

Legal team to review anti-fake news act - Gobind Singh

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PUTRAJAYA, May 22 (Bernama) -- The Communications and Multimedia Ministry will set up a legal team to consider whether to amend or repeal the Anti-Fake News Act 2018 that was passed in April this year, said the new minister, Gobind Singh Deo.

Gobind Singh, a lawyer himself, said he would sit together with the team to look into matters related to the Act before submitting a proposal to Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

"I think a lot of people want to know what fake news is, who decides that. I have always maintained that the Anti-Fake News Act was put through Parliament in a rush. It was not well thought over. At the end of the day, these laws are too broad and capable of being abused."

"This is the reason why I said we need to look into it," said the Puchong MP, who clocked in at 8.15 am at the ministry today.

Gobind Singh, attired in a black suit with a red striped tie, was greeted by the ministry's secretary-general Tan Sri Dr Sharifah Zarah Syed Ahmad and other senior officers. Also present was Malaysian National News Agency (Bernama) chief executive officer Datuk

Zulkefli Salleh.

When pointed out that other countries were using the Anti-Fake News Act as a platform to prevent the spread of misinformation, Gobind Singh said that even before the Anti-Fake News Act was passed there were other laws in place in Malaysia which could deal with a fake-news situation if it arose.

"The question is whether we can tweak those laws. This is the problem that exists (with regard to) the need for media regulation today. Our concern was when the tabling of the Bill by the previous government was done in haste and was not well thought over. The law can be misinterpreted, and I don't think that is how a law should be made."

"The law must be specific so that judges and investigators, who need to apply the law later, must understand it. That is why we must move forward," he said, adding that he would engage with non-governmental bodies and media agencies to hear their views as well.

Besides the Anti-Fake News Act, Gobind Singh said, there were also other laws that needed to be looked into such as the Sedition Act, the Printing Presses and Publications Act, the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission Act, and areas in the Penal Code which restricted freedom of speech.

He said it was a different approach by the Pakatan Harapan government, to be fully committed to building a system whereby media reporting was done without fear or favour.

"These are Acts I am looking at and, hopefully, when we consider repealing or amending the law, we want to get feedback from reporters. Many reporters have come up individually and told me about ways to improve some laws."

"Criticisms are welcome. We want to move forward and want to know honest opinions. Reporters can come and see me, to see how we can move forward," Gobind Singh said.

Asked if some laws were redundant, he said the ministry would streamline laws that were redundant and overlapping since the Federal Constitution also mentioned freedom of speech and expression.

"Of course, there is no absolute freedom since there is a boundary in the law as stated in the Constitution itself. We need to look at how the laws need to be updated as technology and media reporting is moving fast compared to 20 years ago. These areas are important. These laws need to be revised to be brought up to date, and there's a greater need for freedom of the press," he said.

Gobind Singh said the establishment of a media council and enhancing media freedom were among his main agendas as spelt out in the Pakatan Harapan election manifesto and which had to be delivered within the first 100 days of the new administration.

"Media freedom is my priority. I have given my commitment again that there will be

freedom on the part of the reporters to report news as it is. I was informed that all this while there have been certain constraints imposed on how the news will be reported. The content is always there but what comes out has always been questionable," he said.

On the setting up of a media council, Gobind Singh said he would discuss the matter with Dr Mahathir before moving ahead as several issues needed to be ironed out.

Discussions are ongoing on the proposals and how it should be formed, who it should consist of, and its terms of reference. The most important thing is to deliver at the end of the day," he said after he had attended a briefing for almost two hours.

On the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission, Gobind Singh said that although there could be some changes, he would review several laws and look into problems following several complaints against the MCMC recently.

Gobind Singh said the ministry also discussed ways to improve broadband services, on which it had received numerous complaints, to see if the ministry could double the speed with half the price to benefit Malaysians in the long run.

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