

Online site refused print licence despite court ruling

KUALA LUMPUR, MALAYSIA: Malaysia has refused to grant a print license to a news portal often critical of the government despite a landmark court ruling in the site's favour in a case spotlighting the government's curbs on press freedom.



Malaysiakini.com's Editor-in-Chief Steven Gan says that the company will not give up its battle to be granted a licence to publish printed copies of its controversial news. Image: Malaysiakini.

In a letter last week, the Home Ministry informed Malaysiakini.com it had rejected its application for a permit to publish a newspaper, as its news coverage often causes controversy and is not neutral.

"Such news, if published in the print format, will cause shock and distress among the people and could cause hatred towards national leaders," said the letter.

The government - dominated by a majority ethnic Malay party, which has controlled the multi-racial country since 1957 - maintains a tight rein on traditional media, which remains decidedly pro-government.

Websites such as Malaysiakini.com have over the past decade rapidly gained a following in the internet-literate nation with reports on government malfeasance, abuses and persistent corruption, filling a growing demand for alternative news sources.

Appeals court overturns permit ruling

Last year, an appeals court upheld a lower court's ruling that the government improperly curbed freedom of expression by denying Malaysiakini.com a printing permit.

But the ruling United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) is implementing a broad clampdown on freedom of speech that has seen dozens of people, mostly opposition politicians or activists, targeted with sedition investigations or other charges.

Malaysian human rights group Suaram said at least 39 people have been investigated, charged or convicted under the British colonial-era Sedition Act this year alone, with new charges emerging on an almost-daily basis.

Prime Minister Najib Razak in June launched a defamation suit against Malaysiakini.com over criticisms of his government in the site's reader's comment pages.



Malaysia's Prime Minister Najib Razak is believed to be behind the curbs to halt press freedom in the country. Image: Wikipedia

Malaysiakini.com Editor-in-Chief Steven Gan said the portal would seek a court order to compel the home ministry to issue the permit.

"We want to make the point that we have a right to publish. We know it's going to be a long haul," Gan told AFP.

Malaysia's Internet remains largely uncensored stemming from a 1990s promise made to encourage foreign high-technology companies to invest in the country.

Capitalising on growing yearnings for clean government and civil liberties, the opposition stunned UMNO by winning a majority of the popular vote in elections last year, though the regime clung to control of parliament.

Source: AFP via I-Net Bridge

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