

Amendments To Draconian Press Law Are "Baby Steps"

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By Lim Kit Siang

We welcome the amendments to the Printing Presses and Publications Act (PPPA) to remove the annual licensing for newspapers as well as to provide for judicial review for the exercise of the Ministerial powers under the Act.

However, the manner in which the PPPA Amendment Bill is being rushed through Parliament, with very limited and inadequate debate in the early hours of the morning, the tabling of the Bill only on Wednesday and without any consultation with the concerned stakeholders, raise serious questions as how serious is the Prime Minister, Najib Razak in wanting to usher in a political transformation and make Malaysia the world's "best democracy".

The PPPA amendments are just "baby steps" if the Prime Minister is serious about Malaysia becoming the world's "best democracy". What we want is for the total repeal of the PPPA as there are adequate existing laws to deal with any press abuses.

Last month, the Prime Minister claimed that his three-year premiership had brought about more media freedom which has been acknowledged internationally. This is a most self-serving argument.

True, Malaysia's Press Freedom Index 2011/2012 according to international watchdog Reporters Without Borders has moved up 19 places to 122nd placing compared to 141st ranking in the 2010 index.

But this is not because of anything that Najib has done to bring about as "transformation" in media freedom in his three years as Prime Minister. In actual fact, Malaysia had performed worse in the area of press freedom in 2011 compared to the year before, with a worse score for press freedom as compared to the previous years.

Malaysia has been able to improve its press freedom ranking despite a worsening press freedom score solely thanks to the downward spirals in other countries wracked by unrest, like the 29-place plunge of Indonesia because of violence against newspapers.

Malaysia press freedom score is miles behind top Asian country Japan, ranking 22nd out of 179 countries, and second highest-ranked Asian country Hong Kong at number 54.

There have been many negative developments inimical to the expansion of media freedom in the past year under Najib's premiership, including:

Malaysia was again refused a newspaper licence.

A television cameraman died on duty in hostile conditions in a needless and shadowy adventure sponsored by a member of the Prime Minister's Department.

Nanyang Siang Pau and the Star were hounded by the Home Ministry for errors that impinged on religious sensitivities, while Utusan Malaysia whipped up racial and religious tensions with abandon.

Media Prima took over the New Straits Times Press, and the prime minister's press secretary was appointed to a senior editorial position to supervise NSTP newspapers, further concentrating press ownership and control.

This is why journalist organisations in the country are unimpressed with the PPPA amendments and are calling for an outright repeal of the law.

Centre for Independent Journalism (CIJ) executive director Masjaliza Hamzah noted that printing permits would still be required and that the minister would have the right to revoke or suspend them. This means that the government would still have effective control over the print media as the Executive will make the decisions on who gets a permit.

The proposed amendments also do not address the fact that most major Malaysian newspapers are owned by political parties.

CIJ said: "The PPPA in its entirety should be repealed and newspapers should be free to publish without the need for a government permit. There are sufficient laws in place to deal with newspapers that publish false news without the need for ministerial oversight."

National Union of Journalists (NUJ) secretary-general V Anbalagan is of the same view. He said the print media was already losing ground to online media and maintaining the current law would not stop the readership slide.

He said: "The amendments are baby steps forward and we're hoping that the government doesn't rush through it. We don't want piecemeal solutions this time.

"Licences for newspapers should be completely and unconditionally removed. If the newspaper or a journalist has committed an offence then, let the courts deal with it."

Is the government prepared to heed these calls for genuine media freedom reforms?

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