

**Syed Hamid's media reforms not enough**  
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**Soon Li Tsin**

Home Minister Syed Hamid Albar's 'piecemeal' reforms to create a freer media environment in the country are not enough, said several press freedom groups today. MCPX

malaysia budget 2007 2008 070907 syed hamid albarThe minister in an interview with the Star over the weekend promised to review repressive media laws in a bid to boost press freedom.

As his first step towards achieving this, he granted PKR's news organ Suara Keadilan a publishing permit.

Syed Hamid also said his ministry will re-look the annual licensing requirement for newspapers under the Printing Presses and Publications Act (PPPA).

He opined that licences need to be issued only once upon application and an annual renewal will not be necessary. However, the ministry still maintains the right to suspend licenses.

Meanwhile, in an informal poll at popular search portal MSN Malaysia, 83 per cent from 793 responses at press time said the Malaysian government should consider a free press followed by 18 per cent saying otherwise.

Malaysiakini spoke to several NGOs regarding the minister's proposed reforms. Here are their views:

**V Gayathry, Centre for Independent Journalism executive director**

If the minister wants to make a meaningful change, the most absolute minimum requirement is to reinstate judicial review back into the PPPA which was removed by (former prime minister Dr) Mahathir (Mohamad) in the mid-1980s.

With judicial review, the minister will not have the final say over whether a paper's permit should be revoked or suspended. The courts can compel the ministry to explain why and how that decision was reached and the media owners would at least be able to challenge the minister's decision.

Rightfully, to have the environment of press freedom, many conditions are necessary. The ministry should take their hands off the press and should no longer call up editors to direct them. There should not be any kind of monopoly - political or corporate. There must be editorial independence and no pressure from advertisers.

The absence of these things means the least we can have is a judicial review which will act as a check and balance for the people even if it appears to be bad for the government. At the end of the day after Syed Hamid's so-called reforms, the discretionary and absolute powers are still with the minister. This is insufficient in truly reforming the press in the country.

### **Wong Chin Huat, Writers' Alliance for Independence (WAMI) chairperson**

Media reform should be done in a whole. The best and most acceptable way is to set up a parliamentary select committee to look in legislative reforms into the PPPA. Doing away with the renewal requirement does not solve the whole problem because the absolute discretion by the minister in suspending permits is still there. Reforms should mean the media need not rely solely on the minister anymore.

There should be a push for this parliamentary select committee. This renewal condition is merely a cosmetic reform and ignores the structural problems present. Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi needs to do more. After March 8, people are still questioning his leadership and in the words of New Straits Times, he needs to get on with his work.

If the PM is sincere, he should invite the opposition and press freedom groups to talk and set up the select committee. They need to discuss what kind of laws need to change and how the media system needs to be fixed. I welcome Syed Hamid's proposal but we need a whole package and not just piecemeal solutions.

### **Anil Netto, reform movement Aliran treasurer**

It is a step in the right direction but of course the minister fails to mention judicial review which is something that we want. The minister should not have the absolute power to suspend licenses arbitrarily as seen in the Makkal Osai's case where the paper has no say. Such decisions should be reviewed by the courts.

While we welcome the annual licensing reforms as it removes the hurdle for people in renewing their permits every year but it is not enough. Sure they gave Suara Keadilan a permit but what about other publications? Anybody should be given the right to register and be given a permit. Then we can move towards self-regulating media council and abolish the PPPA.

### **Suara Rakyat Malaysia (Suaram)**

Suaram acknowledges the Syed Hamid's pledge to respect press freedom and re-looking into the requirement of annual licence for the publication of newspapers. However, while welcoming this latest decision and pledge, we are also cautious as the government has on many occasions unfulfilled its pledges, and even worse, acted on the contrary.

The arbitrary banning of Makkal Osai just several days ago demonstrates the inconsistencies of the government with regard to its commitment to human rights and fundamental liberties.

The ministry has not publicly made known which of the guidelines the paper had purportedly breached. How then would the ministry's decision be accountable? Further, there is also no independent review of the decisions of the ministry.

The approval of Suara Keadilan's publication permit and the government's pledges to respect press freedom will amount to nothing if restrictive laws, particularly the PPPA are still in place. With such a restrictive legislation as the PPPA in place, newspapers and magazines are required to renew its licence annually with the Home Minister and their licences can be revoked at any time at the whims of the minister.

Suaram therefore reiterates its calls for the government to abolish the PPPA. The government should do so immediately if it is serious about upholding press freedom. Press freedom cannot be achieved by mere rhetoric and cosmetic measures without putting an end to restrictive laws.

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