Proselytization Outlawed
Category : July 1988
Published by Anonymous on Jul. 01, 1988

Proselytization Outlawed

Malaysian Law Forbids Preaching to Muslims

Pathmarajah, N. In a controversial move to protect its Muslim population, Malaysia's largest state, Selangor, made illegal the spreading of non-Islamic beliefs to Muslims. The same law, passed April 4th, also bars non-Muslims from associating 33 Malay words (including the name of God) and 13 expressions with a non-Muslim religion. Malacca state enacted a similar law April 12th; the rest of the 13 Malaysian states are expected to follow suit.

A result of Christian proselytization efforts among the Malays, the sweeping legislation forbids anyone from actively persuading a Muslim to abandon Islam and/or join another religion, allowing a Muslim to take part in a religious activity of a non-Islamic religion, giving a Muslim printed material regarding a non-Islamic religion or "subjecting him to any speech or display of any material concerning a non-Islamic matter." Penalties range from three months in jail and a U.S. $1,250 fine to one year in jail and a $4,500 fine.

In an interview with Hinduism Today, Dr. S.M. Ponniah, Advisor to the Malaysia Hindu Sangam, explained the consequences of the laws. For the Christians, the laws put a significant damper on their conversion efforts, while the restrictions on words scuttles the just published Malay-language Christian Bible. That edition uses such traditional Muslim words as Allah for God and Ummah for congregation. The Sikhs, whose religion arose out of Islam, are now suddenly forbidden use of words traditionally part of their religious vocabulary. According to Dr. Ponniah, Buddhists and Hindus are not affected by the word restrictions.

As to the proselytization law. Dr. Ponniah remarked, "It is my opinion that the Hindus and Buddhists also need legislation of this sort to protect themselves, because they are the ones under attack by the prosyletizing religions." Sangam President Datuk Govindaraj told newspapers in Malaysia, "These laws tend to isolate the Muslims and the non-Muslims begin the erosion of freedom of religious

expression. Even a healthy chat about religion with a Muslim may be construed to be proselytization."

The law is part of a general trend towards Islamization of Malaysia's federal and state laws and of government policies begun in the mid-seventies. However, Christian evangelism through an unexpected route is said to be the immediate catalyst. In the last decade, over 300,000 Indonesian immigrants (some of whom were Christians) were admitted into Malaysia to work in the plantation and construction sectors.

Last year, according to Dr. Ponniah, "There was a big hue and cry that 60,000 Malays became Christians. Upon closer investigation, only two Malays were found to be Christians; both were put under arrest. This caused the bill to come."

As Muslim Malays and Indonesians are virtually indistinguishable, the side effect - or, as some conjecture, the real purpose - of allowing this immigration was to tilt the present demographic balance in favor of the Muslims. As of now, the Malaysian population is 50% Muslim and 50% non-Muslim. But the present Mahathir government has been encouraging Indonesian immigration and strong population growth of native Malays. By the year 2030, this plan will alter the present 50:50 balance to 70:30, with Muslim Malays the dominant racial/religious group.

The ban on word usage is an unusual solution, considering the efforts to promote a national language in Malaysia. Joginder Singh, the Sikh president of the Malaysian Consultative council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism and Sikhism, complained, "It is ridiculous to ask all Malaysians to use Bahasa Malaysia and forbid some of them, at the same time, from using certain Bahasa Malaysia words."

Catholic Archbishop Anthony Soter Fernandez. President of the Conference of Bishops of Malaysia, added, "by restricting the use of [these] words only to Muslims, it may suggest that Christians do not believe in the same God. There is only one God, the same God for Muslims and Christians. We should not take paths which divide us." To which Hindus would add (if it isn't illegal), "Amen."

Article copyright Himalayan Academy.