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M'sian Islamic groups demand stronger role for Islam ahead of polls

KUALA LUMPUR - SOME 100 Islamic groups in Malaysia called on Wednesday for wider powers for Shariah courts and stricter enforcement of religious and moral doctrines ahead of general elections next month.

In a list of election demands, the groups said the government should declare Malaysia an Islamic-majority nation and reject any attempt to make it a secular state.

The demands were made by the Defenders of Islam, a loose coalition of about 100 mostly conservative Islamic organisations representing students, professionals and others.

Yusri Mohamad, president of the Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia, which leads the coalition, said recent racial and religious tensions stemmed from efforts by certain groups to challenge Islam's role in the multiracial country.

'We want to remind all Malaysians to preserve and maintain the status quo. The formula may not be perfect but it has worked reasonably well. It is acceptable and sustainable,' he said.

About 60 per cent of Malaysia's 27 million people are ethnic Malay Muslims. The rest are Christians, Buddhists and Hindus from the Chinese and Indian communities.

The ruling National Front coalition, which has governed Malaysia since 1957, is led by the United Malays National Organisation, which draws support from Malay Muslims and espouses a generally moderate form of Islam.

The government has instituted an affirmative action program for Malay Muslims which gives them preferential treatment in education, employment and business.

The Islamic groups' demands follow a campaign by Malaysian churches urging Christians to choose candidates in the March 8 polls who champion religious freedom.

There are growing concerns among religious minorities that their rights are being eroded by a rise in Islamic fervor, which many blame on overzealous Muslim bureaucrats in Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's government.

The fears have been fueled by a recent government ban on the word 'Allah' in Malay-language Christian literature, the demolition of Hindu temples, and court judgments favoring Muslims in disputes with non-Muslims.

Mr Yusri said the Islamic demands, which will be distributed to all candidates and political parties, were aimed at highlighting Muslim needs, not countering the Christian campaign.

The groups' statement called for asserting 'the significant role of Islam in the state'.

It also called for the power of Islamic Shariah courts to be strengthened and new laws to block the propagation of other religions among Muslims, especially in states with large minority populations.

The groups sought more Islamic studies in schools, increased scholarships for Muslims and the implementation of Islamic practices, such as prayers during school assemblies. They also said television

stations should ban Western entertainment programs such as reality shows and promote Islamic programming. -- AP

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