

PM: Don't be insensitive to other faiths
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By Shannon Teoh

KUALA LUMPUR, April 1 — Datuk Seri Najib Razak has called for all religions to respect other faiths but did not censure yesterday's seminar by the Johor government on the "Christian threat" despite calls from non-Muslim groups for the prime minister to "walk your talk" of unity and moderation.

The Malaysian Consultative Council on Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Sikhism and Taoism (MCCBCHST) had said Najib's 1 Malaysia concept for unity and moderation is in "disarray" after Johor education and religious authorities decided to carry on with the seminar for about 300 religious schoolteachers.

"Whatever it is, we don't want it (the matter) to be the source of misunderstandings between the followers of the various faiths in our country.

"We can discuss matters pertaining to faith, but we cannot be insensitive to the other groups, whether Muslims against the non-Muslims or vice-versa," Najib (picture) told reporters after meeting Felda settlers in Bera yesterday evening.

The Umno president added that as a general election is near, "everything can be manipulated or twisted to become a political issue that is why we must be careful in this matter." News of the seminar's theme earlier this week drew swift condemnation from non-Muslims, who expressed shock and dismay over the characterisation of Christians in the title.

"We implore you (Najib) to walk your talk. Be the leader of a responsible government that practises what it preaches. Your concept of 1 Malaysia and your call for moderation is all in disarray," MCCBCHST said in a statement yesterday.

But Muslim NGOs insisted that the government was duty-bound to address the "threat of Christianisation," which they repeatedly profess to be real despite the absence of firm evidence.

In response, Johor dropped specific mention of the "Christian threat" from the seminar originally themed "Pemantapan Aqidah, Bahaya Liberalisme dan Pluralism Serta Ancaman Kristianisasi Terhadap Umat Islam. Apa Peranan Guru?" (Strengthening the Faith, the Dangers of Liberalism and Pluralism and the Threat of Christianity towards Muslims. What is the Role of Teachers?).

But Johor Mufti Department officials said that while the title of the seminar will be changed, the contents and structure will remain unaltered.

The Mufti Datuk M. Tahrir Kiai Samsudin also insisted the seminar was for the good of teaching Islam.

Christians form 9.2 per cent of Malaysia's 28.3 million-strong population.

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.

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

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