

Malaysia: Human rights regressed under PN govt - report

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The Human Rights Watch's (HRW) World Report 2021 released yesterday said human rights in Malaysia deteriorated under the Perikatan Nasional government, which it said aggressively cracked down on freedom of speech and peaceful assembly as well as made attacks on the media.

"The ruling coalition halted the Pakatan Harapan government's faltering human rights reform movement.

"Freedom of expression and freedom of the press came under attack immediately after a change of government when authorities opened a sedition investigation into activist Fadhiah Nadwa Fikri for organising a protest against the method by which the new government came to power," the report states.

"Since then, authorities have opened investigations into numerous activists and opposition politicians for speech critical of the government," said HRW, adding that over 520 investigation papers have been opened into false and seditious news and 'false news' on Covid-19 as of May 11.

The report acknowledged that stern actions were taken against media and journalists that "misreport" the news.

It cited investigations into *South China Morning Post* correspondent Tashny Sukumaran and *CodeBlue* editor Boo Su-Lyn as well as contempt proceeding against *Malaysiakini* editor-in-chief Steven Gan.

In July, the Home Ministry also [banned](#) the book *Rebirth: Reformasi, Resistance and Hope in New Malaysia* under the Printing Presses and Publications Act after claims that the book's cover resembled the country's coat of arms.

Tashny was investigated under Section 504 of the Penal Code and Section 233 of the Communications and Multimedia Act 1998 over her report on a raid carried out against undocumented migrants nabbed at the areas placed under an enhanced movement control order. The government decided "[no further action](#)" against her.

Boo was [investigated](#) under the Official Secrets Act (OSA) over articles pertaining to the Sultanah Aminah Hospital (HSA) fire several years ago in Johor Bahru. Gan, who was charged with contempt of court over comments made by five readers in a *Malaysiakini* news report, [is awaiting](#) the court verdict.

"Malaysia has undergone an incredible reversal of human rights in 2020 - all for the worst. Hopes for human rights reforms have never risen so fast in Malaysia nor collapsed so quickly," said Phil Robertson, deputy Asia director at HRW.

For the record, in January 2019, Robertson himself was not happy with the slow pace of reforms undertaken by the Harapan administration.

Harapan had promised sweeping changes, including reforming key government institutions and revoking repressive laws, including the Sedition Act, Prevention of Crime Act and National Security Council Act. However, these promised law reforms did not materialise.

“Police abuse of suspects in custody continues to be a serious problem, as does a lack of accountability for such offences,” HRW said in the report.

The government, it said, resorted to the Independent Police Conduct Commission, a watered-down version of Independent Police Complaints and Misconduct Commission (IPCMC) after the police force objected to the IPCMC.

“Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin seems intent on dragging Malaysia back to the bad old days of the Najib (Abdul Razak) government when simply speaking out publicly about sensitive topics would have the police soon knocking at your door. The government should stop backsliding and fully respect the rights of all within its borders,” Robertson said.

The report also states that “discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people remains pervasive in Malaysia”.

It says: “In July, the minister in charge of religious affairs gave ‘full licence’ to the religious authorities to take action against transgender people, both through arrests and religious education to ‘return’ them to the ‘right path’.”

In August, after activist Nicole Fong responded to this “full licence” decision by posting a series of infographics online critical of the official “*mukharyam*” programme - which aims in part to influence LGBT people to renounce their non-normative gender identity or sexual orientation - religious authorities lodged a police report against her.

The 761-page Human Rights Watch World Report 2021 reviews human rights practices in more than 100 countries.

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