

Penang journalists: Genuine reforms, please
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Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak's announcement that annual renewal permit for newspapers would be abolished is too little and too late by 27 years, says a Penang journalists group.

Although it welcomed Najib's Merdeka Day declaration, the Penang Chinese Journalists and Photographers Association (Pewaju) said permit should have never been made compulsory.

Pewaju felt that the impact of Najib's promise of reform has been blunted as newspapers are merely given back a little of the press freedom which journalists should have enjoyed all this while.

The group wants Najib (left) to initiate more genuine reforms, like a Freedom of Information Act.

"The application for annual renewal of permit has placed extreme restrictions on press freedom, resulting in the media practising self-censorship," said Pewaju, in a statement.

"We want to see the government show more sincerity in its reforms, by abolishing other Acts that restrict press freedom like the Printing Presses and Publications Act (PPPA), Official Secrets Act, Sedition Act," it added.

Yesterday, the premier's announcement that the annual renewal of publishing permits for newspapers will be replaced with a one-off licence, which can be withdrawn at the discretion of the Home Minister.

PM announcement receives jaundiced reception

He also promised other reforms such as repeal of the archaic Internal Security Act, which has been often used to incarcerate political dissenters.

However, Najib's critics have received the pronouncements warily, preferring to wait for the day when the actual reforms are implemented.

Meanwhile, Pewaju welcomed the repeal of the 1960 security law, saying it had also been used to restrict press freedom, and urged the government to release all ISA detainees and compensate those still under detention.

However, Pewaju expressed caution that Najib's announcement remains a promise which can be rescinded anytime as it has not been endorsed by Parliament.

The group also urged the government to give newspapers a specific schedule on when the actual reforms would take place.

It hoped that the contents of the announcement related to the media is not just sweeteners and empty promises to garner votes come the general election, referring to the polls which must be held by 2013.

"At the same time, the government should not try to restrict the media in other ways, such as pressuring newspaper chiefs, or set a quota for party politics reportage during the polls," they added.

"As media organisations linked to the ruling government are supported by taxpayers (who purchase the newspapers), we hope that the Opposition or those who have different political leanings would be given the opportunity to express their views," the group added.

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