

Asean leaders to get report on Malaysia's crackdown on freedom, says human rights group

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Sedition charges against cartoonist Zunar and other curbs imposed by Putrajaya on freedom of expression will be detailed in Human Rights Watch's (HRW) report on Malaysia that will be given to every Asean leader at the regional summit in November.

HRW deputy director for Asia Phil Robertson said that the report, due to be released sometime in September or October, will be on the desk of every leader flying into Malaysia for the summit, which Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak will host as Asean's chairman.

Robertson said the report will cover Putrajaya's onslaught against free expression using laws such as the Sedition Act and of late, Section 124B of the Penal Code.

"Quite clearly, the government is hell bent to silence critics to ensure the only voices heard are those who support the government.

"We will make sure that report is on the desk of every leader that is flying into Malaysia for the Asean summit so they have a clear idea about the kinds of human rights violations that are taking place in the host nation of the Asean leaders summit this year," Robertson said at a press conference in Petaling Jaya today.

Malaysia will host the 27th Asean summit as current chair of the regional group.

Robertson added that HRW has also written to the Home Ministry with questions on the its crackdown on freedom of expression, including whether it would drop charges that are no longer criminal under the revised Sedition Act.

"Our view is that they should (drop charges) but we want to know if the government would do so."

Recent amendments to the Sedition Act no longer make it a criminal offence to criticise the administration of justice and the government.

Zunar's lawyer Latheefa Koya, who was present at the press conference, today said that following these amendments, the case against Zunar should be dropped.

The changes to law, however, have not been enforced.

Zunar, whose real name is Zulkiflee Anwar Ulhaque, was charged for a series of tweets he made on February 10, the day former opposition leader Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim was sentenced to jail for sodomy by the Federal Court.

The tweets were in relation to the hearing of Anwar's appeal.

Latheefa said if the judges felt insulted by the remarks, there could have been contempt proceedings initiated instead of charging the cartoonist for sedition.

"To bring those tweets under the Sedition Act is grossly wrong and unjust when none of them had any seditious tendency."

Court mention for Zunar's case will be on September 9. – August 18, 2015.

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