

Table of Contents

- ***Malaysia's 'Allah' ruling widely criticised***
 - ***Christians banned from using "Allah"***
 - ***Christians fight for right to use word 'Allah' for God; Malaysia court set to give ruling***
 - ***Johor resort's surau may face demolition for hosting Buddhist worship***
 - ***Malaysia cracking down on Shi'ism***
 - ***Malaysia court quashes Hindu kids' conversion to Islam***
 - ***First Vatican envoy to Malaysia sparks Muslim anger over 'Allah'***
 - ***Man faces 3 months in HKBP Filadelfia death threat case***
 - ***Malaysian Muslims ask Vatican to recall envoy over use of "Allah"***
 - ***Bringing in Hindu priests and musicians to Malaysia***
 - ***Call to burn Bibles heightens Malaysian election tensions***
 - ***Christians banned from using word 'Allah' in arabic by new fatwa***
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Malaysia's 'Allah' ruling widely criticised

Church leaders call decision to limit use of 'Allah' to Muslims 'repugnant'

WWN (11.12.2013) - 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 criticised 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 centre 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 marginalise extremists.

But after his ruling party haemorrhaged support to the opposition in general elections in May, Najib has moved to appease Malay Muslims by pledging greater economic support for them, and emphasising 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 multi-racial and multi-religious 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 licence.

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 vandalised. 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 centres 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 victimised. 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.

Christians banned from using "Allah"

AsiaNews (14.10.2013) - A Malaysian court has ruled that non-Muslims cannot use the word "Allah" to refer to God, overturning an earlier ruling of [31 December 2009](#) in favour of Christians' right to do so. A decision that, at the time, had created controversy and sparked extremist attacks on churches and mosques. This morning the judges of the Court of Appeal determined that the opening to non-Islamic faithful would have "created confusion within the community." In response, Christians recall that they have used the name "Allah" to define (also) the Christian God for decades and that the new provisions - strongly desired by the government, to meet the demands of the more fundamentalist segments of the country - violate their rights and religious freedom.

Outside the court a hundred Muslim activists waved placards and chanted slogans in which they maintained that the word "Allah" be "exclusively" used by Muslims. In the courtroom, the chief judge Apandi Mohamed Ali ruled in favour of the executive and

rejected requests (corroborated by previous judgments) of the group led by leaders of the Catholic newspaper the Malaysia Herald. "The usage of the word Allah is not an integral part of the faith in Christianity" the judge ruled, "the usage of the word will cause confusion in the community."

Fr. Lawrence Andrew, editor of the Catholic newspaper, said he was "disappointed and dismayed" by the decision of the judges and that they will resort to the Federal Court to seek redress. The battle in court is thus not over, but it will now be up to the highest forum of the national judicial system. "It is a retrograde step in the development of law in relation to the fundamental liberty of religious minorities." In Indonesia and the Middle East, he adds, Allah is used by Christians and Muslims alike. He therefore calls on Christians to "continue to pray for justice" and added that the Church will not bow to an unjust sentence, but it will move ahead with the appeal.

Meanwhile, the Minister of Agricultural Development of the Malaysian state of Sarawak - one of the territories that make up the Malaysian part of Borneo Island - announced that Christians in the area can continue to use "Allah" to define their God. He described today's decision by judges "not authentic" and complains that only Muslims can use it." We (Christians in Sabah and Sarawak) have been using the word Allah for over 100 years. Why suddenly we are now told we cannot use it" He concludes that Muslims in Sabah and Sarawak, whom he describes as "brothers", have never opposed the use of Allah by Christians.

The controversy over the use of the name "Allah" for the Christian God in the media and books, like the Bible, in Bahasa Malaysia broke out in 2008, when the Home Ministry threatened to revoke The Herald's license to publish. In response, Catholic Church leaders sued the government for violating rights enshrined in the Constitution. They added that the Christians of Sabah and Sarawak have used the word "Allah" for generations without problems, as it has done for 14 years, the Catholic weekly.

