

**In the Christian part of the Malaysian nation, a growing distance from Barisan  
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**By Elizabeth Zachariah and Jennifer Gomez**

New churches, still yes, but only in industrial and remote areas, no longer the type of prime spots the old ones sprouted on.

Wild charges of the "Christianisation" of Muslims.

The ban on the word "Allah" for non-Muslims.

Election fraud. And until it was pulled back yesterday from Parliament, the government's new Bill to allow one parent alone to convert their young child to Islam, even against the wishes of the other parent.

These are issues which have made the Christian part of the Malaysian nation feel increasingly alienated.

To be sure, this is not a recent phenomenon. Even before the general election in 2008, there was some friction between this group that makes up about 10 per cent of the population and the Barisan Nasional government.

Unresolved questions surrounding conversion to Islam and cases of authorities insisting on Muslim burials for converts whose families were kept in the dark over the change of religion were already festering sores.

Ground reports suggest that the bulk of the Christian vote went to the opposition in GE13, and there are suggestions that since May 5, there is even less love between the community and Putrajaya.

"What with all the issues, Christians definitely feel that we have been victimised," said Bishop Philip Lok, president of the Council of Churches Malaysia, one of several Christian leaders The Malaysian Insider spoke to.

"And, we have to admit, those feelings have intensified post-GE13. We have been blamed for not supporting Government policies and more."

Although the Cabinet has somewhat eased the tension by pulling back the Administration of Islamic Law (Federal Territories) Bill, it has left a bitter taste in the one-million strong Christian community, as there was no consultation. Nor were their views sought before the Bill was brought to parliament.

Although the bishop said he was glad that the controversial conversion Bill had been withdrawn, he noted that Christians were aware that the possibility of unilateral conversion for minors still exists in a few states.

"It is unfair and unjust to the non-Muslims. We were not at all consulted," Bishop Lok added.

He urged the government to listen more when it came to issues that involve non-Muslims, such as unilateral conversion, to maintain the ties with the Christian community built by prime ministers in independent Malaysia's early past.

"We hope that in the future, we will have the opportunity to speak out and voice our grouses and concerns to the Cabinet before they table such a Bill.

"This just goes against what Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak had been talking about – national reconciliation. Their actions are more like anti-national reconciliation," he added.

Reverend Eu Hong Seng, chairman of the Christian Federation Malaysia and a leader of the National Evangelical Christian Fellowship, concurred, saying that there were many incidents and statements by various authorities with regards to how non-Muslims can and cannot practise their faith.

"This is of serious concern. These parties have been allowed to promulgate Bills and proposals that clearly infringe on our guaranteed rights with impunity," he added.

Eu said that he, too, was encouraged by the government's decision to withdraw the unilateral conversion Bill involving minors, but insisted that they needed to do more to allay the fears and negative sentiments among the people.

"It demonstrates that there is still some sense and rational thinking prevailing among our leaders.

"We believe a firmer public stand and stronger moves by the government to curb all forms of bigotry is needed. I would be most keen to see such similar wisdom applied to all other pending issues that have continued to cloud over the religious freedom of non-Muslims in this nation."

Christians, he said, along with other Malaysians, had no reason to be anti-government should the elected leaders deliver and keep to all its manifestos and promises made pre-election.

"We are concerned about the lack of integrity of leaders, corruption, injustice, crime, police brutality, transparency issues and others.

"And as a church we are committed to praying for the government of the day and the continued wellbeing of our nation," Eu said.

Father Clarence Devadass, director of the Catholic Research Centre, who stressed that his comments were his own opinion and not the official view of the Catholic church, said that based on the feedback from people he spoke to, they were dismayed over how the recent polls were conducted.

"In the run-up to GE13, Christians wanted a clean and fair elections. However, the outcome of the elections and the stories that are in circulation since then have led Christians to think that GE13 was not carried out on a level playing field," Father Clarence said.

Based on feedback he received, Christians were also unhappy that religion was used as a point of contention in the recent polls by both BN and Pakatan Rakyat, namely the "Allah" issue.

"The actual issues concerning the people were not addressed. Instead, religion was used as a point for dividing the nation, rather than uniting it," he noted, adding that Christians want a just, clean and transparent government which is impartial to all.

If there was a sense of persecution, "the 'persecution' is denying not just the Christians but all non-Muslims their fundamental rights as Malaysian citizens, enshrined in the Constitution," he said.

Father Clarence added that the BN must be sincere if it wanted to promote 1Malaysia, not just as a slogan but in its policies and actions, adding that it was pointless to have a nice slogan, when all other actions seem to go against it.

"A slogan is only of value when it is accompanied by actions that bring that slogan to life. Christians will work with anyone who is on the side of truth and justice," he added.

In his personal opinion as a priest, Father Clarence feels that BN has to be sincere in its actions and should stop "singing different tunes to different communities", as this would only infuriate the stakeholders.

He added that if BN was sincere about 1Malaysia, the ruling coalition should stop all inferences that go against it.

"For far too long, the government has given only lip service to Christians. They have not shown the political will to unite all Malaysians. It is time that they should show in action, only then can people regain trust in the ruling government. There is no longer trust," he said.

He added that Catholics should be vigilant, make their voice heard, and engage with other civil societies in the quest for a better Malaysia.

St Thomas More parish priest Father Simon Labrooy stressed that the Catholic church was all for peace, but people were getting uncomfortable with politicians who use religion as a tool for self-gain.

He questioned why it was so difficult to inculcate a sense of respect for one another's religious choice without comprising one's own religious values.

Father Simon was all praise for the "man on the street" for being more open-minded than politicians.

"Politicians are playing with this issue for their personal gain and fanning the fire of disunity. They think Malaysians are stupid. Among the people, we want peace and unity," he said.

Asked if Christian sentiment has hardened against BN, the priest responded: "Yes, the anti-BN sentiment goes without saying. We want a proper government with ministers who can think and follow up with a good conscience." – July 9, 2013.

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