

PKR finally gets permit for Suara Keadilan after waiting 8 years
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Home Minister Syed Hamid Albar has pledged to boost media freedom in Malaysia by promising to loosen up the government licencing regime and announced that he had approved a publishing permit for the PKR party organ. MCPX

malaysia budget 2007 2008 070907 syed hamid albar "I've just approved the Parti Keadilan Rakyat newspaper, and I asked my officers why not. I am open about it," said Syed Hamid in an interview with the Star today.

"All political parties have their own papers. It's their party paper. We have not cancelled the licences of any party newspaper," he added.

The minister, allocated this new portfolio in the recent cabinet, said his motive was moved by a quest for everyone to contribute to the nation-building process.

The party, led by Anwar Ibrahim, has been applying for a permit for almost 10 years to publish its own newsletter for its members since the formation of the party in 1999.

"Even when people talk about press freedom, for me the bottom line is that we need press freedom in order for us to have a check and balance in government.

"I want to change that paradigm. We are not trying to control you, but we want everyone to contribute to the nation-building process," Syed Hamid said in the interview.

Only one application

The former foreign minister also gave some hope for many by saying that he had instructed his officials to re-look the annual licensing requirement for newspapers.

"I have told my officers that I want to have a re-look at the Printing Presses and Publications Act so that we can move with the times.

"I have asked them to look for other ways of managing the media other than issuing the annual licences," he added, stating that he would consider an one-off printing licence for the newspapers.

"I have not discussed it with the cabinet. My view is that we should issue licences only once (upon application).

"That way, we will have the right to suspend but you don't have to renew every year. That is one of the things I've been toying with.

"My argument is why should we let ourselves become unpopular by having such regulations when we had exercised the law sparingly over the years but I need to convince more (people)."

At the moment, the annual renewals of such licences are seen as hampering the newspapers from writing anything critical of the government for fear of non-renewal of their licences.

Most recently Tamil daily Makkal Osai had its licence not renewed last week, effectively banning the daily from being printed. Syed Hamid had said that the daily had breached the ministry's guidelines for the non-renewal of the licence.

He said it was not his personal decision but one done after a lengthy observation of the way the newspaper operated.

"They breached various guidelines that are stipulated in the publication permit," he added.

Chance to regain credibility

In an immediate reaction, the Malaysian Press Institute (MPI) praised the intention of Syed Hamid to relax conditions for the licence requirement for newspapers.

Bernama reported MPI's board of trustees chairperson Azman Ujang as saying that it was a wise move to strengthen the freedom of the mainstream media which had been regarded to be under the control of the government or component parties of the ruling coalition.

He said the government's move would pave the way for the birth of more independently-owned newspapers which could enrich the democracy in the country.

As a long-term measure, Azman said the government should consider scrapping the newspaper publishing licence since the country had adequate Acts and regulations governing newspaper companies.

"Let the market forces dictate the survival of a newspaper, not the government's licence. With this, the government's image in terms of transparency and integrity will improve," Azman said.

Azman believed that with the relaxation of conditions the government intends to give, the mainstream newspapers, currently faced with the credibility crisis as compared to the freedom enjoyed by bloggers, would be able to regain their credibility and reputation.