In 2009, the High Court granted Catholics the right to use the term "Allah", a ruling that shocked and angered Muslims, who consider the word exclusive to Islam. This was followed by a wave of violence with attacks and improvised explosive devices used against churches and other places of worship. In an attempt to stem the tide and appease extremist Islamists, the Malaysian government decided to appeal the High Court ruling. Malaysia, a Southeast Asian nation of some 28 million with a Muslim majority, Christians are the third largest religious group (after Buddhists) with about 2.6 million members. When a 400-year-old Latin-Malay dictionary was recently republished, it showed that the word "Allah" was used from the start [to name the biblical God in the local language](#).

Christians fight for right to use word 'Allah' for God; Malaysia court set to give ruling

The Christian Post (20.08.2013) - Malaysia's Catholic Church will argue that Christians should be able to use the word "Allah" when referring to their God in print in the Court of Appeals on Thursday. The Church is currently locked in a battle with authorities, who believe that Muslims should have exclusive rights to the name.

The Wall Street Journal is reporting that the Church will be asking the Court of Appeal to dismiss the government's appeal of the Church's previous victory; though it seems likely that the case will be decided by the Federal Court, the country's highest.

According to the government, "Allah" is a sacred term. However, the Church highlights the fact that "Allah" has historically been used by Christians and furthermore, is the only proper translation for God in the Malay language.

Much of the argument has come to a head as the Herald, a Catholic newspaper that reaches 100,000 Malaysians weekly, has used "Allah" in its publication for years, despite government warnings as far back as 1998. After the newspaper refused to stop using the name, the government banned all publications from using Allah and the Church filed a lawsuit.

Over 60 percent of Malaysia's population is Muslim, while close to 10 percent of the population is Christian, 1 million of whom identify as Catholic.

The case has raised tensions between various Muslim and Christian groups in the country, and although most Christians and Muslims in the country have been able to live alongside one another peacefully, in the aftermath of the court's initial ruling in favor of the Catholic Church, confrontations have turned more violent. In 2009 when a court first ruled that the Catholic Church constitutionally could use "Allah" 10 churches were vandalized in subsequent weeks and a church office was burned.

Johor resort's surau may face demolition for hosting Buddhist worship

The Malay Online (13.08.2013) - The Johor religious authorities may decide to demolish Tanjung Sutera Resort's surau as it had been used by non-Muslims to host their religious activities, a state Islamic leader said today.

Citing the Quran, Johor Islamic Religious Council (MAINJ) advisor Datuk Nooh Gadut explained that if such a sacred place had knowingly been used for activities outside the Islamic faith, it should be taken down.

"The most sacred places on Earth are mosques and surau. Accordingly, they are not allowed to be used to carry out religious activities other than for Islam and if a surau is found to have hosted other religious activities, it can be demolished based on surah At-Taubah verse 107 (in the Quran)," he was quoted saying on Bernama Online.

Nooh added, however, that the demolition could not be ordered immediately as the surau in question is still considered evidence in the ongoing probe on allegations that Buddhist tourists used the venue for their worship.

According to Bernama, the RM60,000 surau is now being guarded by the police and the People's Volunteers Corps (Rela).

The national news agency also reported Nooh as saying that his team will take over the probe from the cops once they have completed their investigations, in keeping with procedures under section 7A of Johor's Syariah Criminal Enactment 1997.

The Johor Fatwa Committee is expected to meet next week to deliberate the case and will likely issue its decision within a month, Bernama wrote.

The Johor Sultan has also reportedly waded into the controversy and has ordered a full probe on the incident.

Earlier today, a group representing Malaysian Buddhists apologised for the incident, which has irked followers of Islam, the country's dominant religion.

In a brief statement by the Buddhist Maha Vihara, Chief High Priest of Malaysia Datuk K. Sri Dhammaratana expressed his group's regret while urging followers of the religion to be mindful of others in their worship.

"We would like to apologise to our Muslim brothers and sisters for the actions of a certain Buddhist group from Singapore in having their meditation session at the surau of a resort in Kota Tinggi.

"I advise Buddhists in Malaysia and Singapore to respect the religious sensitivities of other religionists while carrying out our own religious obligations and responsibilities," Dhammaratana said today.

