

**Government mulls national media policy**  
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**Syed Jaymal Zahiid**

The government has not given up on its intention to create a media council as another regulatory authority over the print media in particular, despite the long-held objections of journalists.

Home Minister Syed Hamid Albar said today that the government has continued to consider this, and is also discussing a national media policy.

"The government is toying with the idea and looking at all questions pertaining to media ethics, professionalism and all that," he told a press conference today.

"We have started to draft the policy and (establish the foundations) of the National Media Council. Don't ask me when (it will be implemented). There are a lot of considerations, so we have to look at various aspects."

Asked if the implementation of the council would lead to repeal of the Printing Presses and Publications Act 1984 (PPPA), as sought by editors and journalists, the minister was non-committal.

"I don't want to jump the gun. The council will require management from both sides but I would not go as far as repealing the PPPA. We'll see what can be done," he said.

More than 900 journalists had, in a two-part petition signed between May 1999 and 2001, urged the repeal of the licensing provision of the PPPA for a start.

press freedomThey argued that this would enable the print media to play its role as a watchdog of the public interest. In return, the journalists volunteered self-regulation of the profession through an independent industry-managed body.

However, the government subsequently commissioned the Malaysian Press Institute - representing media companies but run with government funding - to draft enabling legislation to set up a media council under parliamentary supervision and funding.

Media practitioners strongly rejected the draft law, maintaining that nothing less than independent self-regulation is acceptable to the profession.

They have also insisted that any such move must be accompanied, at minimum, by simultaneous repeal of the PPPA licensing provision that controls the issuance of annual printing and publishing permits.

The PPPA has been condemned by press-freedom activists as a key instrument of government control over the print media.

Criticism of the government and politicians can be silenced because the annual permits can be revoked or not renewed at any time by ministerial order and without means of judicial review.

Given that no assurance of a repeal has been forthcoming, the creation of a media council

has been at a stalemate since a stakeholders' meeting held in 2004.

### **Unchanged reasoning**

Syed Hamid had earlier delivered a keynote speech at a colloquium on media policy, organised by the Asian Institute for Developing Communication.

He said that, due to the pluralistic nature of Malaysian society, the government has a responsibility to ensure that harmony between ethnic groups is preserved.

"We must always remember that the government has a responsibility to preserve national security and stability as these are vital to a country's survival and prosperity," he said.

"The problem arises when the media, in its quest to utilise its freedom as an unbiased channel of information, sensationalises reports with little or no nation-building value, which adversely affects peace and harmony of the nation."

Activists, however, are of the view that the government cites this as a reason to maintain power.

Apart from the PPPA, they have also demanded the repeal or review of other restrictive laws that affect the media - the Official Secrets Act, Sedition Act and Internal Security Act (ISA), among these.

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