

Bar Council: We are prepared; forum will go on

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by Debra Chong

KUALA LUMPUR, Aug 8 - The Malaysian Bar Council is steadfastly going ahead with a planned public forum on conversions to Islam, despite mounting opposition from top leaders from Umno and Pas and threats of a massive street protest outside the legal body's headquarters here tomorrow.

Ragunath Kesavan, vice-president of the Bar Council told The Malaysian Insider that they have taken all precautionary steps for the forum by holding it inside their auditorium in Leboh Pasar Besar and regulating participation. Interested parties are required to register to enter.

The police have been informed and will be on standby in case of any untoward incidents, he added.

"This has been on the cards for the last two to three months. These are issues which are alive and relating to people who have suffered from this conflict of laws. We need to look for avenues for them to voice their grievances as well. ," said Ragunath in a phone interview this afternoon.

"It may be controversial, but that doesn't mean you don't talk about these issues. If it is emotive, if it is sensitive, we still have to talk about discuss these things. That is our position; you need to discuss!" he stressed.

"What we're saying is, it's not an issue of conversion. We're not questioning Article 121 (1A), we're not questioning Article 3 of the Federal Constitution on the status of Islam. When you have two jurisdictions, the civil and the syariah jurisdiction, obviously there will be conflicts of law.

"When you have conflicts of law, you need to resolve these conflicts. This is what we're looking at: How do you resolve these issues? That is all."

Speaking on behalf of president Datuk Ambiga Sreenevasan, who is out of the country but will be back to participate in the forum tomorrow, Ragunath said that efforts have been made to get differing voices from both the civil and syariah jurisdictions. "We've got people from both sides, with different opinions. And we want to find out one understanding of the problem. Also, we want to find out why people have such an opinion. We need to know also, you see. And we want to put forward our views. Because the first way to reach an amicable solution is to understand each others' views."

"Anyway, we're mature and democratic enough. And further to this, yesterday, the

prime minister was reported to have said in the newspapers, 'Have more dialogue'," said Ragunath.

He is sceptical of closed-door dialogues, because such measures severely restricts the number of participants. "When you say closed doors, who's involved?" he scoffed. "You need to get the stakeholders to attend."

The half-day forum, open to members of the public, will start at 8.30am and end at 1pm and is divided into two sessions. Part 1 will have family members of those who have embraced Islam share their real life experiences over conflicts brought on after conversion.

The second part will be a discussion from the legal aspect, with a detailed examination of Article 121(1A) of the Federal Constitution and two court cases, that of R. Subashini and S. Shamala. This session will be moderated by lawyer, Zarizana Abdul Aziz, from the Penang-based Women's Centre for Change

Among the panellists are Dr Wan Azhar Wan Ahmad, who is the director of the Syariah Law Centre at Institute of Islamic Understanding Malaysia (Ikim). Others include lawyers Ravi Nekoo, K. Shanmuga and Mohamed Haniff Khatri Abdulla.

A fifth panellist, Dr Naim Mokhtar, a former syariah court judge and current syariah prosecutor with the Federal Territory Islamic Religious Department, will no longer be participating, Ragunath confirmed. No reasons were given for his withdrawal.