

Putrajaya under fire for snubbing UN rights official over Allah ban
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Putrajaya failed to fulfil its obligations as a United Nations member state when it ignored the UN Special Rapporteur's letter expressing concerns on freedom of religion over the Allah ban, civil society groups and the nation's top human rights body said.

The Human Rights Commission of Malaysia (Suhakam) said that as a UN member state, it was important for the Malaysian government to respond to the concerns raised by Special Rapporteur Heiner Bielefeldt.

"As much as we understand the sensitivity of the issue, we are also concerned that the issue on the use of the word Allah among non-Muslims has led to severe criticisms by the international community which may reflect negatively on Malaysia's human rights record," Suhakam said in a statement to The Malaysian Insider.

Suhakam also said there was an urgent need for the government to facilitate interfaith dialogues among relevant stakeholders, particularly community leaders, religious scholars, the relevant state and federal authorities and the public on the use of the word.

Suhakam's response is timely, as Bielefeldt had recently called on the human rights body to take a position on the ban, adding that otherwise, they would run into problems with the international network of human rights institutions.

Bielefeldt had also mentioned the letter sent to Putrajaya last November seeking clarification over the ban on the use of the word Allah following a Court of Appeal ruling against Catholic weekly Herald.

"I am still waiting for a response, and hoping this can't be the final word of the government," Bielefeldt had told The Malaysian Insider last week.

Civil society groups, meanwhile, said the federal government was being "disrespectful" when it failed to respond to Bielefeldt's letter sent in November last year.

Suaram executive director Yap Swee Seng said they were disappointed with Putrajaya's failure to respond to Bielefeldt, pointing out that Malaysia should collaborate with the Special Rapporteur as it had pledged to do so when the government ran for the elections to sit on the Human Rights Council.

(Malaysia sat for a three-year term on the Human Rights Council from 2011 to 2013).

He said by not replying to the letter, Putrajaya had failed to meet minimum standards and the basic duty of being a member state of the Human Rights Council.

"The government should walk its talk and show the UN it is serious about its own pledge, otherwise this will not bode well for the country's image, especially since Malaysia is eyeing a seat on the UN Security Council now," Yap said.

The Coalition of Malaysian NGOs (Comango) spokesperson Honey Tan said she was not surprised that Putrajaya had snubbed the Special Rapporteur's letter.

"They also do not reply to Comango's letters seeking meetings.

"It shows that the senders are not important and the issues they raise are not significant," Tan added.

During the second cycle of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) process which was finalised in March, Malaysia rejected two of the four recommendations related to freedom of religion or belief. (Malaysia received 232 recommendations in total).

The two were to revise Malaysia's legislative framework in order to ensure freedom of religion or belief for all, and to take measures to ensure that all persons, including Muslims, can freely exercise their right to freedom of religion and belief, without interference by the state and including the right to change their religion.

Yap pointed out that while the government had provided an explanation for the other recommendations they rejected, it did not do so for the two recommendations it rejected on freedom of religion.

He said this was proof that Malaysia was not committed to promoting and protecting freedom of religion in the country and was unwilling to be held accountable.

Yap also said that this went against the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), which stipulates in Article 18 that "everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance".

"Malaysia affirmed the UDHR in the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action 1993 during the World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna and should not be seen by the international

community as backtracking on this shared consensus of the international community," Yap added.

Tan, however, said that given that there were many restrictions on freedom of religion in Malaysia, the rejection of the two recommendations were not unexpected.

"It only confirms that for the Malaysian government, politics is more important than fulfilling human rights," she added.

Yap also said that the rejection sent a worrying message that Malaysia condones the suppression of religious minorities.

He said that this had tarnished Malaysia's image and that recent incidents such as the "Allah" ban, body-snatching from a funeral in Penang, intrusion into a Hindu wedding by Islamic authorities and cases of unilateral conversion of minors to Islam further proved that the concerns raised by the religious minorities and international community were not unfounded.

Suhakam, meanwhile, reminded the government of its commitments made during the UPR process, in particular, to promote interreligious dialogue and reconcile different schools of Islamic thoughts and other religions; and to continue to combat all forms of discrimination particularly religious discrimination and to protect religious minority groups.

"More importantly, the government accepted in principle the recommendation to implement its commitment to promote and protect the rights of all people to worship in peace and security without discrimination or restriction," Suhakam said. – July 10, 2014.

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