

Pressure on non-Muslim BN leaders to move on conversion bill
Malaysian Insider
July 4 , 2013
by JENNIFER GOMEZ

Non-Muslim Barisan Nasional leaders – already weak from their pummelling in the recent general election as Umno saved the day for the ruling coalition – now face their biggest test since the polls.

At least two such ministers and one MCA leader have been receiving demands from religion-based groups that they must take a strong stand against a Bill tabled by the government last week to allow one parent alone to convert the religion of a minor, even against the wishes of the other parent.

This Bill is seen by many non-Muslims as the second stinging betrayal by the government after leaders reversed their position that non-Muslims could use the Arabic word, Allah, to describe their god.

At stake is the non-Muslim political leaders' credibility with an influential constituency, non-Muslim religion-based leaders.

Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Tan Sri Joseph Kurup (pic) was told yesterday by leaders from a broad religious ensemble, in no uncertain terms, that he must take a clear message to Cabinet.

The Malaysian Consultative Congress of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Sikhism and Taoism (MCCBCHST) met with Kurup, who also is the minister in charge of national unity and integration, and demanded that two controversial clauses be removed from the bill.

They want changes or the withdrawal of the Administration of Islamic Law (Federal Territories) Bill altogether.

MCCBCHST deputy president Jagir Singh said they made their position clear to the minister and added: "The minister told us he will convey our message to the Cabinet on Friday."

The controversial clauses which they want deleted from the Bill are Section 107 (b), which allows for unilateral conversion of children by just one parent and three sub-clauses in Section 51 which provides for the Syariah High Court to decide whether a person is Muslim or not.

He added that the council also met with representatives from the MCA, and in the meeting chaired by Datuk Seri Liow Tiong Lai, the Chinese-based party also agreed that the two clauses should be removed.

"We share a similar stand," Jagir said.

Yesterday evening, Kurup also met the Catholic Lawyers Society of Kuala Lumpur, who gave their views on the Bill.

Society president Viola Lettice DeCruz said: "The minister has asked us to submit a more comprehensive report on our concerns for him to bring up to the Cabinet."

Another lawyer present at the meeting, Francis Pereira, said: "As minister in charge of national unity and integration, he seemed interested in what we had to say. We are now hoping he will bring it up to the powers that be."

Earlier, another non-Muslim minister, Datuk Paul Low, the Minister in the Prime Minister's Department also said that clause 107B of the Bill should not be allowed.

He said: "That clause is fundamentally unjust as it denies the rights of one parent on the welfare of his or her children, and the children are also denied the protection of their right to receive guidance from both parents as to their wellbeing."

His statement followed comments made by Tourism Minister Datuk Seri Mohamed Nazri Aziz who had said he was against the Bill, maintaining his 2009 stand that conversion to Islam cannot be done unilaterally by one parent.

Nazri was the de facto Law minister then. Yesterday, he reiterated that the Bill was unfair to non-Muslims.

"As a lawyer and a Muslim, I am not comfortable with this situation. Personally, I want this reviewed," he said. – July 4, 2013.

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