

Name of Media	The Star
Date of Article	18 April 2010
Author	Hariati Azizan
Title	Time is right for interfaith dialogue
Project Name	8 <sup>th</sup> ASEF Journalists' Colloquium/6 <sup>th</sup> ASEM Interfaith Dialogue



**Sunday April 18, 2010**

## **Time is right for inter-faith dialogue**

THERE is no better time for Malaysia to have an inter-faith relations body, says National Unity and Integration Department director-general Datuk Azman Amin Hassan.

Speaking to *Sunday Star* after his presentation at the Sixth Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) Inter-faith Dialogue in Madrid, Spain, recently, he concedes that the need for interfaith dialogue in Malaysia is urgent.

“We cannot sweep things under the carpet any longer. We need to open up and be transparent. And we need to work together to find solutions for the issues created by our religious differences,” he says.

“It is because we feel that something urgently needs to be done to promote better inter-religious relations that we drew up a proposal paper on a possible mechanism that can work and presented it to the Cabinet.”

Hence, with the Cabinet’s approval, the Interfaith Relations Working Committee was recently established under the purview of his department.

However, this initiative is nothing new, Azman points out, as the Government has been working on strategies to promote religious harmony and tolerance in the country for some time now.

A special panel – headed by former MP Datuk Ilani Ishak – was established for this purpose under the Prime Minister’s Department about five years ago, he reveals.

Following the spate of church attacks after the High Court ruling over the use of the word “Allah” last December, he says, Minister in the Prime Minister’s Department Tan Sri Dr Koh Tsu Koon met with various groups who were concerned about the simmering religious tension in the country.

“We organised some closed door meetings to give them the opportunity to voice their concerns. Many said there is an urgent need for openness and transparency on religious issues, so the matter was brought to the Cabinet. They agreed and the committee was formalised,” he shares.

The Cabinet decided that Ilani should also chair the new committee and its first meeting was held in February.

In the first meeting, which was attended by various religious groups, says Azman, they discussed the formation of seven working committees to oversee the different issues.

As he said in his paper at the ASEM dialogue, these sub-committees are working groups on seven areas, namely inter-religious cooperation; resolving issues relating to religious conversion; resolving issues of houses of worship and graveyards; resolving issues on propagation; usage of religious terminology; harmonious religious team; and promoting understanding among political and religious leaders.

The committee, which has since been renamed Committee to Promote Inter-Religious Understanding and Harmony, met again early this month. It comprises representation from the relevant bodies including the Department of Islamic Development, Institute of Islamic Understanding and the Malaysian Consultative Council on Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Sikhism and Taoism.

Azman stresses that the committee is merely a framework for managing religious and cultural polarities.

“The idea is to involve religious leaders, leaders of NGOs (non-governmental organisations) as well as the relevant government departments like Jakim and the Unity Department. There will be no involvement of any active politicians.

“One of the committee’s roles is to provide linkages between federal government agencies, state departments and religious leaders.”

The committee will also provide the mechanism for resolving administrative issues on religious matters, not only by facilitating discussions among the parties involved but also through studies of existing policies and regulations.

For example, he adds, it is currently finalising a draft of guidelines regarding places of worship.

“The committee’s recommendations would be forwarded to the Cabinet and it would be up to it whether to accept them.”

Most important, he points out, is the facilitation of dialogues with the different stakeholders. This is to ensure things are done properly while observing the sensitivities of all religions.

“Take the temple relocation issues, for example in the Shah Alam case; when we engaged the community and religious leaders on the matter, we realised that we can find peaceful measures to resolve the issue.

“And they said that they felt good that we had bothered to go down and meet them to talk about it,” he shares.

However, Azman believes that for now, we are not ready to have public inter-faith dialogues yet.

“Too many people are latching onto the issue for political reasons. We are ready for inter-faith dialogue, among the NGOs especially, but we need to protect the public from these forces. So we advise any groups who want to organise any inter-faith dialogue to do it behind closed doors.”

Another challenge is garnering the support of the different religious groups, so the committee also tries to hold individual discussions with each group to explain what the committee is all about.

“Inter-faith dialogue is something new in Malaysia. Some religious groups do think that if they participate in an inter-faith dialogue, they are giving way to other religions. There are also those who think that because Islam is the official religion, there is no need to initiate dialogue and explain why certain things are so.

“So we try and meet with them to explain why it is important to have this committee and inter-faith dialogue,” he says.

Ironically, he adds, many countries around the world, like Pakistan and Sudan, are interested in the Malaysian model as an Islamic country with citizens of diverse religious backgrounds living peacefully with each other.

“But we understand now that it is an ongoing process to promote religious harmony and understanding, something that we need to learn from other countries too,” he says adding that the committee plans to look at a few inter-faith approaches worldwide.

It will definitely be a long journey to resolve all our inter-faith issues, Azman opines, but he is optimistic that having dialogues will pave the way.

“I remember when we had one of our first inter-faith dialogues in 2007. There were a lot of misconceptions between the different religious groups present. But then I could see something fruitful from the dialogue itself. The Muslim and Hindu groups arranged to meet on their own after the meeting to continue their discussion and try find their own solutions for certain issues.”