

Anwar to Najib: Make stand on preventive laws clear
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By Lisa J. Ariffin

KUALA LUMPUR, July 18 — Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim today urged the prime minister to make a clear stand on preventive legislation instead of making cosmetic changes to existing laws.

The opposition leader made this statement when asked to comment on the proposed National Harmony Act that is set to replace the Sedition Act.

“The fundamental issue is whether you do support or not draconian acts,” Anwar (picture) told a press conference today after testifying today in his defamation suit against Umno-owned newspaper Utusan Malaysia.

“If you say no, it is not a question of introducing a new act to replace or to amend,” he added.

His lawyer and PKR vice-president N. Surendran pointed out Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak’s administration “has a track record of promising to bring about new acts that will make it more liberal and reduce oppressiveness of law”.

“But they have always disappointed the people by coming up with worse acts,” he said, citing the Peaceful Assembly Act as an example.

“So with the National Harmony Act you can expect more of the same because no details have been given and it looks almost similar to the older Sedition Act,” he added.

Surendran said the new act will “still give powers to the government to criminalise people because of free speech”.

Anwar agreed with his peer, and said, “It (the act) has a different name, but same hard effect.”

“Also, they’re selective of who they want to prosecute,” he claimed.

“Groups that are pro-Umno who make defamatory and racist statements are ignored, but when other groups do the same, they will take action,” he added.

Earlier this month, Najib announced his intention to repeal the Sedition Act 1948, in his latest move to regain the momentum for reforms ahead of elections that must be held soon.

He said the 64-year-old law would be replaced with a National Harmony law.

Following the prime minister’s Malaysia Day address last year, the Najib administration repealed the Internal Security Act 1960 (ISA), lifted three Emergency Declarations and enacted the Peaceful Assembly Act to regulate public gatherings.

The government has also scrapped the need for annual printing licences in the Printing Presses and Publications Act 1984 and lifted the ban on student participation in politics through amendments to the University and University Colleges Act 1971.

Human Rights Watch said it was eyeing with caution the government's plan to replace the Sedition Act 1948 with a National Harmony law, saying that other "repressive" laws had been replaced with laws just as "bad or worse".

It said the Sedition Act was "clearly a rights-abusing law" and the replacement law needs to be "consistent with international human rights standards."

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