

Kit Siang wants special committee on assembly law
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KUALA LUMPUR, Nov 24 — Lim Kit Siang today called for a parliamentary select committee (PSC) to be formed to study the new Bill regulating public assembly, claiming that the proposed law fails to guarantee reforms promised by the government.

The government had earlier this week tabled the Peaceful Assembly Bill, two months after Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak first pledged reforms to laws on security and public assembly.

“We hope that the Peaceful Assembly Bill is withdrawn. If not that, at least refer it to a parliamentary select committee so that all stakeholders may study it and offer their opinions,” the DAP parliamentary leader told Parliament.

Lim (picture) said the Bill should be carefully scrutinised before it was passed, and that it should not be rushed.

“(Even with the Bill), there is still this perception that the police can limit the rights for freedom of assembly,” added the Ipoh Timur MP.

Shortly after it was unveiled, Pakatan Rakyat (PR) leaders said the new Bill was “worse” than previous laws on public assembly, and that it simply meant “people could not gather anywhere in Malaysia.”

PR described the Bill as repressive and restrictive of civil freedom, claiming it accords the police even more power to arrest individuals.

Najib today declared it a “revolutionary” law and a “giant leap” towards improving individual freedom.

The prime minister pointed out to opposition lawmakers in Parliament that under the new legislation the powers of the police would be capped and punitive action against protestors reduced to only fines instead of jail sentences.

Section 27 of the Bill states that public gatherings cannot be held in the following areas: petrol stations, hospitals, fire stations, airports, railways, land public transport terminals, ports, canals, docks, bridges, places of worship, kindergartens and schools as well as dams and reservoirs.

It states that no street protests are allowed, and bars any assembly in or within a 50-metre buffer zone around the listed prohibited areas.

Section 9 (5) of the Bill allows the police to fine organisers up to RM10,000 if no advance notice of a planned assembly is given to the authorities.

Section 20 (1) (c) allows for police to arrest anyone who brings or recruits children in an assembly.

Section 21 (3) allows protesters arrested by police to be fined up to RM20,000.

The new law says that there also must be 30 days' advance notice for assemblies except for designated areas defined by the home minister. The assemblies can then proceed unless there is objection by the police.

Simultaneous assemblies may be held, but this is subject to the discretion of the police. If a "counter assembly" should cause potential conflict with another assembly nearby, police have the right to name an alternative location and time for the counter assembly to be held.

Individuals under 21 years of age not allowed to organise assemblies and children under 15 are not allowed to participate in assemblies except for cultural and religious ones like funeral corteges or events approved by the home minister.

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