

Abuses signal return of Mahathir era
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The laundry list of transgressions into the political and civil rights of the people by the government in 2010 signals a return to the Dr Mahathir Mohamad era, says human rights organisation Suaram.

Unveiling an overview of its Civil and Political Rights Report 2010 today, Suaram secretariat member Hasbeemasputra Abu Bakar said the violations, which included a high number of arrests for public assemblies and clampdowns on the media, were "signs of a closing society".

anti-isa vigil in petaling jaya amcorp mall "There has been very little space for dissent or alternative views that do not jive with the government.

"It's a very tricky time; things could go either way, but Suaram views the situation as a signal of the return to the Mahathir era of control over society," he said.

Intolerance of dissent was a hallmark of the Mahathir administration, Hasbeemasputra added, particularly after Operation Lalang in 1987 that saw the arrest of 106 people under the Internal Security Act (ISA) and the revocation of the printing permits of several dailies.

Credible, but failed attempts towards reform

This was followed by the Abdullah Ahmad Badawi administration, which Suaram said took a "softer" approach and had made credible, albeit failed, attempts towards reform.

But under Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak, Hasbeemasputra pointed out, three opposition mouthpieces were given show-cause letters, reporters were hauled up by the Securities Commission while newspapers and television and radio stations endured undue censorship.

Additionally, the Najib administration was moving to introduce online sedition laws, which could allow policing of dissent in cyberspace.

January, the first month of 2010, he noted, took off to a bad start with "religious chauvinism", which led to the torching of several churches and vandalism of other places of worship.

This was a recurring theme over the year, with the latest incident involving 10-year-old Basil Beginda, who was caned for bringing to school non-halal food for his own consumption.

Despite Najib's 1Malaysia campaign, controversies over racist remarks by civil servants "scarred" the year and actions against them were delayed, with the government defending the delays.

A 'below-pass' mark for 2010

Detentions without trial remain a bone of contention for Suaram, Toni Kassim book launch gathering 250609 Kua Kia Soong with secretariat member Kua Kia Soong (right) giving the government a "below pass mark" for human rights in 2010, mainly because of the existence of the ISA, Dangerous Drugs Act (DDA) and Emergency Ordinance (EO).

In its 30-page overview, Suaram noted that 25 people were still detained under the ISA, and as of February 2010, 819 have been detained under EO and 412 under the DDA.

It noted that the judiciary "continues to disappoint" by refraining to make decisions on important constitutional issues such as the jurisdiction between civil and syariah courts in the Shamala Sathiyaseelan and S Kallammal cases.

The Human Rights Commission (Suhakam) got a thumbs up for monitoring the anti-water tariff hike rally and ISA candlelight vigil, but received a ticking off for its chairperson Hasmy Agam's apparent lack of sensitivity on sexuality issues.

Similarly, while Suaram lauded the moves to enact freedom of information laws in Selangor and Penang, it noted that much of this proposed law required improvement.

Other matters highlighted were the government's failure to address the refugee issue, the alarming increase in fatal police shootings and the fact that more than 100 people were arrested for public assembly this year.

On the matter of police shootings, Suaram said it would continue to send representatives to inquest hearings and play a role in coordinating civil society to create greater awareness and put public pressure on the authorities.

Sungai Rinchang panel wins Human Rights Award

The NGO also presented its 11th Annual Human Rights Award to the Sungai Rinchang Estate Committee, which had fought for 15 years to win land and housing rights for the estate community.

NONE Accepting the award on behalf of the community was PSM secretary-general S Arutchelvam (left).

"If you travel from Semenyih to Beranang, you will see a green spot on your right. This is because of the Sungai Rinchang workers who held their ground and did not allow anyone to encroach for 15 years," he said.

Earlier, Arutchelvam gave a speech in remembrance of Suaram founding member Fan Yew Teng, who died of cancer in Bangkok on Tuesday, after which a one-minute silence was observed as a mark of respect.

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