

## Why irritate others on 'Allah', Dr M asks Christians

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KUALA LUMPUR, Jan 1 — With Selangor religious authorities preparing to clamp down on non-Muslim's use of "Allah", Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad today questioned Christian motives for "annoying others" with their insistence on using the Arabic word to refer to God.

The former prime minister said it would not hurt Christians in the peninsula to yield on the contentious issue, claiming that the usage of the Arabic word was common only among Christians in East Malaysia but not for the minority group here in the peninsula.

"We live together at peace with each other, respect each other's religion, but you want to do something that annoys other people," Dr Mahathir told reporters after PPP's New Year open house here today.

"It won't hurt them not to use the word 'Allah'. They've never used it before. Those who use it [are] Sabah and Sarawak. There is no objection, but here in the peninsula, why do we want to find a cause for quarrelling?" he added.

After a lull of nearly three years, temperatures over "Allah" have again flared over tussle for the word some Muslims insist was exclusive to Islam.

The latest flashpoint was the threat by Umno Selangor to protest outside all churches in Selangor this Sunday unless a senior Catholic priest apologises over his remark insisting on Christians' right to use "Allah" in their religious practices.

Malay daily *Utusan Malaysia* reported today Gombak Umno head Abdul Rahim Kamarudin as saying that Father Lawrence Andrew, editor of the Catholic Church's weekly paper, *Herald*, has until Saturday to retract his statement.

Newly-appointed Selangor Islamic Religious Department's (Jais) director Ahmad Zaharin Mohd Saad said last Thursday that letters will be sent to all churches in Selangor, asking them to comply with the state ban on non-Muslims from using 35 Arabic words and phrases, including "Allah", which are listed under the Selangor Non-Islamic Religions (Control of Propagation Among Muslims) Enactment 1988.

But Lawrence responded by criticising the Jais plan to compel churches in the state to stop using the Arabic word for God, and said the Catholic Church would not abide by such a directive.

When it was pointed out today that "Allah" is used as part of the national language, Dr Mahathir acknowledged the fact but still disagreed with the reason.

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“I know national language, but they’ve never used it, even in the national language before.

“Why now? For 50 years, we had no problem,” added the veteran politician.

The tussle over “Allah” arose in 2008 when Catholic newspaper the *Herald* was barred by the Home Ministry from using the Arabic word. The Catholic Church had contested this in court and won a High Court decision in 2009 upholding its constitutional right to do so.

Putrajaya later appealed the decision and successfully overturned the earlier decision when the Court of Appeal ruled this October that “Allah” was not integral to the Christian faith.

Despite the ban, the effects had not intruded directly into the everyday worship of Christians; it has so far been limited to a prohibition against the *Herald* printing the word, and the seizure of Christian religious materials, including the Al-Kitab Malay-language bibles and compact discs that contain the word “Allah”.

Christians make up about 10 per cent of the Malaysian population, or 2.6 million. Almost two-thirds of them are Bumiputera and are largely based in Sabah and Sarawak, where they routinely use Bahasa Malaysia and indigenous languages in their religious practices, including describing God as “Allah” in their prayers and holy book.

Besides the Bumiputera Christians from East Malaysia, some of whom have moved to the peninsula to reside and work, Orang Asli Christians in the peninsula also typically use Bahasa Malaysia in their worship.

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