Yesterday, media reports surfaced of a video uploaded to YouTube last week allegedly showing a surau in the Johor resort being used by Buddhist tourists for prayers.

This later led to the arrest and remand of the resort manager under section 295 of the Penal Code, which comes under the heading of "injuring or defiling a place of worship with intent to insult the religion of any class".

The 85-second-long video titled "Surau dijadikan tokong???" (A surau turned into a temple?) begins with an external shot of a small building and a close-up of what appears to be a sign in Arabic script over a doorway.

The video's maker then approaches the building to record what appears to be a prayer session by a dozen white-clad people led by a monk in red and saffron.

Yesterday, Berita Harian reported the resort owner as saying he did not expect the offer to lead to the controversy now.

"I do not think the action of giving permission to believers of other religions to use the surau is wrong. This is because they only wanted to use the surau for meditation.

"I have no intention of hurting anyone's feelings. My intention is to show that Islam is universal and tolerant," said the Singapore-born Muslim.

Malaysia cracking down on Shi'ism

Govt's move appears to have both religious and political overtones

The Straits Times (08.08.2013) - Malaysia is clamping down on Shi'ism, the second branch of Islamic orthodoxy, in a move that appears to have both religious and political overtones.

The nationwide crackdown began last month with the ban of local Shi'ite group Pertubuhan Syiah Malaysia. The same month, state governments gazetted a 1996 fatwa issued by the National Fatwa Council that declared Shi'ism deviant and therefore haram or impermissible.

There is also a witch hunt that has been going on for Shi'ite believers in four universities

in Selangor and the federal territory of Kuala Lumpur, as well as in the opposition Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS).

It is now illegal for Shi'ite groups to conduct their activities and preach the teachings to Malays who subscribe to the Sunni branch of Islam known as Ahli Sunnah Wal-Jamaah.

"Stern action will be taken against those propagating the Shi'ite ideology," de facto Religious Affairs Minister Jamil Khir Baharom said last Saturday. Those who contravene the ban can be prosecuted for defying a religious edict and fined up to RM3,000 (S\$1,200) or jailed for two years if convicted.

According to the Home Ministry, a growing number of Malays have become Shi'ite believers in recent years, with an estimated 250,000 people now belonging to 10 active groups.

Although Shi'ism is accepted as part of the Islamic orthodoxy by the Muslim world, it is being treated as a non-Islamic religion in Malaysia. Like other religions, it is prohibited from being preached to the Malays.

Islamic officials have argued that the government cannot allow Shi'ism to take root in Malaysia because it would divide the Malays and the Muslims who are Sunnis.

In the words of former prime minister Mahathir Mohamad: "Whenever there are Shi'ite and Sunni teachings (in the state), there is bound to be enmity that can lead to war and murder as has happened in several countries like Pakistan and Iran."

There are major theological differences between Shi'ism and Sunni Islam and the deep distrust among the followers can spark sectarian flare-ups.

Sunnis have accused Shi'ites of vilifying the three companions and the wives of the Prophet Muhammad, venerating Shi'ite imams or spiritual guides more than the Prophet and practising Muta'ah or temporary marriage that degrades women.

Some Malays started to convert to Shi'ism after being enamoured by the Islamic revolution in Shi'ite Iran in 1979, and started small groups in Selangor.

"Ten years ago, it was a small community with three camps, but now they have spread nationwide," said Home Ministry secretary-general Abdul Rahim Mohamad Radzi at a press conference on Monday. "The development of information technology is among the factors for their growth as the teachings are spread through a range of social sites."

Large Shi'ite communities have emerged in Kedah and Perlis, prompting the ruling Umno party to blame PAS for supporting the growth of Shi'ism in the two Malay states.

PAS deputy president Mohamad Sabu has been singled out as the man responsible for promoting Shi'ism and has been accused of being a Shi'ite himself by Umno-owned media and pro-Umno bloggers. The allegation is based on his support for Iran, Lebanon's Shi'ite militia Hizbollah and the regime of Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad.

Mr Mohamed Sabu declined to respond to the allegations when pressed by reporters, but other party leaders have come to his defence.

