

**The fear campaign is on
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A series of tough measures in recent weeks has raised fears of a major crackdown against tolerance and dissent as rival political forces battle for state power in a society made fragile by economic uncertainties and decades of autocratic rule.

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bar council islamic forum controversy incident 090808 04An influential Catholic newsletter faces closure, an inter-ethnic forum on religious freedom gets forcibly disrupted, a popular book on Islam by a respected Malaysian academic is banned and a senior judge has ordered a prominent blogger to reveal his sources as well as the identities of hundreds of thousands of net users who wrote comments to his postings.

"Taken together there is a growing climate of fear and intolerance," said Yap Swee Seng, executive director of Suaram.

"Tolerance for dissent and freedom of media is narrowing," he told IPS. "What little media freedom existed is now under severe threat."

A Catholic journal The Herald faces closure because it plans to publish political commentaries and other current affairs issues that the authorities say are outside its scope - religion.

Church leaders, who are already facing the authorities in court over various issues - including the right to import bibles in the Malay language and the right to use Allah, the Arabic word for god, in their prayers - have appealed to be allowed to publish The Herald freely.

The same week authorities banned a book on Islam titled Muslim Women and Challenge of Islamic Extremism by respected Malaysian academic Prof Norani Othman, sparking outrage among Muslim feminists and civil rights activists.

Early August an inter-faith forum on the plight of families converting to Islam, that was organised by the Malaysian Bar Council, was forcibly disrupted by Muslim fundamentalists while the authorities did nothing to protect the forum's right to free assembly and speech.

The same month a senior judge ordered a prominent blogger to reveal not only his sources for three postings on his website but also the identities of hundreds of individuals who left behind comments.

Possible defections

anwar ibrahim sodomy allegation saiful bukhari azlan first day in court 070808 09Lawyers and civil rights activists say these events all point to a serious assault on freedom of media and expression on the Internet, in forums and in the mainstream media.

They said the oppression signals the beginning of the end of a liberal atmosphere that came in the wake of the 2004 general election which saw Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi winning with a huge mandate.

But the Mar 8 general election saw the government losing five state governments to the opposition and facing the possible defection of its lawmakers to opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim's camp.

Anwar - who is fighting an Aug 26 by-election battle to return to parliament after an absence of 10 years - has vowed to topple the government by Malaysia Day on Sep16 and initiate real reforms.

The hardening of attitudes and the move to curb dissent are seen as early moves to strengthen the ruling political establishment dominated by Umno - which has ruled without interruption since independence in 1957.

abdullah ahmad badawi govt announce new petrol price increase 040608 07"They (Umno) are weak while the opposition is gaining ground. The series of repressive measures must be seen in that light as an attempt to curb freedom and defend the political status quo," said a prominent lawyer who declined to be identified for fear of repercussion.

He said the court order against the website is having a negative impact on the vibrant blogging community that is said to have given readers a refreshing alternative view of politics and society and enriched the intellectual climate.

"The court order to reveal sources and identity of commentators is having a chilling effect on bloggers," the lawyer said. "They are worried that multi-million dollar sedition or defamation suits may follow."

Muslim NGOs

The Writer Alliance for Media Independence and the Centre for Independent Journalism have expressed alarm at the series of hard-line measures including the banning of the book.

"If the authorities find the book to be false or misleading then they should put up a case through rebutting it," the organisations said in a joint statement. "The government must have the courage to engage in public debate and win the battle for public opinion."

"Banning books is an act of cowardice," they said urging the repeal of the Printing Presses and Publications Act which provides for the banning of books and publication at the discretion of the authorities.

sisters in islam anti book banning book burning campaign 190808 posterThey urged Muslim NGOs to step forward and defend freedom and campaign to stop the banning of books and push the government to show accountability and transparency and openness when reviewing books on Islam.

Church leaders have come forward to condemn the repression and defend freedom of speech.

Over 30 civil rights NGOs signed a joint petition condemning the increasing repression and intolerance of dissent calling on ordinary Malaysians to rise and defend freedom and show the authorities their concern.

"We should not tolerate or condone extreme acts aimed at curbing legitimate public discussion," said Ramon Navaratnam, one of the signatories, former senior civil servant and chairman of the Malaysian chapter of Transparency International.

"We must uphold the right of Malaysians to exercise their freedom to dissent and even to engage in peaceful demonstration in defence of their concerns," he said.

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