



5.23.17

MALAYSIA | 100 Days Since Pastor Abduction

Christian Solidarity Worldwide is calling for the Malaysian government to secure the release of Pastor Raymond Koh and to bring his kidnappers to justice, as his family and supporters mark 100 days since his abduction.

Pastor Raymond Koh was abducted from his car in broad daylight in Petaling Jaya, Malaysia on Feb. 13 by 15 men in three black cars. Eyewitness reports and CCTV footage suggest that Pastor Koh was abducted by professionally trained men.

His family has called on the authorities to investigate but little progress has been made. Their concerns have been echoed by the UN Human Rights Office in Bangkok. According to the family, instead of concentrating on the circumstances behind Pastor Koh's arrest, the police have instead focused on suspicions that Pastor Koh and the non-governmental organization (NGO) that he founded, Harapan Komuniti (Hope Community), have been guilty of 'proselytizing' to the Malay community.

On April 6, the Malaysian media reported that the police had started investigating Pastor Koh and alleged unnamed associates for attempting to convert unnamed Muslim teenagers to Christianity in the northern state of Perlis. Malaysia's Inspector-General of Police, Khalid Abu Bakar, reportedly stated that the investigation would be under Section 298(A) of the Penal Code, which stipulates offenses relating to religion under the Federal Constitution of Malaysia.

Harapan Komuniti (Hope Community), a non-profit organization that undertakes social and charity work among marginalized and underprivileged communities, including people living with HIV/AIDS, recovering drug addicts, single mothers and their children. In 2011, a dinner organized by the NGO was raided by 30 officers from JAIS (Selangor Islamic Religious Department) and the organizers were accused of "proselytizing Muslims." Although no one was prosecuted, Pastor Koh's family received death threats in the aftermath.

Although the Federal Constitution declares in Article 3(1) that “Islam is the religion of the Federation,” there is no express prohibition of proselytization. The use of Federal Law to investigate proselytization by invoking Section 298(A) of the Penal Code, an ambiguous cause which bars “causing disharmony, disunity or feelings of enmity, hatred or ill-will,” is unusual and could lead to more severe punishments being handed to those who are caught proselytizing. The federal constitution recognizes that Islam is the majority religion, providing special protections for Muslims and allowing for the creation of State shari’a courts with jurisdiction over Islamic matters, while also providing lesser protections for religious minorities. Malaysia’s ruling coalition Barisan Nasional (BN) unites UMNO, the ethnic Malay and Muslim-majority party, with the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) and the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), ethnic minority parties which have significant religious minorities. This coalition has traditionally promoted tolerance and protected pluralism. However, in recent years there has been an increase in Malay-Muslim religious nationalism, led by the leading party UMNO, and a rise in discriminatory policies.

Around 61 percent of Malaysia’s population of nearly 31 million is Muslim, while Christians make up about nine percent of the population, with two-thirds of them living in Sabah and Sarawak. Malaysia’s much-touted moderate Muslim image has been tarnished in recent times by the rise of restrictions against non-Muslim minorities. The 2017 Annual Report by the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom places Malaysia on its Tier 2 list of 12 countries where religious freedom violations engaged in or tolerated by the government are serious. Malaysia has been designated a Tier 2 country since 2014.

Benedict Rogers, East Asia Team Leader at Christian Solidarity Worldwide, said, “Pastor Raymond Koh works with all people who are in need. The work of people of faith in such communities must be free from threats of violence and intimidation. We recognize that the abduction of Pastor Koh follows and is linked to incidents of harassment, intimidation, hate speech, criminal threats and attacks, based on religious grounds, against him and his colleagues in 2011, that went largely unchecked by the authorities. We urge the Malaysian police to halt their baseless investigation against Pastor Koh and instead concentrate on securing his release and holding the criminals who have abducted him to account.”