

**Bloggers join forces to fight defamation suit
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Two Malaysian bloggers, who are being sued by the same newspaper for defamation, joined forces to fight their unprecedented lawsuits today, which have been criticised for stifling free expression.

The government-linked New Straits Times Press (NSTP) January filed suits against Ahirudin Attan and Jeff Ooi over items published on their websites last year, which criticised the newspaper and the government.

Ooi's counsel, Malik Imtiaz Sarwar, said an application was made to the High Court to merge the actions against Ahirudin and his client since their postings are "substantially the same."

He said consolidating the two cases would prevent two separate trials from being held, which risked inconsistent judgements being made.

"It would be more expedient and it would allow for a comprehensive determination by one judge of the issues involved," Malik told AFP.

"Seeing as how they are common publications, there are common issues of fact and law," he said.

Defending one case

Ooi said lawyers for both the bloggers would work together on a panel to defend the one case. The NSTP and the bloggers have agreed to a black out on giving any details or commenting on the contentious posts.

Ahirudin, who accompanied Ooi to court Wednesday, has said he may call ex-premier Mahathir Mohamad and current prime minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi as witnesses in his defence, since they are mentioned in the postings.

"Basically, joining the two cases will save Pak Lah from coming to court twice," Ahirudin said, referring to Abdullah by his popular name.

The High Court on April 24 is scheduled to consider a separate application by Ooi to strike out an interim injunction that has stopped him from publishing articles or posting comments related to the lawsuit.

Ooi writes the "Screenshots" blog, while Ahirudin blogs "Rocky's Bru."

Malaysian bloggers and media watchdogs have attacked the lawsuits, saying that they will stifle free expression in the country where the media is already tightly controlled.

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