Party information chief Tuan Ibrahim Tuan Man told Utusan Malaysia: "Until today, there has been no evidence that they are Shi'ite as alleged (by Umno)," referring to Mr Mohamed Sabu and others in PAS.

He and other PAS politicians suspect that the anti-Shi'ite campaign by Umno and the government is political and an attempt to split the Islamic party.

Datuk Seri Jamil has denied this. "For the government, Shi'ism is not about any party," he said. "It's a belief and teaching that for us in Malaysia is not part of the Sunni teaching practised here."

Malaysia court quashes Hindu kids' conversion to Islam

AFP (26.07.2013) - A Malaysian court on Thursday ruled against the 2009 conversion of three Hindu children to Islam without their mother's knowledge, a verdict welcomed by non-Muslim groups.

A high court in the northern city of Ipoh declared the conversion of Indira Gandhi's children, now aged five, 15 and 16, by their father to be unconstitutional, said Indira's lawyer K. Shanmuga.

The judge ruled that the father had failed to take the mother and children to Islamic authorities for their consent to the conversion, in a rare verdict in the multiracial but Muslim-majority nation, Shanmuga said.

"It is the first time ever that a child's conversion certificate has been quashed by a high court," he told AFP.

Indira, a kindergarten teacher in her late 30s, faced losing custody of her children after her husband converted himself and them without her knowledge.

Under Malaysian sharia law, which governs civil matters for Muslims, a non-Muslim parent cannot share custody of converted children.

Indira, a Hindu, got a 2010 high court verdict to award her custody. But her husband went into hiding with their youngest daughter and the conversion remained in dispute.

Earlier this month Malaysia withdrew an Islamic law which allows one parent to give consent for a child's conversion, after an outcry.

Opponents said it discriminated against minorities despite government promises to address their grievances.

Religious groups welcomed Thursday's verdict.

"We are very happy about that decision. But it must be accepted by all the Islamic and other government agencies," said Mohan Shan, an official with the Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Sikhism and Taoism.

Conversions of children and "body-snatching" cases -- in which Islamic authorities tussle with families over the remains of people whose religion is disputed -- have previously raised tensions.

More than 60 percent of Malaysia's 28 million people are Muslim ethnic Malays, but it also has sizeable Chinese and Indian minorities who are non-Muslims.

First Vatican envoy to Malaysia sparks Muslim anger over 'Allah'

Reuters (17.07.2013) - The Vatican's first envoy to Malaysia has opened a storm of controversy by apparently supporting the use of the word "Allah" by Christians, prompting a rebuke from the government and condemnation from nationalist Malay groups in the majority-Muslim country.

The row underlines growing intolerance in the multi-ethnic, multi-religious country following an election in May that deepened the divide between majority Muslim Malays and minority ethnic Chinese, many of whom are Christian.

Archbishop Joseph Marino was summoned to the foreign ministry on Tuesday after his comments last week on the issue.

"Archbishop Marino was advised to be mindful of the religious sensitivities of the host country and that the issue he commented on is still under the Court of Appeal," the foreign ministry said in a statement.

Marino, who arrived in the country in April, apologized for any "misunderstandings and inconveniences" his comments may have caused, but some Muslim organizations have demanded a full retraction or the envoy's expulsion.

"The ambassador's comment has touched on the sensitivities of Muslims and should not have happened, more so in the (fasting) month of Ramadan," Hassan Ali, the head of JATI, an Islamic group, was quoted as saying by national news agency Bernama.

In his first media interview since starting his new role, Marino said last week he supported the arguments made by the Christian Federation of Malaysia on why Christians should be allowed to use Allah.

"In terms of how they presented the arguments in favor, it seems to be quite logical and acceptable," he said.

A Catholic newspaper, the Herald, successfully challenged the government's ban on the use of the word Allah by Christians in 2009. The government, which argued that the use of the Arabic word might offend the sensitivities of Muslims, is planning to appeal the High Court decision.

Scholars say Christians in Malaysia's two states on Borneo island have been using Allah to mean God for over 100 years, mainly as they use Indonesian translations of the Bible.

