

**PM Najib to relax curbs on civil liberties**  
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Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak will unveil plans today to ease curbs on civil liberties, an official source said, bowing to a key opposition demand as speculation over snap polls mounts.

Najib will announce long-awaited plans to amend the controversial Internal Security Act (ISA), which allows detention without trial, and relax press and assembly restrictions, a government official familiar with the plans told AFP.

Najib, whose government was widely criticised for forcefully quashing a July rally by the opposition and civil society groups for electoral reform, will detail the initiatives in an 8:45pm speech.

The ISA has long been a hot-button issue in Malaysia. Critics say it is abused by the long-ruling government of Najib's party Umno to silence dissent.

"The prime minister wants to open up the space for discussion and remove archaic and irrelevant laws that serve to stifle and censor rather than encourage greater dialogue," said the official, who spoke on condition of anonymity.

The government was jolted in 2008 when an invigorated opposition led by former deputy premier - and past ISA detainee - Anwar Ibrahim made historic parliamentary gains, setting the stage for a hard-fought next election.

Pressure for more political breathing space has grown amid soaring Malaysian use of the Internet and social media sites, and has been further fuelled by the opposition's recent successes.

Najib, who took office in 2009 vowing to review the ISA, is due to call an election by 2013.

But he has faced mounting questions recently - and declining opinion poll numbers - over the July rally response, rising racial tensions in the multi-ethnic nation and an increasingly cloudy economic outlook.

The official gave no further specifics on the reform plans but made clear the security law would likely be "amended", not repealed.

**Election 'gimmick'**

Opposition politicians and rights activists have long criticised the law as outdated - it was enacted in 1960 as a bulwark against a failed communist insurgency - and ripe for abuse.

They have demanded its abolition along with other legislation that gives the government strong powers to silence its critics. Six other laws apart from the ISA also entail detention without trial.

"This government has always been amending laws. It doesn't really resolve the problem," Nalini Elumalai, an activist with the Abolish ISA Movement, told AFP, calling the plans an election "gimmick".

"All the laws that allow for detention without trial must go."

Najib also will reveal changes to a publications law that leaves newspapers and periodicals vulnerable to having their licences revoked by the government, the official source said.

This has left Malaysia's print and broadcast media lacking real opposition voices, although several plucky online news portals have stepped into the void.

The premier's speech is an annual address marking the nation's 1957 independence from Britain and

Friday's anniversary of the 1963 union of peninsular Malaysia with the states of Sabah and Sarawak on Borneo island.

The ISA allows an individual to be held virtually indefinitely for acts considered a threat to national security or to prevent such acts.

Thousands of people have been detained under the ISA over the past five decades, typically those suspected of Islamic militancy and government critics.

Malaysia has been ruled since its 1957 independence by a coalition dominated by Umno, a continuity that has made it one of Southeast Asia's most stable and economically vibrant countries.

But government critics say this has come at the expense of civil liberties.

- AFP

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