

Penang bishop meets Nik Aziz in bid to douse bible-burning flames
Malaysian Insider
January 28, 2013

KUALA LUMPUR, Jan 28 — Catholic Bishop Sebastian Francis paid an unscheduled visit to Datuk Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat on the PAS leader's 82nd birthday yesterday in Penang, Harakah Daily reported today, in what is seen as a bid to douse potential religious fires between Muslims and Christians amid the "Allah" storm.

The senior clergyman in charge of Penang was reported by the PAS news site to have said that the country needed to emulate the example set by the Islamist party's spiritual advisor and not the provocative sentiment shown by right-wing Malay lawmaker Datuk Ibrahim Ali or the latter's supporters.

Sebastian was also reported to have gifted Nik Aziz a birthday cake to mark their first meeting.

An Anglican priest in Penang lodged a police report last Tuesday over the alleged distribution of anonymous pamphlets advertising a bible-burning festival in Butterworth, supposedly to take place yesterday.

Ibrahim, an Independent MP for Pasir Mas, had sparked a firestorm of protests from church leaders and non-Muslim groups last week when he threatened to burn copies of Malay language bibles.

Politicians and local clergymen had lashed out at the fiery Malay right-wing leader for allegedly stoking religious hatred and driving a deeper wedge between the country's two most dominant religious communities.

The Malaysian Islamic Development Department (JAKIM) also upset church leaders with its sermon on Friday, in which it warned Muslims nationwide of "enemies of Islam" that would try to confuse them into believing that all religions share the same god.

Muslim and Christian leaders here have been at loggerheads over use of the Arabic word "Allah", with the former claiming that it refers exclusively to the Islamic God.

A church was firebombed after the Kuala Lumpur High Court ruled in 2009 that Muslims did not have an exclusive right to the word "Allah".

Debate resurfaced last month after DAP secretary-general Lim Guan Eng, who is also the Penang chief minister, called on Putrajaya to lift a ban on Malay-language bibles in Borneo Malaysia.

A Sabah church group said last Friday that the religious freedom of Christian Bumiputeras was under attack, pointing out that most adherents of the faith in Malaysia came from East Malaysia and use the Malay language.

A Buddhist group urged today the National Unity and Integration Department, which is under the purview of the Prime Minister's Department, to resolve the drawn-out dispute over the usage of "Allah".

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