

'M'sians not yet interested in press freedom'

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KUALA LUMPUR: Malaysians will only be interested in press freedom issues when they become concerned with rights-based issues instead of asking for more street lamps and better roads, MCA Youth central committee member and Kota Melaka MP Wong Nai Chee said yesterday.

Noting that press freedom was also not on the forefront of any political agenda, he said: "It may take another 10 to 20 years before rights-based issues such as press freedom are brought up, but I am quite optimistic actually."

"There are many ways that political reforms are generated. Take, for instance, reforms in the police force, which used to be talked about extensively," he said at the Asian Institute for Development Communication forum to commemorate World Press Freedom Day.

The Independent Police Complaints and Misconduct Commission was now under serious consideration, Wong noted, adding that this would be the same path which would one day lead to press freedom.

He said the press here was still considered integral to internal security - and not as a means to facilitate social or education policies - and hence was placed under the purview of the Internal Security Ministry.

Wong, a lawyer by profession, said: "The Printing Presses and Publications Act 1984 was actually an Act meant to combat communism. However, it was overhauled in 1984 to curb offences pertaining to national and public interests, public order and public morality."

He noted that under the Act,

printing and publishing permits, which were issued annually, could be revoked by the government anytime.

"Even published photographs are subject to this scrutiny. Sometimes, it could be for reasons such as a photograph of a leader looking tired and haggard being published and so on," he said.

Wong called for a parliamentary select committee to be set up to reform laws that controlled the media such as the Printing Presses and Publications Act, the Penal Code, the Sedition Act and the Internal Security Act.

"I don't agree with absolute freedom, because we need to ensure that media content does not compromise public interest, especially in a country like ours which is multi-racial and multi-religious," he said.

Wong agreed to some level of regulation, and lauded suggestions for an impartial, apolitical and independent media council to be set up.

The Writers Alliance for Media Independence (Wami) echoed the call for a parliamentary select committee to be set up, and also called for a Freedom of Information Act and anti-monopoly regulations to be put in place.

In a statement, Wami noted that according to US-based Freedom House's annual index, Malaysia ranked worse as a media-friendly country this year compared to last year, and was currently trailing behind the Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand, Cambodia and East Timor.

It said that Malaysians were 10 times richer than East Timorese and four times richer than Cambodians but enjoyed much less press freedom.

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-Wong