

PM considers ISA reform as polls near, says source
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Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak is considering changes to a controversial security law to allow greater freedom of speech, speeding up promised reforms to reconnect with voters ahead of an expected general election in early 2012.

Najib is studying amendments to curb the home minister's powers and reduce the period of initial imprisonment under the Internal Security Act, a source with direct knowledge of the matter said today.

The premier is expected to make an announcement on the reform on Thursday, the source added.

"The move is aimed at finding a better balance between civil liberties and national security, which has been a key pledge of the government, and it is important that we get this done before the next general elections," said the source who asked not to be identified as the matter has not been announced.

An official with Najib's office declined to comment.

A legacy of Malaysia's fight against communists in the 1960s, the ISA allows for indefinite detention of people seen as a threat to national security but critics say it has become little more than a government tool to quell dissent.

The review is part of a series of changes that Najib promised when he took office in 2009 and comes amid increasing market speculation of snap polls late this year or early in 2012.

The ruling BN coalition is seeking to appease voters who abandoned it during the 2008 general election on complaints over the slow pace of promised reforms.

ISA is 'very barbaric'

The next general election is not due until 2013 but some analysts are predicting early polls while domestic economic growth remains relatively strong.

Najib released 13 detainees under the law when he assumed office, including members of a banned anti-government ethnic minority rights group.

About 30 people are in detention under the ISA for suspected involvement in militancy and human trafficking.

Human rights group Suaram estimates that more than 10,000 people have been arrested under the law since it was enacted in 1960.

Analysts said despite the proposed changes, the government would still have tools at its disposal to suppress critics, including sedition laws.

"The process of reducing the home minister's power is welcomed but we don't principally agree with (mere) amendments as we've always wanted this Act to be abolished as it's very barbaric," said Nalini Enumalai, an official with Suaram.

After taking office, Najib pledged political and economic reforms, which boosted his approval ratings to a high of 72 percent.

His rating has since dropped and was at 56 percent last month after a big protest in the capital in July by mostly young members of the middle class upset about the slow pace of electoral and political reform.

- Reuters

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