

Thursday October 29, 2015
07:01 AM GMT+8

With first envoy to Vatican, Christian community here anticipate better religious ties

By Ida Lim



Tan Sri Bernard Dompok (right) has been appointed as Malaysia's first envoy to the Vatican City. — File pic

KUALA LUMPUR, Oct 29 — Malaysia's Christian leaders expressed hope that Tan Sri Bernard Dompok would be able to show Malaysia's commitment to better interfaith ties and strengthen the country's diplomatic relations with Vatican City.

Congratulating Dompok on his upcoming appointment as Malaysia's first envoy to the Vatican City, the Council of Churches of Malaysia (CCM) noted that the former minister is a member of the Catholic Church who "has always been passionate in bringing Malaysia and the Vatican closer together diplomatically."

"The fact that the government has appointed him goes to show the confidence the government has in him to be able to forge closer diplomatic ties in the coming years.

“We are confident that in his new responsibility he will excel in building bridges of understanding and friendship, and show Malaysia’s commitment to building better interfaith relations and moderation in the nation and in the world,” CCM general secretary Rev Dr Hermen Shastri told *Malay Mail Online* in an email reply when contacted.

“Our prime minister has often announced that his administration will uphold religious harmony, peaceful co-existence and moderation. We can now wait to see if the diplomatic relations with Vatican will offer greater assurance that the rights and interests of the Christian community would be taken care off,” he added.

Yesterday the Christian Federation of Malaysia (CFM), an umbrella body representing churches nationwide, also said it welcomed and is delighted with the news, viewing Dompok as being “ably qualified and vastly experienced as a former senior federal minister” to carry out that role.

“The Christian community in Malaysia will pray for Tan Sri Bernard Dompok to be granted wisdom and fortitude by God to also speak on behalf of Malaysians who respect all religions and who practise their faith in peace and harmony in Malaysia when strengthening diplomatic ties between our Government and the Vatican,” CFM chairman Rev Dr Eu Hong Seng told *Malay Mail Online* in a brief text message when contacted.

When asked if Malaysia’s appointment of its first ambassador to the Vatican City represented Putrajaya’s move to reach out to the Christian community, Eu said it could not be interpreted in such a manner as it is a mere exchange of diplomats between governments.

“I would say it's a normal practice. Because we have an ambassador over in Malaysia and so it's natural for an ambassador to be sent to the Vatican. I don't think you can say it's a move to reach out to the Christian community. You can't interpret it in that way. It's a normal diplomatic thing,” he later said over the phone.

Malaysia formalised diplomatic ties with the Vatican City after Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak’s official visit in July 2011 with the then-Pope, Benedict XVI,.

In January 2013, the Vatican City appointed its first envoy to Malaysia, Archbishop Joseph Marino.

On Monday, Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Anifah Aman announced that the prime minister had given his nod for Dompok to be Malaysia’s first resident envoy to the Vatican City, with the paperwork and seeking of approval from the city state underway.

Dompok, who will also be ambassador to Malta and Albania, was Sabah chief minister from 1998 to 1999, minister in the Prime Minister’s Department in 2004, and minister of Plantation Industries and Commodities in 2009.

He relinquished his post in March 2014 as president of the Sabah-based political party Upko that he had founded 20 years ago, less than a year after losing the Penampang parliamentary seat in the 13th general elections to PKR’s Darell Leiking.

On Tuesday, Dompok said that Najib is the only Malaysian prime minister to have taken tangible steps to formalise ties with Vatican City, revealing that such formal diplomatic relationships were discussed during former prime ministers Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's rule but was not given serious consideration.

- See more at: <http://www.themalaymailonline.com/malaysia/article/with-first-envoy-to-vatican-christian-community-here-anticipate-better-reli#sthash.HwmMTCkA.dpuf>