

Najib's 'trial balloons' no substitute for change
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Human Rights Watch (HRW) described the government of Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak today as "all talk and no action" on human rights, and called on Malaysia to make real changes to its laws and policies, instead of "floating trial balloons" to keep critics at bay.

The New York-based organisation blasted Najib (right) for not fulfilling his pledge to "uphold civil liberties", describing it as "little more than an empty promise" following the spat of "repressive practices" since he became premier in 2009.

"The Malaysian government gagged critics, kept hundreds in detention without charge or trial, and restricted the rights to freedom of assembly and association, despite pledges made during Malaysia's successful campaign for election to the United Nations Human Rights Council," HRW said in a statement.

"The Malaysian government is all talk and no action when it comes to human rights," HRW deputy Asia director Phil Robertson said.

"Prime Minister Najib and his ministers are mistaken if they think that floating 'trial balloons' to make badly needed changes to laws and policies are enough to keep Malaysian civil society and the international community at bay," Robertson said.

The remarks comes at HRW's launch of its World Report 2011, its 21st annual review of human rights practices around the globe and summary of major human rights trends in more than 90 countries and territories worldwide.

Citing incidents that occurred over the past year, the report said the Malaysian government never hesitated to use draconian laws to harass or gag journalists critical of the authorities and political, human rights and civil society activists.

In a year that marked the 50th anniversary of the Internal Security Act (ISA), HRW said Malaysia's promises to reform security-related laws permitting preventive detention were never realised.

"Police regularly dispersed peaceful public assemblies, and the authorities used broadly worded statutes to prohibit publications and bully reporters and writers."

The Malaysian government had also ignored the recommendation of the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, which had visited Malaysia, to repeal all preventive detention laws.

Instead, the government not only continued to use the ISA but further expanded its definition of what constitutes a security issue by the wider application of existing law, the HRW report said.

The government also continued to use the Police Act 1967 to harass or ban peaceful public protests, marches, or meetings by opposition politicians and activists, it added.

Najib, remember your pledge

On freedom of expression, the report found journalists to have been harassed, get published materials confiscated in the guise of these being "under review", others banned outright, suspended or made the subject of 'negotiations' pending applications for licensing or renewal under the 1984 Printing Presses and Publications Act (PPPA).

HRW also cited the charges slapped on cartoonist Zulkiflee Anwar Haque (left) and his books, which the government has banned for his negative portrayal of the legal system and on religion.

Not to be forgotten is the Home Ministry's denial to Malaysiakini its application for a permit to come out with a print version, which has been denied every year since 2002.

Power to deny or revoke a printing licence is in the hands of Malaysia's home minister, under the PPPA. Any decision he makes cannot be challenged, noted HRW.

1Msia should mean respect for human rights

Reminding Najib that he had, in 2009, said journalists should "report what they see, without fear of consequence", HRW said the government had since proceeded to probe websites and social networking pages.

This was possible under the country's broadly-worded regulations on incitement, sedition and public order that are used for political ends, said HRW, and they included those contained in laws ranging from the Communications and Multimedia Act 1998 to the Sedition Act 1948.

The government had also "hastily drafted" amendments to the Anti-Trafficking in Persons Act, which have amounted to reduced, rather than enhanced, protection for those trafficked and smuggled migrant workers.

"Government measures to counter human trafficking fall short of the prevention, protection, and prosecution measures that are necessary to deal with the long-entrenched problem.

"Malaysian officials have opted for short-term and ill-considered measures," said HRW.

Calling for the revocation of the ISA and other arbitrary and preventive detention measures, the group also said the government should rescind the PPPA, narrow the legal definition of sedition and amend the Police Act to provide for reasonable and negotiated conditions for the citizens to assemble.

It also said amendments to the Malaysia's Anti-Trafficking in Persons Act that contradict international human trafficking and smuggling of people laws should be revoked, with legislation crafted to protect the rights of victims of trafficking, migrants, refugees and asylum seekers.

"Malaysia has a long way to go to be the human rights respecting nation that its government leaders claim it to be," said Robertson.

"The slogan of 1Malaysia should respect for international human rights standards, with renewed commitment followed by concrete actions," he added.

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