

Keep politics out, says Herald editor as Allah issue goes to court
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BY JENNIFER GOMEZ

It was never meant to become a major national issue. Whether the Catholics will be able to use the word "Allah" to refer to their god in their weekly newspaper, Herald, will come up again in court tomorrow.

"This was about the weekly using the word 'Allah', it is not about Allah per se, but it has snowballed into something else now. We want politics out of this," said the 68-year-old priest and editor of the Herald, Father Lawrence Andrew (pic).

He is not about to get his wish on that count.

The Malay rights group Perkasa, headed by leaders rebuffed at the general election, has already declared it will turn up tomorrow at the Palace of Justice in support of the government's ban on the Herald's use of the word.

In a statement on Monday, Perkasa called on other Muslims to join it at Putrajaya in great numbers tomorrow morning to "show support towards efforts in defending the word 'Allah' from being used and misused by other religious believers".

So does the priest know what to expect tomorrow, both in court and with the likes of Perkasa supporters waiting outside?

"I leave it in the hands of God, what is there to fear," Andrew said, with his hands clasped.

He added that this was the reason he had told Catholics who had offered to turn up in court to offer support to "stay back where you are and pray".

Earlier, the Sikhs wanted to get involved in the case too as the word "Allah" is contained in their Holy Book.

But Andrew said the church requested for the Sikhs not to get into the court case as they did not want the matter to be blown out of context.

"We were just challenging the government because they threatened to withdraw the permit. We told the Sikhs getting too many parties into the case would not help the situation," he explained.

In January 2008, the home ministry had approved the Herald's publication permit, on condition that the usage of the word "Allah" was prohibited and the word "Limited" (Terhad) be endorsed on its front page to mean that it must be circulated only to Christians.

The then-minister said this was done to protect national security and to avoid misunderstanding and confusion among Muslims.

Roman Catholic Archbishop Tan Sri Murphy Pakiam, as Herald's publisher, filed an application the following month to find the minister's decision illegal and to say that the word "Allah" is not exclusive to Islam.

On Dec 31, 2009, High Court judge Lau Bee Lan allowed the church's application and lifted the home minister's ban, declaring it illegal.

This ruling sparked attacks against several churches throughout the country. The first incident was the torching of the Metro Tabernacle church in Desa Melawati barely a week after the High Court ruling.

The attacks drew international attention and sparked outrage among leaders on both sides of the political divide, with the Najib administration promising to take stern action against the perpetrators.

Andrew recalled that when Herald was issued a show-cause letter by the home ministry back then over the use of the word "Allah", they tried to talk it over with the ministry, but to no avail.

After the 2009 ruling, the government appealed. The church filed an application to strike out the appeal and that is what will be heard tomorrow at the Court of Appeal.

Andrew said about the application to strike out the government's appeal, "I don't think they were expecting us to do this, but we were waiting and waiting after they had said they would appeal, but nothing happened.

"When the date was finally fixed, it was case management after case management, so we decided to file the striking out application."

In court tomorrow, the church's stand is that the 10-point solution by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak in April 2011, just before the Sarawak state elections, explicitly allowed Catholics to use the word "Allah".

Among other things, the prime minister had said Christians were free to bring in and use Malay-language Bibles.

The position taken by the Catholic Church now is that given that the 10-point solution allows the import of books where the word "Allah" is used, it is illogical for the government to challenge its use in the Herald.

Former Home Minister Datuk Seri Hishamuddin Hussein had also filed an affidavit earlier this month on behalf of Putrajaya to challenge the striking out application.

To Andrew, the good thing that has come out of this is that the "church has become more aware of its responsibility".

"It's our responsibility to maintain religious freedom, and therefore the Church sees herself as one that safeguards the rights of people. It wants to safeguard the rights of the downtrodden," he said.

Andrew reiterated the church's reasons for filing the case in court.

"We are only seeking redress. They threatened to take away a word we are using, so we are saying hold it. They want us to change 'Allah' to 'Tuhan'. I can't do that. I'm not the editor of the Bible, and the Herald quotes the Bible," the priest said. – August 21, 2013.

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