

'No guarantee of press freedom in Malaysia'

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While the press in Malaysia may, to a certain extent, face fewer hurdles in their duty of informing the public compared with their comrades in some countries, it is no reason for complacency, says a media doyen.

"This is because, there is no guarantee of press freedom in Malaysia," The Sun consultant editor Zainon Ahmad told a forum on media freedom organised by the Selangor University, National Union of Journalists and Asian Institute for Development Communications yesterday.

This, Zainon argued, was unlike our neighbours Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand, which have a specific clause in their constitutions to protect press freedom.

zainon ahmad at kancil awards 2010 However, Zainon (right) noted that the protection of media freedom in the Thai constitution was removed during Thaksin Shinawatra's tenure as prime minister.

He also asked the media to fight and ask for more media freedom from the powers that be "because what we have now is a far cry from real press freedom, indeed an heavily abridged version of it".

Zainon pointed out that there was something akin to the Bill of Rights in the original Malaysian constitution, which guaranteed the freedom of assembly, expression and other rights that indirectly protected the media as well, but it has been eroded since the 50 or more years after Merdeka.

Do's shackled by don'ts

"Over time, these rights have been abridged," by the use of legislation and amendments to the highest law of our land, Zainon said, which were enacted by the BN-led federal government.

"Now you can do this, but not that, do that but not this."

But nothing was more serious an impediment to the freedom of the press in Malaysia, Zainon argued further, as the imposition of the Printing Presses and Publications Act 1984.

This law, which he called "a relic of the past", should go since there already were more than 20 other laws that could be used to regulate the media.

However, he did welcome the amendments to the Act to do away with the discretionary powers of the home minister and annually renewable licences for the modicum of media freedom it would restore.

"It will remove nail biting by all editors come the end of the year, at least," he joked, telling the anecdote of how print media editors have to play nice at the end of every year fearing for their licence renewals and become only a bit more vocal in the early months of each new year.

Zainon's views, however, were contested by his former boss and current Berita Publishing chief A Kadir Jasin, also a panellist at the forum, who held a different view about PPPA and other laws.

However, Kadir acceded that his view of media freedom might differ from what is commonly held by the current generation and at the same time, he chided editors and journalists for using government oversight and influence as an excuse for not doing their job.

Convenient excuse to lay about

Journalists today, he said, do not ask questions during press conferences or ask incoherent questions

and fail to ask follow-up questions.

He lambasted the journalists as "lazy" and said that they only use the excuse to avoid doing work.

a kadir jasin interview 060705 doubtfullKadir (left) also criticised editors who he said unquestioningly "follow wahyu (orders) from Putrajaya" and that if they continued to do so, no amount of amendments or repeals of laws would restore media freedom.

He reminded editors and journalists that there were more ways than one to skin a cat and do their jobs creatively to run rings around government control and still inform the public.

While Kadir said that he was sceptical about efforts to restore media independence, like the press council being mooted by some, he believes that what is possible is to remove legislation and amendments to restore the guarantees of freedoms accorded to us in the original Merdeka constitution.

But he still believes that other legislation, such as the Official Secrets Act and Sedition Act, should be maintained as safeguards over the media as well, as he believes that the media is a part of society and should be held to the same standards.

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