

PEMBELA says 'Christian threat' seminar a 'guaranteed' Muslim right
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By Shazwan Mustafa Kamal

KUALA LUMPUR, March 29 — Non-Muslims should not question a planned seminar on “the threat of Christianisation” to Islam as the Federal Constitution empowered Muslims to organise such events, a conservative pressure group asserted today.

The Muslim Organisations in Defence of Islam (PEMBELA) defended the event jointly organised by the Johor state education and mufti departments, saying that opposition towards the event meant questioning guaranteed Muslim rights.

“There is a trend to question the efforts to strengthen the faith of Muslims, and this is ignorance towards the special rights of Muslims enshrined in the Federal Constitution.

“Efforts like this seminar are guaranteed rights under Article 11(4) of the constitution... the powers under this [Article] puts Islam at its proper place, as the religion of this country,” PEMBELA secretary-general Abdul Karim Omar told reporters.

“This is a position that cannot be questioned by anyone,” he said.

Article 11(4) of the Federal Constitution simply states that “state law and... federal law may control or restrict the propagation of any religious doctrine or belief among persons professing the religion of Islam.”

Abdul Karim stressed that as the seminar was only meant for Muslim teachers and did not involve non-Muslims, “there was no need to get upset” over the matter.

“[Participation at] the seminar is by special invitation... it focuses on intra-religious matters of Muslims, it’s about challenges faced by Muslims,” he said.

Abdul Karim said there was no need for the Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhism, Hinduism, Sikhism and Taoism (MCCBCHST) to get involved in the matter, reiterating that the seminar was “exclusively” for Muslims.

“PEMBELA wants the irresponsible remarks made by several parties withdrawn immediately, and for the Johor state education department and the mufti state department to receive due respect for their noble efforts in upholding the faith of Muslims,” added Abdul Karim.

The seminar 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?), requires the attendance of two religious teachers from each of the 55 national schools across Johor.

The Johor Mufti and Education departments have come under fire for endorsing the unproven claim that Christians are threatening the Islamic faith.

De facto Islamic affairs minister Datuk Seri Jamil Khir Baharom has defended the controversial seminar, saying that it was needed to safeguard the interests of Muslims.

The Johor Mufti Department has said its seminar on Saturday is to ensure young Muslims are not influenced by "the threat of Christianisation."

The officer in charge of the seminar told The Malaysian Insider yesterday the department was jointly organising the event with the state education authorities because they "fear young Muslims will be confused and not understand" when faced with attempts to convert them.

"Even if there is no threat, we must be careful so that the faith of Muslims will not be influenced," the official, who declined to be named, said when asked if he had proof of proselytising by Christians.

Chrisanne Chin, Council of Churches of Malaysia (CCM) Youth Moderator, expressed shock and in disbelief over the seminar, saying yesterday "why is there a perceived threat? Do they have to create this sense of fear?"

Chin, who is also an executive council member of CCM, stressed that while she was not against religious teacher training programmes, one such as this would put pressure on the teachers to spread religious tension and fear among unsuspecting pupils.

The Cabinet's interfaith panel head Datuk Azman Amin Hassan said the "provocatively-titled" seminar flies in the face of the government's school-level interfaith harmony week launched last month by Deputy Prime Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin.

He added that while "it is fine to improve your faith", such seminars "will cause the [non-Muslim] community to feel uncomfortable."

Azman also said in a text message that he has informed the federal government's "education director-general for immediate action."

Pakatan Rakyat (PR)'s de facto leader Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim yesterday labelled the seminar as "a disgusting political manoeuvre to use religion to frighten the people".

But the Malaysian Ulama Association (PUM) and Malay rights organisation Perkasa supported the seminar as necessary, insisting that the threat of proselytism is real.

The Johor Mufti Department officer also said that as part of their responsibilities to Muslims, similar seminars have been held to "educate (Muslim) youths and rural folks so there would be no misconception when these issues arise."

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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