

Najib: Suhakam Act review will have repercussions
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The government will take all views into consideration in efforts to improve the protection and promotion of human rights in Malaysia.
MCPX

Responding to calls by non-governmental organisations for the Human Rights Commission (Suhakam) Act 1999 to be strengthened, Deputy Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak said the government was aware of the various recommendations, including those made by Suhakam.

He said this in a speech read out today by Tourism Minister Azalina Othman at the 13th annual meeting of the Asia Pacific Forum of National Human Rights Institutions in Kuala Lumpur.

najib and suhakam" It must be kept in mind that any move to amend the Act will, of course, have repercussions and, therefore, needs to be studied carefully," said Najib, who missed the event due to his official trip to Zambia.

Last Friday, 44 non-governmental organisations called for the Suhakam Act to be amended to strengthen the body's independence and integrity.

Citing a report by the International Coordination Committee (ICC) of National Human Rights Institutions last April, the NGOs said Suhakam was given one year to submit evidence establishing its continued conformity with the 1991 Paris Principles - the international benchmark on the establishment of national human rights institutions.

Failure to provide such evidence would lead to Suhakam's downgrading from its current 'A' status to a 'B' for either failing to fully comply with the Paris Principles or for providing insufficient information to make such a determination.

'C' is reserved for countries that do not comply with the Paris Principles.

Among the reasons for the possible re-categorisation was the lack of a clear and transparent appointment and dismissal process, short tenure (two terms) and lack of "pluralism" in the make-up of Suhakam commissioners.

New rules of interpretation

When met at the Asia Pacific Forum, Suhakam chairperson Abu Talib Othman said the government must study the concerns raised "very seriously" because amending the Act was outside the scope of Suhakam.

abu talib othman interview 220807 smile Conceding that some of the recommendations pertaining to the strengthening of Suhakam had already been made by the commission itself, Abu Talib insisted however, that the body was in compliance with the Paris Principles as illustrated by its accreditation in 2002.

He asserted that the ICC was developing "new rules of interpretation", hence the re-accreditation exercise.

"What has happened is that the committee (ICC) is now developing rules of interpretation which make it appear like they are reading more into the original principles.

"The ICC is now coming up with new rules of interpretation," he told reporters on the sidelines of the forum.

He added that the accreditation review was initiated by "one NGO that made a lot of noise on a basis that was wholly unjustified".

"The ICC acted on that group alone," he lamented.

Painting a false picture

Meanwhile, one of the NGOs that had called for the government to strengthen Suhakam, expressed disappointment with Najib's failure to address the issues raised.

dap islamic state roundtable 100807 honey tanHuman rights advocacy group Empower's Honey Tan also blasted Najib for painting a false picture of the state of human rights in Malaysia.

Najib in his speech said Malaysia had made several advances in terms of the rights of its citizens in areas such as education, the judiciary, the fight against human trafficking and promoting the interests of the disabled.

Tan said the status of women, for example, had worsened.

"In 2007, Malaysia fell 20 places in the Gender Gap Index (GGI), and is now placed 92nd out of 128 countries in the world," she said in a statement.

The GGI measures women in education, politics, economy and their health status.

Citing recent legislative amendments, Tan noted that employees were now only able to claim back wages for one year after being unfairly dismissed.

Sexual and gender discrimination still existed based on a person's sexuality, she added.

"We call upon the deputy prime minister to fulfil his commitments and pledges made to the United Nations Human Rights Council to take proactive and innovative measures to further promote and protect human rights and fundamental freedoms instead of curtailing it," she added.