

Malaysia scraps 'fake news' law used to stifle free speech

Thursday 13 September 2018, by [ELLIS-PETERSEN Hannah](#) (Date first published: 17 August 2018).

Critics say legislation was deployed during Najib Razak's time in office to silence criticism

[Malaysia](#) has repealed its "fake news" law, the first country in the world to roll back such legislation.

The law was introduced in March by the previous prime minister Najib Razak, and was widely condemned at the time as an assault on free speech and a tool to muzzle critics from discussing [scandals such as 1MDB](#). Najib is now facing up to 125 years in jail if found guilty of corruption.

Najib's government set out fines of up to 500,000 ringgit (\$122,000) and jail time of up to six years for anything the government defined as "fake news". Scrapping the law became a key election promise for the opposition, led by 93-year-old Mahathir Mohamad, who [took power after a surprise election victory](#) in May.

Mahathir himself was investigated under the fake news law just before the election after he claimed people working for the Najib's administration were responsible for "sabotaging" his plane, almost preventing him from registering as an election candidate.

At a parliamentary vote, the opposition alliance voted to repeal the law after a three-hour debate. Minister Mohamed Hanipa Maidin said the police would instead be given new powers in order to deal with the spread of the "phenomenon" of fake news.

Rights group and press freedom advocates welcomed the vote. "This is a law that was clearly designed to silence criticism of the authorities and to quell public debate - it should never have been allowed to pass in the first place," said Teddy Brawner Baguilat, a board member of Asean Parliamentarians for Human Rights.

"The Committee to Protect Journalists applauds the government of prime minister Mahathir Mohammad for following through on its campaign pledge to repeal the 'fake news' law that blatantly threatened freedom of the press," said Steven Butler, the CPJ's Asia program coordinator.

Malaysia was the first country in south-east Asia to introduce a fake news law and rights groups feared it set a worrying precedent for the region, with the Philippines, Singapore and Cambodia all claiming they too were going to table legislation tackling the problem - though none have yet been passed. Baguilat added that the decision to repeal the law "sends a signal to the wider region that positive human rights change is within reach".

It was a view echoed by Butler. "We hope other nations will follow Malaysia's lead in overturning laws that enable governments to decide what is news," he said.

Malaysia still has draconian sedition laws, and laws restricting press freedom, which were often

used during Najib's time in office. However, in a possible sign of a shift in Malaysia, all charges were recently dropped against controversial Malaysian cartoonist [Zunar](#), who faced nine sedition charges for his critically satirical cartoons of Najib and his wife, Rosmah Mansor. His books have been allowed to go back on sale for the first time in almost a decade.

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