



INTERNATIONAL CENTRE FOR POLITICAL VIOLENCE AND TERRORISM RESEARCH

A Centre of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies

Report on attacks on churches in Malaysia following row over use of term 'Allah', January 2010

Introduction

A number of churches and a Christian school in Malaysia have been attacked or been the intended targets for attack since Friday, 8 January 2010, as religious tensions intensified following a court ruling on 31 December 2009 which allowed the use of the term "Allah" as a translation for God by a Catholic publication. Following the attacks on the same day, some Muslim preachers used Friday prayers to object to the court decision that would allow the use of "Allah" as the Malay term for the Christian God. Muslim groups also held protests after Friday prayers against the court ruling.

Background and Events

The attacks and protests by Muslims groups in Malaysia were apparently triggered by a recent court decision that would allow non-Muslims to use the term "Allah" as an equivalent of God. The controversy arose when the *Herald*, the largest Catholic newspaper published in Malaysia, challenged a ban against the publication from using "Allah" as a translation for "God" in a Christian context in its Malay-language section. The ban had been in place since 2007 and it prohibited the Catholics from using the word in their publications.¹

The *Herald* took the matter to court in 2008, and it was successful in its appeal. The Malaysian High Court, in the week before the attacks, ruled in favour of the paper. The ruling was suspended on 7 January 2010 pending an appeal from the government to the Court of Appeal after it argued the decision could cause racial conflicts.

The decision was a source of dissension as some Malaysian Muslims believe that Allah, an Arabic word, should only be used by Muslims. The debate surrounding the ruling arose even though the term has been used as an equivalent for the English word "God" for centuries in Malaysia, and it is also similarly used by Christians in Egypt, Syria, Lebanon and Indonesia.² Some people also thought that the use of 'Allah' as a substitute for the English term 'God' was an attempt to convert Muslims by confusing them.³

A day before the attacks on churches, the website of the Malaysian judiciary was vandalized. A hacker with the alias "Brainwash" managed to leave threatening messages apparently related to the

¹ Baradan Kuppusamy, "Can Christians Say 'Allah'? In Malaysia, Muslims Say No," Time. 8 January 2010. <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1952497,00.html#ixzz0cDBV3OUJ>.

² Richard Lloyd Parry, "Attacks after Malaysian court rules Christians can worship Allah," The Times. 9 January 2010. <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/asia/article6980360.ece>.

³ Baradan Kuppusamy, "Can Christians Say 'Allah'? In Malaysia, Muslims Say No," Time. 8 January 2010. <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1952497,00.html#ixzz0cDBV3OUJ>.

court ruling on the website, saying that “Allah only restricted to Muslim only.” Since the court ruling on New Year’s Eve, the website of the *Herald* had also been marred with profanities by hackers.⁴

Then on the morning of 8 January, three churches in Kuala Lumpur were attacked by petrol bombs. The three-storey Metro Tabernacle church in suburban Kuala Lumpur was the most severely damaged of the three churches targeted. The church, a member of the Pentecostal Assemblies of God movement, was set on fire during the attack which took place around midnight. The fire destroyed the first-floor offices of the building, but the worship hall was undamaged and there were no injuries. Investigations were still ongoing, and Anuar Harun, head of the fire department operation, stated that forensic experts were working with the police and a canine unit to probe the blaze. He was also unwilling to confirm whether it was a case of arson, saying “it is a sensitive issue.”⁵ Witnesses apparently reported having seen two people on a motorbike who drove near the entrance and threw in something which appeared to be a petrol bomb.⁶



Metro Tabernacle after the attack (Photo credit: Saeed Khan / AFP / Getty)

The two other churches attacked on 8 January was the Catholic Church of Assumption in Kuala Lumpur, and the Protestant Life Chapel church nearby.

On the following day, a fourth church was attacked. The Good Shepherd Lutheran Church in southwestern Kuala Lumpur was struck by a firebomb, slightly damaging its front porch, but there were no injuries.

⁴ Richard Lloyd Parry, "Attacks after Malaysian court rules Christians can worship Allah," *The Times*. 9 January 2010. <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/asia/article6980360.ece>.

⁵ "Malaysian church fire-bombed ahead of Muslim protests," AFP. 8 January 2010. http://www.channelnewsasia.com/stories/afp_asiapacific/view/1029280/1/html.

⁶ Richard Lloyd Parry, "Attacks after Malaysian court rules Christians can worship Allah," *The Times*. 9 January 2010. <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/asia/article6980360.ece>.



Damage to the exterior of the Good Shepherd Lutheran Church in Petaling Jaya, near Kuala Lumpur (Photo credit: VOA News⁷)

On 10 January 2010, two more churches and a Catholic convent school were targeted, but no one was injured in the attacks. Molotov cocktails were thrown at the All Saints Church and a Catholic school in Taiping, Perak, and a bottle of kerosene was found in another church in the vicinity before Sunday services.⁸ The Perak police believed that there was a small fire earlier, which did not cause any structural damage as the wall was intact. Police also stated that they found several broken bottles including paint thinners, outside All Saints Church, one of the country's oldest Anglican churches.

Zulkifli Abdullah, the state police chief, said a broken bottle filled with the inflammable liquid paraffin and with an unlit wick was found inside the compound of St Louis Catholic Church.⁹ Meanwhile, the Malacca Baptist Church in the southern state of Malacca was vandalised when its exterior wall was splashed with black paint.¹⁰

Response

Council of Churches secretary-general Hermen Shastri responded, saying that "churches have taken measures to increase security around their compounds, and (are) trusting the police and other enforcement agencies to keep a lookout for any suspicious individuals."¹¹ The inspector-general of police, Tan Sri Musa Hassan, also increased surveillance and monitoring of churches, and all patrol cars have been instructed to patrol all church areas.¹²

Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak visited Metro Tabernacle the day after it was attacked and appealed for the public to remain calm. He announced that the government would make

⁷ <http://www1.voanews.com/english/news/religion/Three-More-Churches-Catholic-School-Attacked-in-Malaysia-81093382.html>.

