

Christians in Malaysia Report Dangerous Levels of Religious Intolerance

Malaysia's escalating dispute over who has the right to use the word *Allah* to describe **God** continues unabated.

The country's Court of Appeal ruled in October that only Malay Muslims were entitled to do so.

The indigenous people of the East Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak, who have been using *Allah* in text and worship for more than a century, and long before the formation of Malaysia, have rejected what they call the "repugnant" verdict.

This week more than 10,000 local Iban Christians are gathering in Kuching, the capital of Sarawak, for an annual conference. A spokesman said they plan to stage a peaceful protest to remind the federal government to honour its commitment to religious freedom.

Pastor James Ganie, from the Gospel Baptist Church in Kuching, told *The Malaysian Insider*: "The large gathering has more to do with faith rather than the legal matter that is before the court, or even politics. But we will be making our stand again on religious freedom. The meeting will again ask the government to respect the Malaysia Agreement and the assurance of religious freedom."

The court's decision was also widely criticized abroad, including by mainly Muslim countries such as Pakistan and Indonesia, where religious authorities say that prohibiting the use of *Allah* by non-Muslims has no basis in **Islam**.

The United Nations special rapporteur on freedom of religion,

Heiner Bielefeldt, has urged the Malaysian government to reverse its decision.

“Freedom of religion or belief,” he said, “is a right of human beings, not a right of the State. It cannot be the business of the State to shape or reshape religious traditions, nor can the State claim any binding authority in the interpretation of religious sources or in the definition of the tenets of **faith.**”

So far the Malaysian government, which voiced its support for the verdict, has not responded. It is also unclear whether the ban applies only to *The Herald*, the Catholic Church’s weekly newspaper at the center of the legal battle, or covers all aspects of **worship**. The ruler of the state of Selangor reiterated that all Christian subjects are barred from using *Allah*, even though sultans only have jurisdiction over Islamic matters.

Church leaders say **religious** intolerance has reached a dangerous level, as Islamist extremists heat up the pressure on a Christian community feeling increasingly **persecuted**. The Muslim Lawyers Association has now reportedly warned the Malaysian Bar not to back *The Herald’s* case.

The **Christian** community is also dismayed by the lack of assurances from the government to uphold constitutional guarantees of freedom of **worship**.

Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak had been applauded in 2010 when he proposed at the UN the idea to build a “global movement of moderates” from all faiths to reclaim the agenda for peace and pragmatism, so as to marginalize extremists.

But after his ruling party hemorrhaged support to the opposition in general elections in May, Najib has moved to appease Malay Muslims by pledging greater economic support for them, and emphasizing the government’s role as defender of the Islamic faith. In early December he told his party, the United

Malays National Organisation (UMNO), that Malaysia symbolised “the greatness of Islam.”

Such statements appear to feed the agenda of **Islamic extremists** and further fuel fear among Christians in a country once hailed as a beacon of multiracial and multireligious harmony.

The Allah dispute in Malaysia arose in 2009 when the government ordered *The Herald* to stop using the Arabic word for God or risk losing its publishing license.

The paper contested the diktat, arguing that the ban was unconstitutional and won its case in the high court. That verdict resulted in churches being fire-bombed and vandalized. The government appealed the ruling, which it won in October, resulting in the latest impasse.

The Herald has now filed an appeal in the Federal Court.

A team of lawyers representing all major Church groups believes its case centers on the constitutional right to practice one's **faith**.

In Sabah and Sarawak (which were guaranteed fundamental rights of freedom when they joined Peninsular Malaya to form Malaysia in 1963), church leaders have taken an uncompromising stand against what they regard as religious bigotry and Islamic extremism.

Dr James Masing, a Sarawak state minister, responding to the decision by the Court of Appeal, said: “We [Christians in Sabah and Sarawak] have been using the word *Allah* for over 100 years. Why suddenly are we now told we cannot use it?”

Bolly Lapok, bishop of Kuching, said the Association of Churches in Sarawak “finds it completely unacceptable that what have been common practices of the Christians in Sabah and Sarawak for generations, more than 100 years before the very

idea of Malaysia was conceived, are now held as unlawful.” He said to stop using the word *Allah* in the practice of their faith would amount to a curb on religious freedom.

Bishop Dr Thomas Tsen Lip Tet, president of the Sabah Council of Churches, said the appellate court’s judgment was “wholly unreasonable, irrational and repugnant, and hence we reject it.”

He added: “We concur with our brother churches in Sarawak that the judges overstepped their boundaries in determining that using the word ‘Allah’ is not integral to the Christian faith. In deciding thus, the judges arrogated to themselves a right that does not belong to any human court of law: the right to determine religion.”

Referring to *The Herald*’s decision to appeal, he said: “It is up to the federal court now to do the right thing.” Frank La Rue, the UN special rapporteur on freedom of expression, urged the Malaysian government to “withdraw unconditionally from further litigation on this issue.”

The Editor of *The Herald*, Rev. Father Lawrence Andrew, challenged the court’s view that Christian usage of *Allah* would confuse Malay Muslims and create conditions for the conversion of Muslims to Christianity. He debunked that claim by stating that both the attorney general and Prime Minister Najib attended Catholic schools yet remain Muslims.

He said creeping Islamisation of the country was rapidly shrinking the space for differences of opinion.

Christians are not the only religious community that is feeling victimized. The government has now mooted a proposal to curb the spread of Shia ideology. It intends to redefine the word ‘Islam’ in the constitution to apply only to Sunnis, which in effect would outlaw non-Sunni Islamic practices and strip such religious believers of their rights as Malays.

Civil liberties lawyers in the country say the move is unconstitutional and violates the basic structure of the law of the land.