

WSJ: Najib 'barely keeping up' with political reform demands
The Malaysian Insider
April 11, 2012
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KUALA LUMPUR, April 11— Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak is "barely keeping up" with reform demands despite promising to lead Malaysia into an era of fair political competition, the Wall Street Journal said today.

The influential daily said in an editorial today that while the Security Offences (Special Measures) Bill tabled yesterday represented "real progress", it was still "too broad" and could be abused for political purposes.

It also noted that the Bill was only one of two laws meant to replace the Internal Security Act (ISA) and that a second Bill on racial hate laws that could prove to be even more contentious had yet to be tabled in Parliament.

"Since affirmative action policies favouring the Malay majority are a major political issue, will politicians be detained during key periods for criticising them or organising peaceful demonstrations?" the paper said.

"Mr Najib could have shown more sincerity and avoided these problems if he had allowed public consultation on the ISA reforms. Instead he has tabled this bill with the clear intention of passing it as quickly as possible."

The WSJ also cited opposition claims that while the Najib administration had shied away from using the ISA in recent years, it had still used the Sedition Act against political opponents.

The prime minister's introduction of the Peaceful Assembly Act and amendments to the Police Act to allow public assembly was also "only a slight improvement" on balance, it pointed out.

"Mr Najib raised expectations last year when he promised to lead Malaysia into a new era of free and fair political competition. So far he is barely keeping up with society's demands for change," the paper said.

"He deserves credit for overcoming resistance from the reactionary wing of Umno and dragging the party into the modern era. The voters will soon have a chance to decide whether they trust Mr Najib enough to give him a mandate to do more, or whether the opposition should take his reforms to fruition."

The ISA replacement law was tabled in the Dewan Rakyat yesterday, removing the government's option to detain without trial and providing a maximum detention of 28 days for investigation purposes.

Under the ISA, an individual believed to have committed a security offence can be detained for up to two years without trial, on orders from the home minister.

The Security Offences (Special Measures) Bill, tabled for first reading by de facto law minister Datuk Seri Nazri Aziz, states that "all security offences shall be tried by the High Court".

The Bill seeks to provide for "special measures" relating to security offences for the purpose of maintaining public order and security, and for connected matters.

The new law also notably states that no individual can be arrested solely for his political belief or any political activity, as promised by Najib in September last year when he announced a raft of reforms aimed at increasing civil liberties.

But the Bill, the first of two laws that will replace the ISA, still allows the police to arrest and detain "any person whom he has reason to believe to be involved in security offences" without warrant for 24 hours for investigation.

The Malaysian Bar has criticised the Bill for its wide definition of security offences and its "radical departure" from ordinary rules of evidence, which may negatively impact on the right of an accused to a fair trial.

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