

Deputy minister: Party organs are for party members

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Political party publications such as Suara Keadilan and Harakah have been forewarned on various occasions that their newsletters can only be sold to their members and not to the public.

However, the publications did not abide by the terms and conditions of the permit given and hence both the party organs were suspended for three months, said Deputy Home Affairs Minister Chor Chee Hueng.

Speaking to reporters in Parliament today, Chor said: "Newspapers that work as the mouthpiece of political parties must abide by the guidelines provided by the ministry no matter which party publication it is."

He explained that despite numerous reminders in the past, Harakah and Suara Keadilan have been sold at various news-stands publicly.

"Almost all newspapers printing on a party's information and activities must abide by all the regulations... Harakah and Suara Keadilan were given many warnings yet they did not abide by the limitation of the license," he added.

However, Chor said that he could not remember the number of times warning letters were sent from the ministry to the publications, but stressed that the ministry had been keeping tabs on the violations.

"For example Harakah is sold everywhere, and this has been happening for a long time without a check whether it is sold to their members or to everybody," he said.

Quizzed whether there was a need for a permit for newspapers or other publications to be distributed at news-stands, Chor said the permit acquired by the publications would have stated whether it is allowed.

Meeting with ministry officials

Once Chor was done talking to reporters, PKR and PAS leaders approached and demanded an explanation for the ban. The deputy minister once again repeated that the publication had not followed the rules.

However, he had promised to set up a meeting with the ministry's officials to settle the matter.

Chor also brushed aside claims that the suspension was a preventive action before deputy premier Najib Abdul Razak is sworn in as prime minister.

"We have already had two meetings on the matter, therefore this has nothing to do with the incoming prime minister," he said.

Asked on the declination of the permit renewal for the Chinese edition of DAP's bi-monthly, the Rocket which expired last year, Chor said: "If they had adhered to all the regulations it would not have happened... in this country it is rather free since we have so many publications."

On the other hand, PAS information chief and Harakah editor Mahfuz Omar said the suspension was a ploy to hamper the opposition's chances in the April 7 by-elections.

"This is a move done in bad faith and its motive is to impede the information that is carried in our

publications," said Mahfuz together with PKR information chief Tian Chua in Parliament.

The Pokok Sena MP said it was a desperate move by Home Minister Syed Hamid Albar in order to garner support to bag votes for his Umno vice-presidency in the party polls which begins tomorrow.

"The other candidates are lobbying for their agendas and since he (Syed Hamid) does not have one, by doing this he is trying to portray himself as a champion," said Mahfuz.

Escalating influence

Nevertheless, Mahfuz implied that the suspension only reaffirmed the escalating influence of Harakah and Suara Keadilan in shaping the mindsets of Malaysians.

Asked whether Harakah's permit restricted PAS from selling it publicly, Mahfuz claimed that the permit did not include the condition that the publication could not be sold by newspaper vendors.

Tian Chua said the ban was a reflection of former premier Dr Mahathir Mohamad's era notably his encroachment on press freedom.

"Undemocratic ways have become a trend under this establishment," he, adding that the ministry's letter banning their publication did not state any reason.

He also said party members are able to access Suara Keadilan when it is distributed through vendors.

"If those who are not members purchase it, the government should be taking action against them... besides that the government should also show evidence to back their allegation," he said.

However, Tian Chua said until their meeting with the minister, this week's issue of Suara Keadilan will be distributed accordingly.

He added that they are also exploring other legal avenues and might be filing an injunction to invalidate the suspension.