

Activist groups take issue with Archbishop's remarks Function 8 denies leaking the contents of his letters, while Maruah says his comments vilified civil society

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The two activist groups involved in the exchange with Archbishop Nicholas Chia have taken issue with his remarks, saying they were disappointed by his response.

While Function 8 disputed his charge it had leaked the contents of his letters and called on him to make them public, Maruah said his comments had "vilified" civil society.

Both groups issued statements yesterday, with Function 8 accusing Archbishop Chia of making "unsubstantiated remarks" on Wednesday.

The head of the Catholic Church in Singapore had said that blogger Alex Au's account of the incident could only have come from Function 8, with which he had communicated in private.

But the group countered that the two letters Archbishop Chia sent - one reportedly supporting a June 2 rally it was organising, and the second asking to withdraw the first - were not marked private or confidential.

It concluded that the first letter was intended to be made public at the rally commemorating the 25th anniversary of the 1987 arrests.

The group said it cancelled this plan, however, when Archbishop Chia retracted the first letter, and it decided to try to set up a private dialogue with the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA).

Function 8 also suggested that other parties may have been privy to the letters.

"Has His Grace forgotten that his second letter was cc to a third party, and that his staff and others within the church may also have sight of the letters?" said the statement.

The group also took issue with the Archbishop's comments that he withdrew his first letter because it could inadvertently harm social harmony, and that Mr Au's article confirmed the correctness of his decision.

"Au's article confirmed my fear that the group would use my letter in a manner that I did not agree with, and make use of the Office of the Archbishop and the Catholic Church for their own ends," he had said.

Function 8 responded: "What was his initial letter intended for, and what are the unintended manners in which it could possibly be used to 'harm the social harmony in Singapore'?"

It said it believed "there is no room for whispered meetings on the issues", and called on the Archbishop to publish his two letters, as well as reveal what happened between the first letter and the second.

This was "so that the public can judge for themselves whether the actions or inaction of Function 8 and Mr Au were 'irresponsible and regrettable'", it said, quoting Archbishop Chia's words.

It also urged him to publicly clarify if his first letter was solicited.

Meanwhile, the president of Maruah said the group knew about Archbishop Chia's letters, as it had partnered Function 8 in organising the June rally.

"The letters reflect diverse views on key content areas in relation to preventive detention without trial," said Ms Braema Mathi.

Both groups had decided not to publicise the letters until they could clarify with MHA, she said, and added it was "unfortunate" that the incident was leaked before this could happen.

She stressed that Maruah was "deeply disappointed" by Archbishop Chia's remarks on why he had changed his mind.

"We are still clueless as to whether there was intervention by the state in this matter, and if so, on what grounds and to what extent," she said.

"Instead, civil society has been vilified in the Archbishop's remarks, which are the opposite of our intentions to preserve harmony by seeking clarifications."

But she also said "it is more important to move forward", and added that Maruah was still keen to talk to MHA about the issue, and would be happy to meet the Archbishop. She also called for an independent commission of inquiry to be set up to probe the 1987 arrests.

Political analyst Gillian Koh said the issue had to do with what she called Singapore's "operating paradigm" of keeping religion and politics separate.

Unlike political or civil society groups which can shift their positions on political and policy matters, she noted, religious groups interpret these in a "fixed way" according to their precepts.

"So, it is all the more important to ensure that they stay within the bounds of their religious mandate in a highly multicultural context such as Singapore," she said, or there would be greater contest for influence over the state, governance and civil society.

"But for a religious community or leader to be construed as joining hands with another civil society group to advocate change on as sensitive a matter as the ISA, could lead others to question why they might not do the same, or why one group might be allowed to fall out of that operating paradigm."

The current controversy reflected the "harsh realities" of this paradigm, she said, which she suggested someone in the two groups disagreed with. She said: "I think that is where the story really lies."