

Mat Sabu charge violates free speech tenets, say rights groups
The Malaysian Insider
September 21, 2011
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KUALA LUMPUR, Sept 21 — Human rights groups nationwide today condemned the authorities for charging PAS deputy president Mohamad Sabu with criminal defamation, calling such a move a clear violation of human rights and free speech.

The groups said the use of the antiquated law sparks concerns that the government was not serious in implementing legal reforms, even after Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak's announcement last week that the Internal Security Act (ISA) and other security laws would be repealed to give Malaysians more freedom.

Mohamad, popularly known as Mat Sabu, claimed today to a criminal defamation charge of glorifying communist guerrillas and defaming policemen and soldiers who defended the Bukit Kepong police station in 1950.

"It is certainly a violation of human rights and could be a violation of free speech as all he did was express a different view of history," Bar Council Human Rights Committee chairman Andrew Khoo told The Malaysian Insider.

"It puts a damper on anyone who thinks of arbitrating a view that goes against the norm. Just because people didn't like what he said, does it make it criminal? I can't see where the criminal intent is," the lawyer stressed.

Suara Rakyat Malaysia (Suaram) director Dr Kua Kia Soong called it "ridiculous" to charge someone for merely interpreting a part of the country's history that was still being debated.

"Recent history professors have shown views on colonisation that were at odds with most people in this country. Are they going charge them as well?"

"Charging Mat Sabu is the ultimate in dishonesty and injustice because it was only his interpretation of history," Kua told The Malaysian Insider.

The Suaram director said that Mohamad's prosecution showed that the government continues to overlook important areas of democratic reform such as freedom of assembly, freedom of association and freedom of expression.

Human Rights Commission of Malaysia (Suhakam) commissioner Muhammas Sha'ani Abdullah said that the charge was unjustified as Mohamad did not break any law.

"The claim that we have 1,000 police reports does not justify a charge to be made against a citizen for just voicing his opinion. There should be a clear threat to public safety, otherwise it will prevent discussions and debate in the country," he said to The Malaysian Insider.

Umno's Utusan Malaysia had first accused the maverick politician of glorifying Ahmad Indera in an August 27 report that quoted Mohamad as saying that the communist leader was a true hero.

The PAS leader denies the accusation, saying he never mentioned "communism" in his speech.

He faces two years in prison and a fine if convicted.

Najib announced a raft of reforms last week to give Malaysians more freedom but Mohamad's prosecution has renewed fears of a crackdown against dissent.

Opposition politicians are convinced that the Najib administration will continue to prosecute its rivals despite the prime minister's reform pledges, pointing out plans to replace the ISA with two new security laws.

The charge of criminal defamation was also used in 2008 against controversial blogger Raja Petra Kamarudin, who claimed that Najib and his wife were involved in the murder of Mongolian woman Altantuya Shariibuu.

DAP chairman Karpal Singh was also charged under the Sedition Act for remarks he made in relation to political changes in Perak.

The Malaysian Insider

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