

Home Minister: No talk of abolishing ISA
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By Lisa J. Ariffin

PUTRAJAYA, Sept 13 — Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Hussein denied today speculation that the government will abolish the Internal Security Act (ISA) — a possible indication of resistance among security officials and right-wing elements in Umno to purported plans by the prime minister to repeal the controversial law.

Despite talk coming from sources in Datuk Seri Najib Razak's office in recent days that the PM was mulling a repeal of the law which provides for detention without trial, the home minister insisted today that the law would only be "adjusted and amended."

"There is no talk about abolishing ISA. Who has been saying that?" he asked reporters today following a meeting with former police chiefs at the home ministry.

"This is not new, and the debate goes on. There is a review of the Act, but I won't give you the details now," Hishammuddin said.

On Monday, The Malaysian Insider reported that Najib could dismantle the ISA as early as this week as he seeks to gain new momentum ahead of a general election expected within a year.

Najib came to power in April 2009 with the promise of reviewing the security law but the prime minister, whose reform credentials are seriously in question after a series of decision flip-flops, is considering going all the way by abolishing the law that allows detention without trial.

Despite resistance from within the government, Najib's advisers are understood to have told the PM that he needs to make a drastic move to win back middle Malaysia.

In recent days, the idea of abolishing the ISA has also been floated by the PM's advisers through reports in the Singapore Straits Times and international news service Reuters. "The move is aimed at finding a better balance between civil liberties and national security which has been a key pledge of the government, and it is important that we get this done before the next general elections," a source told Reuters today.

A legacy of Malaysia's fight against communists, the ISA allows for the indefinite detention of people seen as a threat to national security but critics say it has become little more than a government tool to quell dissent.

The review is part of a series of changes that Najib promised when he took office in 2009 and comes amid increasing market speculation of snap polls late this year or in early 2012.

The ruling Barisan Nasional coalition is seeking to appease voters who abandoned it during 2008 polls on complaints over the slow pace of promised reforms.

Najib released 13 detainees under the ISA when he assumed office.

Analysts said despite the proposed changes, the government would still have tools at its disposal to suppress critics, including sedition laws.

Hishammuddin declined today to comment further on the issue except to say that the law would be amended.

“This has been an ongoing process. The statute is man-made and will be amended and adjusted according to the means of the day. It is not something we cannot change,” he said.

He, however, added that “we are looking at all possibilities. Something concrete will come up, but not now.”

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