



PERSATUAN GEREJA-GEREJA 01 SARAWAK (ASSOCIATION OF CHURCHES IN SARAWAK)

Ruj Tuan:

Ruj Kami:

Tarikh: 02.05.2013

Pastoral Communique from the Bumiputera Church in Sabah and Sarawak

Greetings in the name of our precious Lord and Saviour, Christ Jesus.

We take counsel from the ancient preacher that there is a time for everything, "a time to keep silence and a time to speak" (Ecclesiastes chapter 3 verse 7).

As the Body of Christ seeking to live out his purpose and mission, we are mindful that the Church is to be a blessing to the nation, to strive for what is true, honourable, just and commendable in the interest of all people (Philippians 4:8).

But in the midst of this, issues affecting the church and the use of our Holy Scriptures have arisen. We, the native Christians of Sabah and Sarawak have kept silent for a considerable length of time. Some have taken our silence to mean something else. Therefore, the time has now come for us to speak.

When the caretaker Prime Minister first mooted the Global Movement of Moderates, we were enthusiastic in extending our support for the initiative. But ironically, the movement is being incessantly and blatantly distracted by unscrupulous elements from within its own ranks, whose strange proclivity is leaning more towards racism and extremism.

It is a grave mistake to condone extremism even for a minor political exigency because to do so is to expose our society to something so inherently base and so evil.

It is like opening ourselves to a kind of vile pervasion which could do untold, even irreparable harm. Extremism feeds on human weakness and insecurity. If left unchecked it could rob us of our true identity and eventually our soul.

A manifestation of such extremism is the extent to which fringe groups within our midst would go to advance their racism and religious bigotry over the controversy of the use of the

word 'Allah' to refer to God by non-Muslims. They have even suggested an open season for burning Bibles (pesta membakar Alkitab). Nothing can be more seditious and incendiary. Yet they were tolerated by the authorities.

Let us be clear that the 'Allah' controversy is more than just about a word. Indeed, various States have passed legislation prohibiting more than three dozen words from being used by non-Muslims. This legislation is applicable and is indeed expressly directed at non-Muslims.

For instance, a fatwa which has the force of law was gazetted on 1 June 2003 in Sabah under the Enakmen Pentadbiran Undang-Undang Islam 1992 whereby the use of 32 words is prohibited to non-Muslims. These included "Allah" (God), "Ibadah" (Worship), "Iman" (Faith), "Rasul" (Apostle), "Injil" (Gospel), "Nabi" (Prophet), "Wahyu" (Revelation) and much more. This is done notwithstanding that Islamic syariah law do not apply to non-Muslims.

The first of such state legislation was introduced by the Terengganu state government in 1980. The following year, the use of the Alkitab or the Malay language bible was prohibited on grounds that it is a threat to national security. The ban has since been modified to a restriction but the Alkitab is still considered a threat to national security. In December 1986 the Ministry of Home Affairs issued a circular prohibiting the use of the word 'Allah' on the purported grounds that such action was necessary for the purpose of maintaining public order and to avoid misunderstanding between followers of Muslims and Christians. This administrative decision was enforced using the draconian Printing Presses and Publications Act 1984.

In 2003, the Bup Kudus or the Iban language Bible was banned as it contains the word 'Allah'. The ban was subsequently lifted following protests by Christians.

In Sarawak and Sabah, the word 'Allah' has been used or spoken by the native communities of the state for generations and long before the formation of Malaysia and is part of their native language. Native Bumiputeras have always been using the term "Allah" in all aspects of the profession and practice of their Christian faith from baptism to final rites and these include in services, prayers, praise, liturgy, worship, and religious education. The term "Allah" is also used in Christian publications and multi-media resources. The right of the native Bumiputeras to use or speak their own language and to practice their religion in the state is safeguarded by the Federal Constitution.

The 'Allah' controversy is not really about religion as such but about unreasonable government policies and laws. In the face of such unreasonableness we cannot and should not remain silent. The time for us to speak has come.

Two thirds of the Church in Malaysia is made up of Bumiputera Christians in Sabah and Sarawak. In this respect, we speak with pastoral and moral responsibility and authority against religious bigotry, racism and extremism in any form. But we are not alone as our non-

Bumiputera brothers and sisters in Christ have also expressed similar concern over the 'Allah' issue on other occasions. We, therefore, speak as one voice.

We need more than just a display ad hoc benevolence. We need a tangible commitment from the authorities to respect and uphold the freedom of religion guaranteed by the Federal Constitution – the supreme law of the nation. We believe non-Christians, including Muslims, also share our concern.

We also acknowledge and uphold that according to Article 3 of the Federal Constitution that Islam is the religion of the Federation. By the same token people of other faiths are also accorded the constitutional guarantee of freedom to profess, to practise and to propagate their respective religions in peace and harmony in any part of the country. We are not asking for what is not already our constitutional right.

Surely the way forward is no longer found in the status quo which expects the Bumiputera Church in Sabah and Sarawak to remain silent.

This year we celebrate the fiftieth year of the formation of Malaysia. It is also fortuitous that this is also the Year of Jubilee for Christians, a year where we wait in hope and prayer for God to intervene and restore what has been ordained as rightfully ours.

We have been praying for long time now to see the righting of wrongs done to indigenous peoples in the name of development and politics. We are also praying for full respect and adherence to the Sabah 20-point and Sarawak 18-point Agreements signed with Malaya upon the formation of Malaysia. The first of these is freedom of religion. Sabah and Sarawak consented to form the greater Malaysian nation in 1963 with Islam as the religion of the federation on the express condition that there will be complete freedom of religion without hindrance placed on other religions. Thus the Government Paper "Malaysia and Sarawak published by Authority of Government of Sarawak dated 4 Jan 1962 (and this is reflected in the corresponding Government of North Borneo Paper) states unequivocally as can be seen from the following text in the foundational constitutional documents:

"People have wondered whether the fact that Islam is the official religion of the Federation of Malaya would affect religious freedom in Sarawak as part of Malaysia. This has been clarified at the recent Consultative Committee Meeting. Although Malaysia would have Islam as the official religion of the enlarged Federation there would be no hindrance placed on the practice of other religions. Complete freedom of religion would be guaranteed in the Federal Constitution. Sarawak has at the present has no established religion and it would not be required to accept Islam as its State religions. "

There is an urgent need for the authorities to acknowledge our frustration and to commit to come up with a long term solution.

The time has come for us to speak but we do so in a manner of peace just as the Christ Jesus is the Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6). We harbour neither ill will nor malice toward people of other faiths including our Muslim brothers and sisters.


Indeed, in speaking we are mindful to extend love to those who may not agree with us. The essence of God is love (1 John 4:8) thus we are compelled to love even our enemies (Matthew 5:44).

Therefore, it is incumbent on Malaysians of every faith to tolerate and embrace one another in love, in truth, and in humility.

Let us together seek to build this beloved nation for the good of all peoples so that all can enjoy the fruits of prosperity and goodness in this land the Almighty God has blessed us with.

May Almighty God bless you and keep you, may His face shine upon you and give you peace.

God bless Malaysia.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to be 'Bolly Lapok', with a small cross-like mark at the top left of the signature.

The Most Rev. Datuk Bolly Lapok
Chairman
Association of Churches in Sarawak