

Malaysia to repeal tough security law, says PM
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Malaysia will repeal a controversial 51-year-old law allowing detention without trial and ease other legislation blamed for curbing civil liberties, Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak said today.

Bowing to a key opposition demand as speculation over snap polls mounts, Najib said the abolition of the tough Internal Security Act (ISA) and other changes were aimed at finding a balance between security and democratic rights.

"I am happy to announce on this historic night that the ISA will be completely repealed," Najib said in a nationally televised speech.

"The changes are aimed at having a modern, mature and functioning democracy which will continue to preserve public order, ensure greater civil liberty and maintain racial harmony."

Najib took office in 2009 promising changes to ISA. But today's announcement came as a surprise as government officials had recently indicated the act was only set for a comprehensive revision.

Najib added that two new laws would be drafted to ensure multi-racial, Muslim-majority Malaysia can "deal with subversive elements, terrorists and criminal acts".

He said any new legislation would ensure detentions can only be carried out by court order and that future periods of detention without trial would be shorter than in the past.

However, he said actions against suspected terrorists would still come under the powers of the home minister.

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.

Review of laws 'that are no longer relevant'

Najib, who had been expected to make some sort of bold move with elections due by 2013 and his public support sagging amid a resurgence by the political opposition, said he also would also review other laws "that are no longer relevant".

This will include repealing the Publications and Printing Presses Act and replacing it with new legislation.

The current act leaves the press vulnerable to licence revocation, and has resulted in a print and broadcast media landscape lacking real opposition voices, although several plucky online news portals have stepped into the void.

The government will also review an act which requires police permission to stage public gatherings, which has been blamed for stifling freedom of assembly.

Najib's government was widely criticised for forcefully quashing a July rally by the opposition and civil society groups for electoral reform.

The ruling coalition now headed by Najib has governed Malaysia since its 1957 independence from Britain.

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