

Guan Eng: Dr M could have been worse
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Was former premier Dr Mahathir Mohamad better than current Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak as far as freedom of the press was concerned or is the latter worse?

Penang Chief Minister Lim Guan Eng did not find it easy to answer that question.

Instead, he said that Mahathir, who resigned as PM in 2003, merely guaranteed no censorship on the Internet and gave Malaysia its own "Bill of Rights".

However, he did not guarantee that there would be freedom over cyberspace as users, including journalists, were still subjected to various laws like the Printing Presses and Publications Act (PPPA), as well as sedition and defamation acts, Lim added.

"These are two different things... no censorship and no freedom over the Internet," said Lim when asked to compare the two premiers' record vis-a-vis press freedom.

"To say whether Mahathir is better (would be difficult) as during his time, there was no (social networking sites like) Facebook or Twitter," he added.

"The Internet was not so extensive then, and now they want to guard even our personal space... if he (Mahathir) had the power, he would have done worse," he added.

Yesterday, Malaysiakini editor-in-chief Steven Gan had, in his comment 'A killer blow to online media', stated that instead of freeing up the traditional media by doing away with the licensing regime under the PPPA, Najib and his cousin, Home Minister Hishammuddin Hussein, are taking the regressive step of controlling the online media.

Lim urged the government not to amend the PPPA to include online news within the ambit of the act so as to enable it to punish and prosecute Internet writers.

He said the amendment was against the Bill of Guarantees of the Multimedia Super Corridor which ensured that the Internet was free from censorship.

Although it is reportedly in its initial draft stage, added Lim, the attorney-general had already made an announcement that he had looked into the proposal.

As to whether Najib could be said to be worse than Mahathir, Lim said that it was up to the people to change the government's views.

He added that journalists themselves must press harder against the proposed amendment to ensure that it would not affect their work.

"Already there is no freedom (of the press) in the print media... now it seems that the same situation would also be seen on the Internet," he said.

'No space in the mainstream media'

"It is in the online media that we can read about the real situation as there is no space (for us) in the mainstream media," he added.

Lim was lamenting the lack of coverage over his various responses to current issues which were not covered in the mainstream press.

On Tuesday, Home Ministry secretary-general Mahmood Adam announced that the ministry intended to widen the scope of the PPPA to online publications.

The government was planning to table the amendments in parliament in March, he said.

However, Hishammuddin told reporters that the amendments were still in the "very early" discussion stage.

The controversial move to include online publications under the Act was met with strong objections from members of the public, media practitioners and politicians from both BN and Pakatan Rakyat.

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