

Revoke ISA ban on Alkitab, Christians tell PM
The Malaysian Insider
April 17, 2012
By Debra Chong

KUALA LUMPUR, April 17 — The Christian Federation of Malaysia (CFM) today urged Datuk Seri Najib Razak to lift immediately the government's outdated orders banning the import of the Alkitab to prove his global movement of moderate reforms.

The umbrella body, representing over 90 per cent of Christian groups in the country, reminded the prime minister of three outstanding orders dating back 20 years under the Internal Security Act (ISA), which is being replaced by a new security law currently the subject of hot debate in Parliament.

The first, signed in March 1982 under the Internal Security (Prohibition of Publications) (No. 4) Order 1982, outlaws the Indonesian version of the Alkitab published by the Lembaga Alkitab Indonesia and printed in Korea.

The other two orders ban the publication of a book titled "Kalam Hidup", published by the Kalam Hidup (Kemah Injil Gereja Masehi Indonesia), and "Perjanjian Baru" (New Testament), published and printed by the Lembaga Alkitab Indonesia, in 1983.

"This order deems the Alkitab (the Bible in the Malay language) to be prejudicial to the national interest and security of the Federation and prohibits the printing, publication, sale, issue, circulation or possession of the publication with the condition that the prohibition 'shall not apply to the possession or use in churches of such publication by persons professing the Christian religion, throughout Malaysia'.

"Pursuant to Clause 32 of the Bill, such orders will remain in force notwithstanding the repeal of the Internal Security Act 1960. This is wholly unacceptable," Bishop Datuk Ng Moon Hing, who chairs CFM, said in a statement today.

He added that all three orders must be lifted to be in line with Najib's raft of law reforms.

"As long as they remain part of the corpus of legislation in Malaysia, they represent an odious and obnoxious derogation from the freedom of religion in Malaysia," Ng stressed.

The Federal Constitution, the country's highest law, states that Islam is the religion of the federation but provides for Malaysia's diverse ethnic and religious groups the freedom to profess their faiths.

While Christians make up only about 10 per cent of the country's 28 million population, it forms the biggest religious group in East Malaysia, where bibles in the national language are widely used as a common denominator.

In recent years, the Christian and Muslim religious communities have been engaged in a tug-of-war over the word "Allah", with the latter group arguing that its use should be exclusive to them on the grounds that Islam is monotheistic and the word "Allah" denotes the Muslim God.

Christians, however, have argued that "Allah" is an Arabic word that has been used by those of other religious beliefs, including the Jews, in reference to God in many other parts of the world, notably in Arab nations and Indonesia.

A 2009 High Court ruling in favour of the Catholic Church using the word to also refer to God has however been blocked pending an appeal by the Home Ministry for the past three years.

A number of conservative Muslim groups have also accused Christians of attempting to convert Malays, resulting in heightened tension between followers of the two religions.

Last month, an officially-sanctioned seminar focusing on the "threat of Christianisation" jointly-organised for religious teachers by the Johor Education Department and the Johor Mufti Department saw another flare up among Christians and Muslims.

The Malaysian Insider

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