

**Media law amended amid opposition uproar for its repeal**  
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**By Clara Chooi**

KUALA LUMPUR, April 20 — Parliament approved in a hurried fashion early this morning a critical legislative amendment governing media freedom, agreeing to strip Putrajaya of its absolute powers over publishing licences and scrapping the need for annual renewal of the permits.

The Printing Presses and Publications (Amendment) Bill 2012 was approved by the Lower House at 2.15am even after federal opposition lawmakers raged against the inconvenient hour and short time given to debate the law.

Lim Kit Siang (picture) (DAP-Ipoh Timor), who took the floor first to open the policy stage debate, thundered to the Dewan Rakyat that the amendments were merely “baby steps” towards greater media freedom.

The septuagenarian, speaking off-the-cuff with his hands locked behind his back, was in top form as he kicked off his speech by accusing the Barisan Nasional (BN) government of being insincere in its promises to reform crucial policies.

“The Bill, that it has to be debated in such a short time, shows that the government is not interested in political transformation. And it was done without consultation... all this talk of transformation is just political mimicry,” he said.

The experienced Lim, who has seen through the harsher days of Malaysia’s restrictive media laws, said that the PPPA amendments fell short of Datuk Seri Najib Razak’s pledges for media freedom.

“The PPPA in its entirety should be repealed! Abolish PPPA! And newspapers should be free to publish without a need for government permit.

“There are sufficient laws in place to deal with newspapers that publish false news without need for ministerial review,” he said.

Lim then read off a checklist of instances which he accused the government of abusing its powers to usurp press freedom.

“Malaysiakini was again refused newspaper licence — why? Why be so afraid to issue a newspaper licence to Malaysiakini?

“A television cameraman died on duty in hostile conditions, in a needless and showy adventure sponsored by a member of the PM’s Department.

“Nanyang Siang Pau and The Star were hounded by the Home Ministry for errors that impinged on religious sensitivities while Utusan Malaysia whipped up racial and religious sentiments with abandon. Why?” he charged.

"The police hounded a young blogger who made facetious remarks of people in high places when there were reports already carried by other blogs.

"Media Prima took over the New Straits Times Press and PM's press secretary was appointed to a senior editorial position to supervise NSTP newspapers, further concentrating press ownership and control," he added.

The DAP adviser also cited statements from the National Union of Journalists (NUJ) and the Centre for Independent Journalism (CIJ), both which had criticised the PPPA amendments as lacking in true reform.

The CIJ, he said, had pointed out that despite the amendments, newspapers would still be required publishing permits and the home minister would still have the power to revoke or suspend them.

"This control would still give powers to the executive to decide who gets the permit," Lim said.

"We welcome these minor amendments but the fact that the PPPA needs to be amended and the push to do so by the government itself shows that the law is outdated and needs a complete review," he added.

Further to this, Lim said the PPPA amendments were still silent over media ownership, pointing out that most major Malaysian media are owned by leading political parties.

His comment earned loud table thumps from the opposition bench and shouts of "Yeah!" from those in agreement.

Cutting in, Nurul Izzah Anwar (PKR-Lembah Pantai) told the House that she had earlier received notice that her motion calling for the repeal of the PPPA had been rejected.

"What is your view, do you think there is no political will from the present government to truly implement political reforms as promised a short while back?" she asked Lim.

"Clearly there is no political will to bring political transformation.

"What we are seeing are baby steps. Baby steps towards the coming elections," Lim responded even as the House erupted with shouts of disagreement from the BN backbenchers.

After several other MPs rose to debate, the Bill, the last of eight slotted in yesterday's Order Paper, was later pushed through committee stage and approved by the Dewan Rakyat by voice vote.

The sitting, said to be the final before elections, had to be extended via a "stop the clock" motion after midnight yesterday to accommodate debates on all the Bills on the agenda.

The PPPA is seen as a major obstacle for press freedom in Malaysia, where most print news media are either owned or indirectly controlled by the ruling coalition.

The amendments passed include a provision "... to remove the reference to the minister's 'absolute discretion' in granting or refusing a printing press licence. This amendment also

seeks to remove the power of the minister to specify in the licence the period of validity of such licence”.

The amendments also remove the home minister’s absolute discretion on whether to allow newspapers from Singapore, so far barred from Malaysia, to be distributed here.

The Bill also adds that “a person who has been granted a licence or permit... shall be given an opportunity to be heard before a decision to revoke or suspend” the permission is made.

Prime Minister Najib announced in his Malaysia Day address last year that Putrajaya would amend the PPPA so newspapers no longer had to apply for a yearly printing permit.

Critics claim the federal requirement encourages newspapers to self-censor and is largely responsible for eroding the independence of the media.

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