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`Change in laws must meet needs'

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KUALA LUMPUR, Sat. - The Government will review laws affecting human rights from time to time but any changes will have to meet Malaysian needs and not be dictated by foreigners.

Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Dr Rais Yatim said today Malaysia would continue to revise the concept and practice of civil liberties but with a focus on fairness in the larger interests of society.

"Malaysia will continue to have its own brand of civil liberty, its own style of doing things, that is freedom with responsibility," he said at a conference on "Malaysia in the New Millennium" in Cambridge University, England.

The text of his speech, entitled Democracy and Civil Liberties in Malaysia: Shaping the Way Forward, was released here.

Rais said public order and security laws would eventually be phased out by the waning of their usefulness.

For example, the Printing Presses and Publications Act 1984 has now met a challenger in the form of Internet newspapers which do not need permits.

He said it had become common for Malaysians to turn to these publications for alternative news and with about 20 such websites, the permit requirement under the PPPA had become redundant.

"All these only go to show that the Malaysian Government is not oblivious to the need for alternatives or, if you like, checks and balances," he said.

He added that the Government had pledged not to censor the Internet but "a crime is still a crime, libel and slander still remain as such", and the law would take its course if these publications overstepped the boundaries.

Rais said despite criticism, the Malaysian system had worked. Its achievements in the last 43 years as an independent state showed a better record than the first 50 years of independence of the United States from Britain.

He stressed that there was no such thing as an international norm of an acceptable and just system of a country.

"What we have is only a high-handed branding by certain forces that happen to have a distaste for views from an Asian leader like (Datuk Seri) Dr Mahathir Mohamad who dares to call a spade a spade, and who says things as they are and as they ought to be," he said.

He added that democracy should not be tied to a straitjacket interpretation, and democracy and the rule of law in Malaysia should take a form which helped to develop the country.

Touching on the criticism of the Malaysian judiciary, Rais said it had its inadequacies but that did not mean that a few of its decisions should render the whole system unworthy.

Citing the Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim trials, he said American and Australian leaders, among others, had been quick to denounce them as a political ploy but did not seem to know that Malaysian courts had previously also convicted other leaders.

Just recently, he said, former Umno secretary-general Tan Sri Sanusi Junid had pleaded guilty in court for assault.

Rais said unlike individuals, a state did not have the privilege of going to court if it was defamed.

"Thus, when a big power condemns a country's legal system simply on the

basis that it is envisaged to be inferior, the end result is nothing less than disastrous," he said.

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