

Amnesty urges Najib and Umno to drop Mkini suit
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Rights NGO Amnesty International has joined the chorus of international bodies pressuring Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak and Umno's executive secretary Abdul Rauf Yusof to drop their lawsuit against online news portal Malaysiakini.

In a statement, Amnesty said that this is as the use of defamation laws is stifling legitimate criticism and violates the right to freedom of expression.

It said that although defamation suits against media have been used in the past by government officials and politicians, it should not be used to limit political dissent and curtail freedom of expression.

“The latest lawsuit marks yet another attack on the right to freedom of expression in Malaysia, where for years, peaceful political activists and human rights defenders have been arrested and detained under a range of draconian laws that do not comply with international human rights laws and standards.”

It said that the right to freedom of expression is enshrined in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR).

This right includes the right to “receive and impart information and ideas through any media,” it said.

It also said that the state had for a long time sought to restrict Malaysiakini's work, resulting in the portal's successful suit against the home minister over his refusal to grant a permit under the country's Printing Presses and Publications Act (PPPA).

Najib and Abdul Rauf filed a suit against Malaysiakini on June 3, over comments made by its readers in two Yoursay articles over the short lived Terengganu imbroglio following the resignation and retraction of three of its assemblypersons including former Menteri Besar Ahmad Said.

Besides Amnesty, two other international organisations namely Human Rights Watch and Reporters Without Borders have made similar calls for Najib to withdraw the suit.

Breaching UN convention

Amnesty also cited United Nations (UN) special rapporteur on the right to freedom of opinion and expression, Frank La Rue, who recognised the importance of journalism.

La Rue (right) said that journalism among other provides individuals with the necessary information to allow them to develop their own thoughts and to exercise their right to seek and receive information.

La Rue also stated that the only purpose of defamation, libel, slander and insult laws must be to protect reputations and not to prevent criticism of the government.

He also said that defamation laws should reflect the importance of open debate about matters of public interests and public figures need to have greater degrees of tolerance for criticisms.

Amnesty said the UN Human Rights Committee (UNHRC), the expert body tasked with interpreting the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) has also underlined these points.

It said the UNHRC also stated that that defamation laws “must be crafted with care to ensure that they comply with the right to freedom of expression and that they do not serve, in practice, to stifle the freedom of expression”.

“Amnesty urges the Malaysian government to reconsider its position, and take immediate steps to ratify the ICCPR, incorporate its provisions in to domestic law, and implement it in policy and practice,” the statement said.