

Allah ruling could cut BN's support in Sabah, Sarawak
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The ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) could lose its solid vote bank in both Sabah and Sarawak with yesterday's Court of Appeal ruling which banned the use of the word Allah in the Bahasa Malaysia section of the Catholic weekly, Herald.

Sabahans and Sarawakians, who form most of Malaysia's 2.8 million Christians, have continued to support BN despite the coalition continuing to lose ground heavily in the past two general elections. But they are spooked with the interpretation of the ruling which suggested there is a blanket ban on the use of the word Allah in Bahasa Malaysia or native language Christian publications. Other minorities such as the Sikhs have also expressed concern about the decision.

This fear was highlighted by the Christian Federation of Malaysia and lawyers after the verdict for a judicial review was delivered yesterday, nearly four years after the Kuala Lumpur High Court allowed the word to be used in the weekly.

BN politicians from Sabah and Sarawak have admitted they now have their work cut out to undo the damage brought about by yesterday's ruling.

United Pasok Momogun Kadazandusun Murut (UPKO) party president Tan Sri Bernard Dompok felt the court decision was a blanket prohibition and had "fatally" affected the spirit behind the formation of Malaysia 50 years ago.

"I am terribly disappointed, especially for the natives of Sabah and Sarawak who had used the term in their churches even before Malaysia was established," he told The Malaysian Insider.

He said that freedom of religion was one of the conditions attached when Sabah formed the federation with Malaya, Sarawak and Singapore in September 1963.

"I did not expect the word to be barred after 50 years and this is so sad," he said.

Dompok, who was a cabinet minister before Election 2013 and had been vocal on the issue during his time in government, said the decision would affect the support for the BN among Christians.

"It did during the recent polls and will continue to erode our support base," said Dompok who lost his Penampang seat to a PKR candidate in the May 5 election.

He was in the cabinet in April 2011 when Putrajaya allowed the Borneo states to import the Al-Kitab from Indonesia which contained the word Allah.

"I thought the issue was solved, but we have regressed," he said.

Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Seri Idris Jala (pic) declined to comment until he read the judgments.

He said it was important to examine the judgment, and its implications, in relation to the 10-point solution as previously agreed by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak and the Cabinet.

Jala was the prime mover behind the 10-point solution which allowed the import of Bahasa Malaysia bibles, Al-Kitab, containing the word Allah and also to print them for local distribution. This was done just before the Sarawak state elections in 2011.

Political scientist Dr Jayum A. Jawan from Universiti Putra Malaysia said the Allah issue would be continued to be used by politicians in the peninsula.

"We saw that in the recent general election and the status quo will remain," he said, adding that although the decision does not directly affect Sabahans and Sarawakians, it may have an impact among voters in the peninsula.

Political analyst James Chin agreed, saying that this matter will be prolonged, simply because it has been politicised.

"We need a political solution and at present there cannot be one because religion in this country is tied to ethnic identity and domination of one race over the other," he told The Malaysian Insider.

He said Christians in Sabah and Sarawak would feel that the decision had violated their rights, particularly as it related to the terms and conditions when Malaysia was formed.

Chin said there was no politician who was strong enough to handle this issue currently.

"It can only get worse from now on and will become a key issue in further dividing the population," he added.

Senior lecturer with the Faculty of Social Science Universiti Malaysia Sarawak Dr Arnold Puyok said, "The use of the word will continue to be a bone of contention in Malaysia's race relations. Questions are raised such as whether the ban only affected the Herald and Catholics in the peninsula.

"How about the use of the word by Christians in Sabah and Sarawak? Putrajaya cannot have a different policy governing the use of the word," he said.

Puyok said the Cabinet and perhaps Parliament must deliberate and make an inclusive decision.

However, he said it was too early to tell whether support for BN would plunge.

"Obviously, BN cannot depend on the politics of development to appease the Christian community.

"Most of them are aware of their political rights and are unafraid to give their critical views on issues related to religious freedom," he said, adding that this where BN will be hit hard the next time around. – October 15, 2013.

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