Muslims, who make up about 60 percent of Malaysia's 28 million population, see using the word Allah in Christian publications, including Bibles, as attempts to proselytize.

On Tuesday, the chief minister of Kedah state, Mukhriz Mahathir, said the state government would not allow the word Allah to be used by non-Muslims in their holy books.

"We cannot accept their excuses because hidden behind those excuses is the aim of turning Muslims into disbelievers of the religion," Bernama reported Mukhriz, a son of long-serving former prime minister Mahathir Mohamad, as saying.

Christians, including about 800,000 Catholics, make up about 9.1 percent of Malaysia's population. Malays are by definition Muslims and are not allowed to convert.

Man faces 3 months in HKBP Filadelfia death threat case

Islamic leader tells pastor 'I'm going to cut your throat'

Jakarta Globe (25.07.2013) - Prosecutors demanded a three-month sentence for a man who threatened to kill the pastor of Bekasi's embattled HKBP Filadelfia church during a tense Easter protest by hard-line Islamists outside the congregation's shuttered church.

Abdul Aziz Bin Naimun admitted to threatening pastor Palti Panjaitan, telling prosecutors the death threats were meant to deter HKBP Filadelfia members from worshipping at their sealed church. According to witnesses, Abdul told the pastor, "Palti, I'm going to cut your throat," while swiping his fingers across his neck as hard-liners hurled rotten eggs and cow feces at churchgoers .

"He admitted to what he did and [said] he did not know that he had violated the law," presiding prosecutor Muhasan said before the Bekasi District Court.

The prosecution argued for a lenient sentence, telling a panel of judges that Abdul was young, cooperative and had promised not to threaten Palti again.

Abdul, a local religious leader, faced a maximum sentence of one year in prison and Rp 300,000 (\$30) in fines for "committing unpleasant acts" under Indonesia's Criminal Code.

Additional charges of hampering a religious service and making threats were dropped by the prosecution. He could have faced a maximum sentence of two years, eight months if charged with threatening Palti's life.

The two men have been entwined in a separate legal cases since Christmas Eve of 2011. Abdul, who has long opposed the protestant church, filed a complaint with police after he was pushed during a Christmas protest that ended with rotten eggs thrown at the congregation.

Palti was questioned over the assault allegations following Abdul's complaint but never charged.

Months later, as the church met for an outdoor Easter service near their sealed house of worship, Abdul arrived again, pelting Palti with eggs and cow dung before issuing the threat during an impromptu speech.

The church regularly holds public holiday services in protest of the Bekasi district administration's decision to seal their church. A local district head sealed the church over claims that it lacked a building permit.

Indonesia's Constitutional Court ruled in favor of HKBP Filadelfia's appeal, but the local administration has ignored the ruling and, with the backing of intolerance groups, refused to allow the congregation to reopen the church.

Religious intolerance is on the rise in Indonesia where local governments routinely cower to pressure hard-line Islamist organizations, according to several prominent rights groups.

Church closures and demolitions have occurred with alarming frequency in the province of West Java. In Bekasi alone, five churches have been sealed or demolished since 2005, according to church leaders.

Malaysian Muslims ask Vatican to recall envoy over use of "Allah"

The Washington Post (22.07.2013) - The Vatican's first envoy to Muslim-majority Malaysia should quit and go back to Rome, angry Malaysian Islamists said after the Roman Catholic cleric said Christians may use the Arabic word "Allah" to describe God.

In an escalating confrontation, dozens of Islamists marched to the Vatican's mission in Malaysia's capital, Kuala Lumpur, after prayers at a mosque on Friday (July 19), and presented a 670-word memorandum demanding his recall.

The troubled envoy, Archbishop Joseph Marino of Alabama, arrived in the Southeast Asian country in April.

Marino's problems began after his interview with reporters on July 11, when he spoke about the Christian Federation of Malaysia's controversial decision to call God "Allah," the Arabic word for God.

"It seems to be quite logical and acceptable," Marino said in the interview.

Some Muslims complained, and the Malaysian government summoned Marino on July 16 to discuss the issue.

