

Waythamoorthy to broker Najib meeting with religious leaders on conversions
Malaysian Insider
June 22, 2013
By Yiswaree Palansamy

Religious leaders want the Federal Constitution changed on the controversial issue of conversions, said Deputy Minister in the Prime Minister's department, P. Waythamoorthy. He promised to organise a meeting with these leaders and Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak soon to discuss this issue.

"This is crucial to ensure harmony among the various races in the country," he said.

So far, Article 12 (4) says the religion of a person under 18 years old shall be decided by his parent or guardian. But this has led to challenges.

For example, a Hindu mother and her estranged Muslim-convert husband are in a tug of war over the religion of their children because their two young children were converted to Islam by the father. He allegedly did this in April without telling his wife, S. Deepa from Negeri Sembilan.

Waythamoorthy, who has legal training, said religious leaders want the words in the constitution changed from "parent" to "parents" to clear the ambiguity involved over only one parent can change the children's religion at will.

He told The Malaysian Insider that he will propose provisions to address the social and moral responsibility of the converting non-Muslim party towards his/her spouse prior to conversion in the Law Reform of the Marriage and Divorce Act 1976.

He said this after a closed-door meeting religious leaders to discuss the rising anxiety of non-Muslims on the issue of conversion of children by one parent against the other parent's wishes or knowledge. He did not say who these leaders were, other than a Sikh leader Jagir Singh.

The meeting was for feedback from these leaders to seek a permanent solution to the issue and to address the case of S. Deepa as well.

"I am very concerned with the ongoing trend and the dissatisfaction of the community with the recent episode," Waytha Moorthy said.

The former activist who shot to fame for championing the rights of the Indian community through the Hindu Rights Action Force (Hindraf) said that lawmakers need to assert their political will to address such issues calmly.

Despite a cabinet directive issued by then Law Minister Datuk Seri Nazri Abdul Aziz, that children of estranged couples are to remain in the religion of their parents at the point of their marriage, unilateral religious conversions still remain an issue, with lawmakers calling for proper governance over the matter. - June 22, 2013.

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