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Malaysia's Interfaith Committee: Time to Start Dialogue

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Synopsis

There is an urgent need for interfaith dialogue to commence in Malaysia in view of the latest controversy over the impounding of Malay language Bibles. Much will depend on whether the existing interfaith committee is able to rise above the numerous objections to its formation.

Commentary

THE RECENT move by the Malaysian Home Ministry to withhold the release of 30,000 Malay language Bibles looks set to be the latest in a string of controversies to affect the already tense religious relations in the country. According to the ministry, the move was in view of the pending appeal by the government over the December 2009 High Court ruling allowing the use of the word 'Allah' in The Herald, a Catholic publication. The High Court ruling sparked a series of attacks on several places of worship in the country.

While the government has since agreed to the release of the Bibles, the controversy has not died down. Christian leaders are now claiming that the Bibles have been defaced after the covers were stamped with the words "for the use of Christians only" and a serial number. According to the government, this was done in line with a 1982 gazette under the Internal Security Act which allows for limited circulation of Bibles in Malay carrying the stamp. In the meantime, both the Perak and Selangor Muftis have issued statements that the Bibles must still be withheld as they contain the word 'Allah', a potential source of confusion for Muslims.

This latest incident underscores the urgent need for a common platform that enables interfaith dialogue and mutual understanding. Unfortunately, Malaysia's attempt at forming an interfaith committee has attracted plenty of opposition even within the first year of its formation. Will the beleaguered committee be able to put aside the various objections to its formation and take on the increasingly difficult task of promoting ways for Malaysians to co-exist peacefully? Arguably, much will depend on unwavering government support for the committee.

Polarising rather than promising

The interfaith forum was previously known as the Special Committee to Promote Inter-Religious Understanding and Harmony -- until objections were raised that the word "inter-religious" would be a source of confusion. To accommodate this, the committee was later renamed the Committee for Understanding and Harmony Among Religious Adherents. Unfortunately, this proved to be only one out of a long line of objections brought against the committee, barely out of its first year of operations. A number of detractors have taken issue with various aspects, from its name to the fact that it would not be a suitable medium for promoting harmony and religious

understanding.

The objections raised so far appear to have been quietly resolved; in the case of the opposition to the committee's name, the change came amidst behind-the-scenes efforts to bring members back to the discussion table. However, the relatively short existence of the committee has proven more polarising than promising in its attempts to foster understanding and harmony. This is unfortunate as the idea behind such a committee, whatever its name, holds much promise for multi-religious Malaysia. The fact that the committee was formed under the auspices of the Prime Minister's Department highlights the government's seriousness in finding solutions to the country's recent incidents of religious friction.

Furthermore, the committee comprises many of the most influential government and non-government religious organisations in the country. These include the Department of Islamic Development (Jakim), the Institute of Islamic Understanding (IKIM) and the Malaysian Consultative Council on Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Sikhism and Taoism. The creation of a mechanism that can bring these different organisations together for dialogue is unprecedented. Hence it is something to be strongly supported by the government and all other parties concerned.

Finally, the commitment to dialogue sets a good example for peaceful co-existence between the various religious communities. Sitting down to talk may not immediately – or even ultimately -- lead to concrete solutions for the various difficult and complex religious problems facing the country. But it is a good beginning towards strengthening the trust among the various religious groups, which can only be a good thing.

However, despite all its promising qualities, the interfaith committee has remained largely in the background since the announcement of its formation in April 2010. And despite weathering the numerous objections raised, the committee has yet to face its most daunting challenge: finding ways to bring about compromises and mutual accommodation amongst the various faith communities to promote harmony and peaceful co-existence as a united nation.

Framing the challenge

The committee, however, must be prepared to ensure that theological differences do not undermine the national goals of building a cohesive society. The success of this enterprise cannot be guaranteed without unwavering government support for the work that it is undertaking.

Recently, the committee was given a much-needed dose of encouragement by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak himself. Speaking at the country's first official celebration of World Interfaith Harmony Week, the Prime Minister expressed his support for the committee "as a mechanism which can solve the problems or issues through honest and frank discussion". He had also pledged full administrative and financial support and made an effort to meet with members of the committee, all of which are encouraging signs.

Such support by the government is crucial, especially in the face – paradoxically -- of the polarising effects of the formation of the committee. The main challenge remains for the committee to channel efforts towards building a cohesive, tolerant society. This is easier to achieve now when the parties involved still appear to be amenable to dialogue, rather than to wait until emotions boil over.

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