Hours later, Marino responded that his interview was "never intended as an attempt to intrude into the internal affairs of the country."

Marino's statement, however, inflamed Islamists who see the use of the word "Allah" as a bold attempt to convert Muslims to Christianity.

"The Vatican Envoy's statement is reflective of the Vatican City's sheer ignorance of the special place given to Islam as the religion" of Malaysia, the protest memorandum said.

The Islamists were supported by hard-line organizations trying to increase the use of Shariah law in Malaysia.

"Joseph Marino is an enemy of the state," said Imbrahim Ali, president of Peraksa, a conservative, nongovernmental organization, according to Agence France-Presse. "His actions have strained race relations in the country."

Muslims, who are mostly ethnic Malay, comprise 60 percent of Malaysia's nearly 30 million residents.

Christians number about 9 percent — mostly ethnic Chinese and Indians — including 800,000 Catholics.

The Islamists also demanded "an official apology from Vatican City to the people of Malaysia for such an offensive statement."

The controversy erupted in 2009 when some Christians in Malaysia published Bibles and other religious literature translated into the country's official language, Bahasa Malaysia.

The Christians translated "God" as "Allah."

Malaysian Islamists, however, said Christians were using the word Allah to convert Muslims, which is a crime in Malaysia.

The government then banned publications using the word Allah to identify a non-Muslim God.

A local Catholic newspaper, The Herald, sued.

The High Court ruled against the government and legalized the word Allah for use by non-Muslims.

Soon after, several churches in Malaysia were firebombed, and the government appealed the case, which is currently pending.

Bringing in Hindu priests and musicians to Malaysia

Malaysia Hindu Sangam Press Release (24.06.2013) - The Malaysia Hindu Sangam has been receiving numerous complaints from local Hindu temples relating to the problems these temples face in applying, renewing or adding the duration of the professional visit pass for their temple priests, musicians and sculptors to the Department of Immigration and Ministry of Home Affairs.

Based on the survey by Malaysia Hindu Sangam, there are a total of 2,300 Hindu temples in the country. Currently, we have 600 local and 250 foreign priests, serving in these temples. This means we have a shortage of about 1,500 priests in the country.

In addition to this shortage, the application for bringing in priests, musicians and sculptors is beset with many difficulties and hindrances. Each application to the Department of Immigration must be accompanied by a support letter from an Indian minister. These support letters were issued only for Hindu priests. For priests of other religions, they need to submit only support letters from their respective religious associations.

Hindu priests upon their arrival, have to undergo special a induction course conducted by the Ministry of Human Resources. This special course is held only for Hindu priests and priests from other religions do not have to attend this course.

At times, when the holding of this course is delayed, temples have to obtain a special pass for their temple priests. To apply for this, they have to obtain approval letters from an Indian minister and also from the Malaysia Hindu Sangam. Temples have to pay US\$31.60 to the Department of Immigration every month to obtain this special pass pending the approval of their professional visit pass for their temple priests by Department of Immigration.

Though this matter, on numerous occasions, has been brought to the attention of our Indian ministers, but to date there has been no solutions to these problems. Therefore, Malaysia Hindu Sangam would like to urge our prime minister and the minister of home

affairs to resolve these problems faced by the Hindu temples in this country as soon as possible.

Call to burn Bibles heightens Malaysian election tensions

Reuters (23.01.2013) - Malaysia's Bar Council said on Wednesday an independent member of parliament should be prosecuted on grounds he called for the mass burning of Bibles as religious tensions flare ahead of a tight election which must be held within months.

Ibrahim Ali, the head of Perkasa, a group that champions rights of the ethnic Malay Muslim majority and has close links to the ruling coalition, was reported in media as advocating Muslims should seize and burn copies of Bibles which use the word "Allah" to refer to God.

That statement should result in charges under various laws, including those governing sedition, Lim Chee Wee, Bar Council President Lim Chee Wee, said in an e-mailed statement.

"This incident together with the contemptuous statement by another Perkasa leader against a judge and the judiciary suggest that Perkasa is allowed to behave with impunity," he said.

