should not arise. He followed the specified guidelines. He knows what he can and cannot do," Sinar Harian quoted him as saying.

Jamil Khir further accused critics of the visit, held in conjunction with the annual Thaipusam celebrations at the temple complex, of playing up the issue to provoke hatred of the prime minister.

"It damages the religion (of Islam) when Muslims are willing to hurl accusations and make all sorts of malicious claims purely because they do not see eye-to-eye with the country's leaders," Jamil Khir said.

He added that if Najib stands accused of sacrificing his faith by going to Batu Caves during Thaipusam, the same could be said of PAS spiritual leader Datuk Nik Aziz Nik Mat, who has on many occasions handed out aid at temples.

Earlier this month, Perak Mufti Tan Sri Harussani Zakaria slammed Najib for “sacrificing his faith” by showing up at the annual Thaipusam festival at Batu Caves, the prime minister’s third visit in as many years.

Harussani had pointed out that Muslims were not allowed to join in on religious rituals conducted by other faiths.

The Mufti, however, later retracted his initial statement after accepting Najib’s clarification that the prime minister had only given a speech at the complex and did not enter the cave temple.

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