

Group seeking to use church for political aims: Govt Function 8 disrespectful to Catholic Archbishop, says MHA in statement

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The Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) yesterday took a civil society group to task for being "disrespectful" to the head of the Catholic Church.

In its statement, the MHA also took pains to stress that "the Government values its longstanding relationship with the Catholic Church and the Catholic community in Singapore".

The controversy began on Tuesday, when blogger Alex Au wrote on his site that Archbishop Nicholas Chia had sent a letter to Function 8 in support of a June rally against the Internal Security Act (ISA).

Mr Au claimed that the Archbishop retracted that letter following a meeting with Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean, who is also the Home Affairs Minister.

On Wednesday, the Archbishop issued a statement to say he withdrew his letter because "on reflection, its contents did not accurately reflect my views on the subject, and if used in a manner that I did not intend, may inadvertently harm the social harmony in Singapore".

Yesterday, the MHA noted the Archbishop's reasons for withdrawing his letter. It added that his decision to do so ahead of "a political event in June 2012, shows his appreciation of the complexity of our society and the need to keep religion and politics separate".

It also accused Function 8 of publicising the matter through Mr Au, and said this was "disrespectful" of the Archbishop.

"This deliberate breach of the Archbishop's trust confirms the objective of this group to publicly involve the Catholic Church and the Archbishop in their political agenda," the MHA said.

The MHA statement did not address Mr Au's charge that the Archbishop withdrew his letter after a meeting with Mr Teo. But it said that it has been a longstanding practice for government ministers to meet regularly with religious leaders, "as part of building trust and understanding and to maintain religious harmony".

"This is a well-established process that is appreciated by both ministers and religious leaders," said MHA.

The civic group at the heart of this exchange, Function 8, is associated with the 22 people who were arrested under the ISA in 1987 for allegedly conspiring to overthrow the Government. The detainees included Ms Teo Soh Lung, one of the founders of Function8, and Mr Vincent Cheng, an associate of the group.

The Government stated then that the detentions were not directed against the church but against a few individuals who had used their positions in church organisations to pursue a political agenda.

Following a meeting with then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, the leader of the Catholic Church in Singapore at that time, Archbishop Gregory Yong, said he was "satisfied" that the Government had nothing against the church when it made the arrests.

The Vatican reiterated this position in 1989, when it said its ambassador and the church in Singapore did not feel themselves to be under attack by the Government, and that relations have been and are good.

In response to the Archbishop's statement, Mr Au wrote a fresh post yesterday saying he hoped to generate "a debate about where citizens would like to draw the line between religious organisations and politics, and how that line is to be maintained".

He refused to reveal his sources for his first post on the incident.

Meanwhile, Function 8 also issued a statement yesterday directed at the Archbishop, whom it accused of making "unsubstantiated remarks".

It called on the Archbishop to publish his two letters to the group and to explain what took place between the first letter and its retraction. It pointed out that besides its members, others within the church may have had sight of the letters.

The Archbishop could not be reached for comment.

Dr Gillian Koh of the Institute of Policy Studies said the matter of the letter and its withdrawal falls within a generally well-accepted paradigm here "that religion and politics are kept separate".

"The state monitors this carefully and acts to maintain that separation," she added.