The latter refers to a January 7 article written by a senior Perkasa member attacking a high court judge presiding over a defamation case brought by opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim.

Neither Ibrahim Ali nor the home ministry were available for comment.

The events foreshadow an intense election struggle as the country prepares for an election which must be called by April.

Opinion polls show that the ruling Barisan National coalition of Prime Minister Najib Razak, in power since independence from Britain in 1957, has all but lost the support of ethnic Chinese, who account for about 25 percent of the population.

The coalition will have to rely on more votes from Malays, who make up around 60 percent of Malaysians. Christians account for about 9 percent and a substantial number are Chinese.

The ruling coalition suffered its worst election result in 2008, losing its two-thirds majority in parliament for the first time. The next election is predicted to be even closer, although the coalition is still widely expected to win.

Malaysia has not experienced a major race riot since May 1969, when violence erupted after largely ethnic Chinese based parties made unexpected gains in general elections.

The chief minister of opposition-ruled Penang state on Wednesday put police on alert after a note was found at a church promising a Bible-burning "festival" on Sunday.

The note, shown on the opposition-friendly online news portal Malaysiakini, signs off with "Let's teach 'em a lesson".

Penang Chief Minister Lim Guan Eng urged the home minister to "impose stringent measures to prevent such abhorrent and vile acts that would endanger national harmony and heighten religious tensions".

He also called for stern action against Perkasa's Ibrahim.

The tussle over the word "Allah" goes back to 2009 when the Catholic paper Herald successfully challenged in court a government ban preventing non-Muslims from using the word to refer to God.

The government wants to prevent "Allah" being used by Christians, saying it is subversive and aims to convert Muslims.

The sultan of Selangor state this month issued an decree banning the word from being used by non-Muslims.

Christians banned from using word 'Allah' in arabic by new fatwa

The Christian Post (01.01.2013) - A Malaysian Sultan has issued a fatwa prohibiting non-Muslims from using the word "Allah" in Arabic.

The Sultan of the Malaysian state of Selangor, Sharafuddin Idris Shah, issued the prohibition on Tuesday, according to the Lebanon Debate newspaper.

Malaysian media have reported that the prohibition has been put in place by the Islamic leader because it is a "sacred word," and should be reserved exclusively for Muslims.

The sultan has ordered the Islamic Council of Selangor and the Islamic Affairs Department in the state to take strict action against all groups that question the fatwa and the 1988 Ordinance, which prohibits the use of the word "Allah" in Arabic [by non-Muslims].

The organization representing Protestant churches in Malaysia commented on the decision by saying that Christians in the country have been using the word "Allah" when referring to God for centuries, and they plan to continue to exercise their constitutional right.

Lawyers from a related "Allah" case in 2009, in which a Christian woman challenged the government's confiscation of her religious CDs as they had "Allah" written on them, said that the fatwa goes against the court's decision in that 2009 case.

It also highlights another similar case that ruled Christians would be allowed to import and use bibles in any language.

However, according to MidEast Christian News, that court decision was "followed by a wave of religious violence that swept the country."

The dominant religion in Malaysia is Islam, whose followers make up 61.4 percent of the population, according to the Population and Housing Census of 2010.

Islam is recognized as the state religion of Malaysia, although the country has a secular constitution.

The country has often seen politics become entwined with religion, leading numerous debates to take place on whether Malaysia should be an Islamic or secular state.

According to the 2010 Census, the religious make-up of Malaysia is: 61.4% Islam, 17.8% Buddhism, 9.2% Christian, 6.3% Hinduism, and just over 3% other. Only 0.7% of the population confess to having no religious following.

Freedom of religion is guaranteed by the country's constitution; however, in practice it faces many restrictions. For example, a Malay must be a Muslim. Although non-Malays are more free to practice various faiths, however, if a non-Malay has converted to Islam they technically are prohibited from leaving the faith.

In addition, children born to Muslim parents are considered Muslim, and are prohibited from converting.

If a Muslim does attempt to convert to other religions, they can face punishment by state governments, with punishments reportedly including fines and/or imprisonment.
