

# Asean blighted by religious intolerance

**Dr Chokchuang Chutinaton** makes a plea for Asean member nations to respect fundamental human rights and religious freedom.

**T**he strong-arm tactics and the intolerant treatment by the Thai and Malaysian governments towards the al-Arqam religious sect of Malaysia is indeed shocking. Al-arqam has been unjustly banned in Malaysia and its leader forcefully deported from Thailand.

The al-Arqam is a peace-loving Islamic religious group in Malaysia with a membership of about 100,000. They have never been known to commit any crimes or violent acts. Yet today the governments of Thailand and Malaysia are treating them like criminals to be roughly arrested, forcefully expelled and then detained under draconian laws.

What has happened to our free, democratic societies in Asean? What has happened to our common-sense rule of justice... that a person or a group is innocent until proven otherwise. Moreover, have we no kindness and gratitude to show to the al-Arqam business investors who have been here for 10 years, giving jobs to hundreds of Thai workers to help our economy? Now, when they are in trouble with their Malaysian government due to religious and political intolerance, we (the Thai government) betray our good friends and join Malaysia and three other Asean members to attack the wounded al-Arqam group like sharks in a frenzy after smelling blood.

Thailand has had a relatively good record for human rights and religious freedom in the past. However, under the influence of Asean, Thailand has recently violated human rights. A couple of months ago Thailand bowed under Indonesian pressure to harass a conference on East Timor held in Bangkok. This month, under Malaysian pressure, Thailand forcefully and suddenly expelled seven al-Arqam members including its leader.

In a democratic society there is religious freedom, which means the freedom to worship or believe according to one's conscience and the State has no right to restrict this most basic human right unless one's beliefs violate other people's human rights. Thus the intolerant actions taken by the Thai and Malaysian governments are gross violations of human rights and are certainly unacceptable to the international community.

The al-Arqam religious sect has been banned in Malaysia because their government claimed they have "deviated" from

Malaysia's Islamic, mainstream religion. The government of Malaysia has also accused them of maintaining a suicide squad in Thailand and thus has banned all of its 250 school and business concerns. The Thai authorities have strongly denied the existence of such a squad and that the al-Arqam has not committed any crime in Thailand. The al-Arqam sect has lived peacefully both in Malaysia for 26 years, and in Thailand for 10 years.

Suppression of dangerous extremist groups or terrorist groups, although legitimate, should not lead us to the illegitimate, irresponsible suppression of innocent minority groups and thus lead us to violate human rights (which include religious freedom or liberty of conscience).

Let us not forget that in our hunt for terrorist groups or so called "deviationists" we can be misled by a non-freedom-loving "friend" Dr Mahathir Muhamad, the Prime Minister of Malaysia, to meet a more dangerous enemy called tyranny which can certainly destroy our hard-earned democracies if we neglect concerns for human rights, justice, and individual religious freedom for minority groups.

Events of the last few months where Thailand has been acting under pressure from Malaysia to harass the al-Arqam members together present a shocking example of intolerance and religious bigotry and the most unprecedented, joint, international violation of human rights in the modern history of the Asean nations. Imagine five nations, in the name of solidarity, joining forces to bully and ban a small minority religious group that has done no harm to society and has not committed a single crime.

Not one of the ridiculous allegations the Prime Minister of Malaysia made against al-Arqam has been proven in court. Yet five Asean nations have already condemned them as guilty by banning them. The verdict is "guilty until proven otherwise" or "guilty because Malaysia says so." What kind of legal justice is this? If we were the innocent victims, would we like others to treat us or ban us like this when we have done nothing wrong?

**T**he Thai Chuan government has denied that there is any violation of human rights or any religious persecution. It is simply an immigration law problem, they say. Since their passports were revoked by Malaysia, they had no more legal right to stay in Thailand so they



**CHOKCHUANG:** learn from history.

had to be expelled.

In view of the present evidence, the al-Arqam sect is not a terrorist or a criminal group. Then why are they being banned and persecuted? The answer could be both religious and political. However, the more obvious answer must basically be due to their different religious belief.

The Malaysian government itself has openly declared and confirmed that the al-Arqam sect was banned because they have "deviated" from mainstream Islamic religion. Malaysia's National Fatwa Council, the religious body that rules on Islamic orthodoxy, has banned al-Arqam too. The leader of the al-Arqam sect is accused of claiming to be the "Messiah," and having a "dialogue" with the prophet Mohammed, and predicting doomsday.

Malaysian police have arrested members of the sect as they distributed leaflets after a religious celebration and reportedly have seized pamphlets about the movement from the men outside a mosque.

Since when (in this enlightened 20th Century) is it wrong to have a different religious belief or faith? In this modern age and in our free democratic societies with our much greater understanding of human rights and religious freedom, how can we still have such inhumane religious intolerance! By banning a group because they believe differently (either in religion or in politics) is returning us to the Dark Ages when millions of "heretics" were tortured and killed by the Spanish Inquisition of the Papacy because they believed differently from the Roman Catholic Church.

During this dark age, Galileo and Copernicus were sent to prison or put under house arrest for believing that the earth is not the centre of the universe which was contrary to the Catholic Church's religious beliefs. In the 7th Century, owing to intense opposition to his "strange ideas" and beliefs of the worship of "only one God," Mohammed (founder of Islam) and his followers were forced to flee from Mecca to Medina.

Have we learned nothing from history? Have we forgotten the painful lessons of history concerning political and religious intolerance and bigotry? How many millions of people in the past have suffered terribly or were killed because of intolerance?

**R**eligious intolerance will most certainly lead to persecution, injustice, and gross violations of human rights and perhaps even religious wars (which are the most terrible and most persisting of wars). Today, on a wall of the Nazi Auschwitz concentration camp in Poland, there is a famous grim reminder by George Santayana: "The one who does not remember history is bound to live it through again."

For Thai foreign policy, it is always good to have friendship with neighbouring Asean members; however, friendship or solidarity should not lead us to do evil or commit immoral acts or violate basic human rights. Have Thailand's fears of offending Malaysia (and thus affecting Asean solidarity) blunted its sensitivity to human rights?

Has Thailand lessened its sovereignty by following blindly Malaysia's repressive demands to suppress al-Arqam and allowed Malaysian police into Thai territory to arrest al-Arqam members? When was the last time Thai police were allowed to enter Malaysia to hunt for wanted criminals and terrorists that had escaped into Malaysia?

*The Nation's* editorial (Sept 4) made a note-worthy comment by asking whether "... the Thai government has made itself appear as a foolish pawn in a political game being played by a neighbouring Asean country." Asean should not be used as a tool of Malaysia to suppress innocent religious minority groups. The intolerant and dictatorial demands of Malaysia should not be accepted by other Asean members.

In conclusion, religious tolerance, justice, and respect for human rights must be given to all parties, even to a small religious minority group who believes differently from mainstream religion.

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