

Bill tabled to remove renewal, minister's discretion over print permits
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KUALA LUMPUR, April 18 — Amendments to remove the home minister's absolute discretion over publishing licences and the need for annual renewals in the Printing Presses and Publications Act (PPPA) were tabled today, continuing Datuk Seri Najib Razak's reform push in the final days of the current parliamentary sitting.

If passed, as expected by the Barisan Nasional (BN) majority, the Bill will allow legal challenges against the home minister's decision to grant, refuse, revoke or suspend printing licences.

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

"... 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," reads the explanatory notes for the Bill.

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. The Bill was tabled for its first reading this morning by Deputy Home Minister Datuk Abu Seman Yusop.

Prime Minister Najib announced in his Malaysia Day address last year that Putrajaya would amend the PPPA so newspapers would no longer need 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.

If MPs pass the law by the end of the current sitting, which ends tomorrow, it will likely complete all of Najib's promised reforms after a Bill to allow undergraduates to join political parties was also tabled earlier.

The raft of reforms began with the repeal of the Banishment and Restricted Residence Acts in October.

But some initiatives, such as the Peaceful Assembly Act and the replacement for the just-repealed Internal Security Act, have been criticised by the opposition and civil society as being more draconian or opening the door to other abuses.

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