⁸ "Malaysia Christians defy church attacks," Bangkok Post. 10 January 2010.

<http://www.bangkokpost.com/breakingnews/164885/malaysian-christians-defy-church-attacks>.

⁹ "Churches firebombed in Malaysia," Al Jazeera. 10 January 2010. <http://english.aljazeera.net/news/asia-pacific/2010/01/20101106245977872.html>.

¹⁰ "Failed attack at Taiping church, convent school," The Malaysian Insider. 10 January 2010.

<http://themalaysianinsider.com/index.php/malaysia/49109-failed-attack-at-taiping-church-convent-school>.

¹¹ "Malaysia Christians defy church attacks," Bangkok Post. 10 January 2010.

<http://www.bangkokpost.com/breakingnews/164885/malaysian-christians-defy-church-attacks>.

¹² Richard Lloyd Parry, "Attacks after Malaysian court rules Christians can worship Allah," The Times. 9 January 2010. <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/asia/article6980360.ece>.

contribution of 500,000 Malaysian ringgit (more than US\$148,000) to have the Metro Tabernacle relocated.¹³ He stated that the actions of those responsible for the attacks do not indicate the government's position nor that of mainstream society. Najib also said that the Malaysian Cabinet ministers were meeting various groups including Christian groups for dialogue sessions.¹⁴ Other ministers also expressed consternation at the attacks, for instance Deputy Prime Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin spoke out against the attacks, saying that it could lead to instability in the country.¹⁵

125 civil society groups issued a joint statement condemning the attacks against churches. There were groups representing the major religions in the country, such as Aliran Kesedaran Rakyat (Aliran), Hindu Rights Action Force (Hindraf), Council of Churches of Malaysia, Muslim Professionals Forum (MPF), and the Malaysian Consultative Council for Buddhism Christianity Hinduism Sikhism and Taoism (MCCBCHST), as well as other groups such as the Women's Aid Organisation (WAO), Youth for Change (Y4C) and Writer Alliance for Media Independence (WAMI).¹⁶

Another 130 Muslim Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and the People's Volunteer Corp (RELA) volunteered to help monitor the security of churches. The initiative started with a group of 60 volunteers in Kuala Lumpur, who would inform the RELA or state authorities if there were any suspicious activities at places of worship. The monitoring would not be restricted to churches, but would also be for mosques and other places of worship as well. The number of volunteers would subsequently be increased and the initiative would be expanded to every state and district, and a meeting would also be held with non-Muslim NGOs to strengthen security.¹⁷

The Internal Security Act (ISA) could be used against the people responsible for the attacks. Najib stated that "what is important is to take action and get the evidence first. There are enough laws in the country to prosecute people,"¹⁸ implying that if deemed necessary, the ISA would be used in order to ensure national security.

Impact Analysis

Despite the increasing number of attacks, the number of attacks is still low and they are still limited to small-scale attacks and minor vandalism which are uncoordinated and improvised. The attacks involved petrol bombs or molotov cocktails being lobbed at the targets, which would not cause much damage. The attacks have been relatively indiscriminate, as they have not been targeted at the Herald directly, the group behind the lawsuit, nor only at Catholic churches or schools, but at a variety of churches in Kuala Lumpur and other states. The inherent danger is that there is a possibility of attacks escalating, and that would require increased vigilance and intelligence gathering.

It is also important is for both the government and society at large to not exaggerate the scale of the events, and not to exacerbate the situation by inciting fear and suspicion. Despite the attacks, there

¹³ "4th church firebombed in Allah dispute," CNN. 9 January 2010.

<http://edition.cnn.com/2010/WORLD/asiapcf/01/09/malaysia.churches.attacked/>.

¹⁴ "Najib: Most Malaysians not extremists," The Star. 10 January 2010.

<http://thestar.com.my/news/story.asp?file=/2010/1/10/nation/5445073&sec=nation>.

¹⁵ "Muhyiddin leads leaders in condemning church arson," The Star. 9 January 2010.

<http://thestar.com.my/news/story.asp?file=/2010/1/9/nation/5440994&sec=nation>.

¹⁶ Hemananthani Sivanandam, "125 civil society groups condemn arson attacks," The Sun. 10 January 2010.

<http://www.thesundaily.com/article.cfm?id=42180>.

¹⁷ "130 Muslim NGOs And RELA To Help Monitor Security Of Churches," Bernama. 10 January 2010.

<http://www.bernama.com/bernama/v5/newsgeneral.php?id=467367>.

¹⁸ "Najib: Most Malaysians not extremists," The Star. 10 January 2010.

<http://thestar.com.my/news/story.asp?file=/2010/1/10/nation/5445073&sec=nation>.

is a wide-scale opposition to the ruling. The media representations may have given the impression of the potential for widespread social unrest between monolithic religious groups who stand in opposition against each other. However, both Muslim and non-Muslims are divided by the issue, and those who have acted thus far are small but vocal or violent minorities, which contributes to the perception that the religious groups are diametrically opposed to each other.

In any case, the timing of the appeal by the government and the resurgence of the issue warrants further analysis. The Arabic word 'Allah has been used in non-English speaking places like Borneo as an equivalent term for God by Christian minorities without any trouble before the recent government appeal against the court ruling in favour of the *Herald*. The question is why has this become an issue at this moment. The politicisation of the debate suggests an attempt by the incumbent political party to shape opinion of the electorate. The new emphasis on the issue may have unintended consequences on social stability and race-based politics in the country, depending on further developments and how they influence public perception.

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