

Spooked sellers push Harakah circulation down

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By Aidila Razak

Circulation of the print version of PAS bi-weekly Harakah has dipped by about 17,000 copies following seizures by the Home Ministry, representing a loss in revenue of about RM25,500, its chief editor Ahmad Lutfi Othman said.

Speaking to Malaysiakini, Lutfi said circulation started to drop since last week and has not yet picked up as sellers and distributors are afraid of taking the risk of vending the Islamic party's popular publication.

NONE"Not only are copies of Harakah siezed, the Home Ministry officers are telling the sellers that the next time Harakah is found at their premises, they will be charged in court.

"Some sellers only sell about 10 copies and earn just 20sen a copy. If they are charged in court, they can be fined RM4,000 to RM5,000. It's not a risk they are willing to take," he said.

Lutfi (right) said that in Negri Sembilan and Kedah, seizures were made at the distributors, even before the bundles of the journal were delivered to the sellers.

"It is especially problematic when the distributors get spooked by threats... I believe this is their (the government's) intention," he said, noting that the distributors and sellers were reluctant to lodge police reports on the seizures as they did not want to run foul of the authorities.

Deja vu

So far, random seizures have taken place in Kedah, Perak, Selangor, Malacca and Sabah.

"We understand the Home Ministry officers bring with them a list of shops that sell the journal, which the Harakah (management) had supplied to the ministry years ago upon its request.

NONE"The officers tell the sellers that their shops are not on the list, so that is the reason for the seizure," he said.

According to Lutfi, the bi-weekly's circulation hit a high of 180,000 copies

nationwide during the 13th general election period, and is reminiscent of similar seizures that were made in 2000.

In nationwide raids on May 22 - two weeks after the general election - Home Ministry officers seized a total of 1,408 copies of Suara Keadilan, 1,062 copies of Harakah and 70 copies of The Rocket.

The ministry said in a press statement the next day that the operation "will be continued to ensure the enforcement of the PPPA (Printing Presses and Publications Act) to ensure all quarters do not breach the Act".

Said Lutfi: "In 1998, before (then deputy prime minister) Anwar Ibrahim was sacked, we were selling about 60,000 to 70,000 copies per edition. Within a year, we were selling 300,000 to 400,000 copies per edition.

"In 2000, shortly after the 1999 general election, we faced problems with KDN (Home Ministry). This makes me believe that the intention is to curb Harakah's influence by keeping its circulation at about 100,000 and no higher."

'Home Ministry on a rampage'

Lutfi, who is also Kumpulan Aktivis Media Independen (Kami) chairperson, said since then, Harakah has been re-classified from a "newspaper" to a "newsletter", with its sale allowed only at the party premises and to party members.

He said the Harakah management has complied with the Home Ministry order by issuing a directive to all its sellers to sell only to party members.

NONEPAS has also built special display racks for Harakah where the journal is kept separately at places outside of the party premises where other newspapers are also sold. This is also in compliance with the ministry instruction.

Lutfi said the management was also contemplating a judicial review against the ministry on the recent seizures of Harakah, but was in two minds about it as such a move could also aggravate the situation against the journal.

"Some of us are even not sure about making the information about the seizures public as news that the Home Ministry is on a rampage may spook other sellers.

"I believe it is time to be rid of such (sales) restrictions as the aim of all political parties is to reach out to all rakyat, and not just their members. Harakah cannot exist merely at the discretion of the Home Ministry.

"In any case, seizures of newspapers only take place in communist countries or under dictatorships, not in democracies such as ours," Lutfi fumed

This afternoon, when questioned about this matter, Home Minister Ahmad Zahid Hamidi said these seizures were made simply because the sale of the journal was restricted to members.

Asked why seizures were made at the distribution level, before it could be established that the publications would be sold to non-members, Zahid said: "That you have to ask the person in charge of enforcement."

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