

## **Can religious leaders still talk through issues anymore?**

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To the world, before these past few weeks, Malaysia has been a country that always at least claimed to be a model for moderate faith and prided itself on cherishing interfaith dialogue and shared space.

No one is making that claim anymore, at least no one from the top. No one there can.

Not when in the space of bare weeks, Malaysians have seen two high religious figures – one Buddhist, the other Catholic – have to issue apologies to mollify a madding crowd.

Just last week, the Buddhist Chief High Priest of Malaysia Datuk K. Sri Dhammaratana apologised for the Buddhist group that used a surau in Johor for prayers, even though that group was from Singapore.

A few weeks earlier, the Vatican envoy to Malaysia Archbishop Joseph Marino apologised for his comments on the "Allah" issue after Malay rights groups kicked up a storm.

More recently, several government ministers have taken a hardline position on matters relating to faith. One deputy minister even gave the thumbs-up to an Astro disclaimer on a TV biopic of the new Pope.

Yes, Malaysia, it has come to this: someone thinks "Viewer discretion is advised" is necessary for a documentary on Pope Francis.

What impact is this climate of intolerance having on interfaith dialogue in the land whose prime ministers like Tun Abdullah Badawi and Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad once said showed the world how moderate faith prevails?

Here's the good news: thankfully – and surprisingly – little impact on the faithful.

Religious leaders say they are not ready to raise the white flag yet, insisting that interfaith dialogue is the only way to settle religious conflict.

Yes, there are serious challenges and long-standing issues, such as the conversion of minors and the use of the word "Allah" by non-Muslims, which remain unresolved.

Ex-Perlis mufti Datuk Dr Mohd Asri Zainul Abidin has a thought on why such challenges even exist for interfaith dialogue. He said the lack of success in interfaith dialogue between Muslims and non-Muslims was due to the lack of understanding of what can and cannot be brought to the discussion table.

He offered that firstly, all parties should know that when Muslims come to the dialogue table, it is not to recognise the other religions as equal to Islam, but rather to recognise that Islam respects non-Muslims' right to exist.

"Among some conservatives, they think that interfaith dialogue is about sacrificing the status of Islam. Which is why both sides of the divide should be clear about the underlying terms.

"When that is made clear, then interfaith dialogue can do a lot of good and promote better understanding on religious conflict issues," he said.

This has worked to some extent in the Cabinet interfaith committee, notes Jagir Singh, president of the Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Sikhism and Taoism.

He said, "Dialogue between Muslims and non-Muslims is certainly not dead. In fact, discussions among the various religious groups in the Cabinet committee has achieved some progress, although on certain complex issues, we have yet to reach a consensus.

"This is understandable because there are so many other factors involved which is beyond the committee."

Jagir added that these factors include the stands taken by various non-governmental bodies and state religious departments.

He added that it was important for interfaith dialogue to continue so that there is a venue for different religious leaders to meet and forge understanding on various issues.

Buddhist monk Venerable Sing Kan, who was the immediate past vice-president of the interfaith council and is a current committee member, agreed with Jagir that interfaith dialogue should continue, but added that with the child conversion and "Allah" issues remaining unresolved, it appeared as though talks have reached a deadlock. The reasons for this should be addressed, she said.

Malay rights group Perkasa, on the other hand, feels there is no room for Muslims and non-Muslims to sit and debate on religion.

Its secretary-general Syed Hassan Syed Ali said that Jagir "could fantasise all he wanted about the potential fruits of interfaith dialogue.

"Let the others reach consensus with them on religious matters, but this won't happen with Perkasa. To us, they should just accept and understand the status of Islam as laid out in the Federal Constitution."

Clearly, Perkasa falls in the "conservative" group that Mohd Asri spoke of. How can they be managed? Mohd Asri reiterates that all dialogue between Muslim and non-Muslim parties must have the objectives clearly laid out beforehand. This, he said, will result in the talks having a better chance of achieving its aims.

"There is still hope for interfaith dialogue," the former Perlis mufti stressed.

Venerable Sing Kan emphasises the leading role politicians need to take in setting the right spirit for religious tolerance and harmony.

On this front, Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Tan Sri Joseph Kurup plans on setting up a new council of religious heads for the purpose of understanding each other's faiths.

Kurup told The Malaysian Insider that he will raise the matter at the Cabinet so that a council made up of members of the various religious groups can be formed to understand

each other's stand and values of their respective faiths.

He also clarified that this is different from the existing Cabinet committee to promote Understanding and Harmony Among Religious Adherents.

"Dialogue between Muslims and non-Muslims in Malaysia can achieve results, but it needs to be fine-tuned to determine each religions' stand and values," Kurup said, in explaining the need for a new council.

It is a point also emphasised by the Vatican's first envoy to Malaysia, the Archbishop Marino.

In his statement released to the media after his apology, he said that as the former Apostolic Nuncio to Bangladesh, a country whose majority population is Muslim, he "firmly believes that inter-religious dialogue is the means to promote good relations among peoples of different faiths, who can discover the beauty of each other's belief". – August 19, 2013.

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