

**Najib defends 'Allah' ban, rules out election debate**  
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**By Jahabar Sadiq**

KUALA LUMPUR, April 26 — Datuk Seri Najib Razak has expressed support for the appeal to overturn a High Court ruling which allows the use of the Arabic term "Allah" for God by non-Muslim groups in Malaysia, according to an interview with global news station Al Jazeera.

The caretaker prime minister also told Al Jazeera English's Veronica Pedrosa in the interview, to be aired tomorrow, that he did not intend to have a public election debate with Opposition Leader Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim before the May 5 polls.

"The concept of Allah is different in the Muslim sense than in the Christian sense, we should not upset the Muslims and Muslims should not upset the Christians, we are living in harmony for years and it should continue," he was quoted as saying in an excerpt distributed by Al Jazeera English.

The Court of Appeal has fixed May 30 for another case management on the government and Home Ministry's appeal against the 2009 High Court decision that the word "Allah" can be used by the Catholic weekly newspaper Herald.

In 2007, the government limited the usage of the term to the Muslim context only. This was revoked by the High Court two years later as the judge said the law was unconstitutional. Putrajaya appealed the ruling and the short-lived implementation of the 2009 court verdict has since been suspended.

After the ruling, there was a series of firebombing and stones thrown at several houses of worship in Kuala Lumpur. Some of the culprits were charged and later punished but the case continues to rankle.

The Christian community forms less than 10 per cent of the 28 million population in Malaysia but both Najib and Anwar have long started wooing them ahead of Election 2013.

Najib also said that he preferred engaging the public directly rather than debating with his political opponent.

"There are many ways to reach out to the public, both political parties have a lot of space in Malaysia ... It is unlikely we will have a debate, we need to engage with the people, the opposition will engage with people," Najib told the Talk to Al Jazeera

Najib's interview will be first aired globally tomorrow at 12.30pm (local time). It will be on Astro Channel 513. Repeats of the 30-minute interview will be on Sunday at 4.40pm, Monday 3.30am and 10.30pm.

He is leading the Barisan Nasional (BN) charge in the 13th general election, and has been made election director for Selangor which is under PR rule.

There are 222 federal and 505 state seats in 12 states up for grabs in the May 5 polls and pundits expect BN to keep the government albeit with a smaller majority.

The election is expected to be a tight race as the ruling BN, which has led the country in one form or another since independence in 1957, is campaigning on a series of reform initiatives introduced by Najib who took office four years ago.

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