

Najib's openness pledge greeted warily
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Malaysia's government must fully explain its plan to overhaul oppressive security laws before it can be declared a victory for human rights, opposition figures and activists said today.

Rights groups hailed Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak's announcement yesterday that he would repeal an unpopular law allowing preventive detention as a potential watershed validating decades of campaigning by civil liberties advocates.

Amnesty International called it a "significant step forward for human rights" in the Muslim-majority country, while the Human Rights Commission of Malaysia praised Najib's "historic and bold decision".

But with memories still fresh of a crackdown on a July rally for electoral reform, government opponents demanded clarity on two new laws the premier said would replace the draconian Internal Security Act (ISA) and other legislation.

They expressed particular concern that new laws would retain some police preventive detention powers, albeit for shorter periods and subject to more court oversight.

"I welcome the repeal of the ISA, which has been long fought for by the people and opposed by (the government)," opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim said in a Twitter posting while on a trip abroad.

"However, we must be cautious over whether (the new laws) will actually guarantee freedom or just replace the present law," added Anwar, a former deputy premier and past ISA detainee.

Najib, who is due to call fresh elections by 2013, made the announcement in an apparent bid to shore up his chances against a fractured yet increasingly potent opposition alliance.

He has faced mounting questions over the July rally response, rising racial tensions in the multi-ethnic nation, and an increasingly pessimistic economic outlook.

There is also growing dissatisfaction with preferential policies favouring the dominant Malay ethnic group, who make up half the polyglot nation's people.

Political analyst Shaharuddin Badaruddin expressed doubt the legal move would lure back voters who in 2008 deserted the long-ruling Barisan Nasional coalition that Najib now heads, handing the opposition historic gains.

"The impact of repealing the ISA and security laws really does not have as much resonance compared to boosting the salaries of civil servants or removing taxes," he said, adding voters will be looking more at a budget expected in October.

'The devil is in the details'

Opposition figures and activists said repealing the ISA will have only a symbolic effect if a range of other oppressive laws are allowed to stay on the books.

"The devil is in the details. We have to look at what is the final substance of the two new laws," Ragunath Kesavan (right), former president of the Malaysian Bar, told AFP.

"Whatever it is, there cannot be any more detention without trial, that has to be the basis of any amendment or repeal of the laws."

Plans also call for scrapping a requirement that newspapers must apply yearly for licence renewal, which

is blamed for stifling debate.

It would be replaced by an indefinite licence, but Najib said the new licence could be cancelled, giving no further details.

And while the government would review a law requiring police permission for public gatherings, Najib said the revision "would be against street demonstrations".

"These reforms manifestly fall short and leave substantial undemocratic and oppressive powers in the hands of the government," said N Surendran, vice president of the opposition party PKR.

Najib's de facto law minister Nazri Aziz, who said new legislation would not be introduced to parliament until next March, dismissed such concerns.

"Najib has taken a bold move in repealing the (ISA), so the opposition should wait and see what happens in parliament before making such baseless statements," he told AFP.

The ruling Barisan Nasional coalition has been accused of routinely using the ISA and other statutes to snuff out challenges to its power.

But public opinion has turned against such strict measures in recent years as the opposition has gained strength and soaring Internet use has fuelled more open debate.

- AFP

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