

S'pore legal power challenged

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SINGAPORE: The *Far Eastern Economic Review* (FEER), whose editor and publisher are being sued for defamation by two of Singapore's leaders, has questioned the authority of the Southeast Asian city-state's courts to hear the suits, the defendants' lawyer said yesterday.

The suits filed on Aug 22 by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong and his father, Lee Kuan Yew, centre on an article published in July about Chee Soon Juan, an opposition activist in Singapore.

A high court will hold a hearing on Oct 25 at the request of Review Publishing Company Ltd and *Review* editor Hugo Restall to decide if the Singapore court had the jurisdiction to hear the cases, according to court documents filed by Peter Low, the defendants' lawyer in Singapore.

Because the *Review* is a

Hong-Kong-based monthly which does not have any employees in Singapore, the defendants are challenging the right of the Singapore court to

enforce damages outside of the city-state, as well as the way the Lees served their legal papers on the two parties overseas.

In the *Review* article that the Lees say defamed them, Restall wrote about Chee's campaign for more democratic freedoms in the tightly controlled city-state and how the ruling party has sued a number of opposition politicians.

The article also criticised the government's handling of a corruption scandal at a charity, the National Kidney Foundation.

Singapore's government later banned the *Review*, which has more than 1,000 subscribers in Singapore, because it did not appoint a legal representative and pay a S\$200,000 (RM460,000) security bond — new requirements that are unrelated to the suit, and which the *Review* has called unjustified.

In comments reported by Singapore's *The Straits Times* newspaper yesterday, Restall said the magazine planned to

defend the suit and hoped it would send a message to other countries such as China about controls over the media.

"That's one reason why it's important to fight this case, to prevent China from believing that if it adopts the Singaporean model, the international media is going to roll over and accept that, and tone down its coverage," Restall was quoted as saying in a talk on Monday to the Foreign Correspondents' Club in Beijing.

Singapore's leaders have drawn criticism over several successful defamation suits in past years against journalists and political opponents.

The leaders say they have sued to defend their personal and professional reputations. The elder Lee, Singapore's founding prime minister, still wields considerable influence under the title of Minister Mentor in the Cabinet. — AP