

A. MEDIA COUNCIL ON MAY 2, 2003

- PRESS FREEDOM DAY

REPORT ON NUJ MEDIA COUNCIL FORUM ON 2ND MAY 2003 AT HILTON HOTEL PETALING JAYA

On 2nd May 2003 in conjunction with Press Freedom Day which falls on May 3rd. NUJ organised a Media Council Forum at PJ Hilton. Deputy Minister of Information, Dato' Zainuddin Maidin gave a keynote address.

In his address he categorically said that the government will only establish the media council if journalists are agreeable to it. He said this is part of the recommendations of the Attorney General Chambers besides suggesting that a thorough study be done on the proposed Media Council Act drawn up by the Malaysia Press Institute.

Dato' Zainuddin is also of the opinion that perhaps it is not necessary to have the Media Council but in the alternative, the powers of SUHAKAM should be increased to include the regulating of the conduct of the media.

He also questioned whether it is relevant for us to celebrate Press Freedom Day when we only concentrate on local issues but forgetting the despicable conduct of the Western media i.e America and Britain in the attack on Iraq.

He is of the opinion that Freedom of the Press as understood, propagated and defined by the sponsors of Freedom of the Press and democracy i.e. the West, is dead.

Dato' Zainuddin also reminded local journalist not to be trapped and influenced by the philosophy of Press Freedom propagated by the West because it is another tool of neo colonialism.

He said that in 1997 when Asia was hit by the monetary crisis, Western journalist was undermining and criticising Asian Values. It is their agenda to undermine us Asians and will seize the first opportunity to do so in times of crisis.

He also hit out at certain parties advancing press freedom who had invited foreign speakers from under developed countries to speak about press freedom. He said these people are not qualified to do so because they can't even fill their own stomach. He thought local journalists are much more able to speak about press freedom taking into account their contribution to the well being of the country and the multi-racial, multi religion and multi-cultural nature of its population.

He urged local journalists to develop its own concept of press freedom taking into account its social responsibility to the nation and sensitivities of its people.

NUJ President, Norila Daud in her welcoming speech felt that the formation of the Media Council if not properly composed and functioned as it should be, will only act like another watch dog for the government and this will hinder Press Freedom.

She said, NUJ being the only body protecting the welfare of 1,400 journalists was concerned how the Media Council will affect the work of professional journalists, photographers and graphic artists.

She said the draft proposed by Malaysia Press Institute did not give fair representation because out of the 24 seats, the union and press association was only given one seat.

NUJ was also concerned that the Media Council would be given punitive powers to reprimand individual journalist, editors and others and this would hinder the advancement of Press Freedom in the country.

The other concern was that the proposed Media Council is to be established as a statutory body and this arrangement is always prejudicial to the mind of the public as being linked to government and thus not truly independent.

She said, NUJ will hand over its proposal to the Home Ministry by August this year after tabulating responses and feedbacks from its members.

The panelist of the forum were UKM communications lecturer Prof. Dr. Safar Hashim ; Prof. Dr. Mokhtar Muhamad from Faculty of Communication and Media UiTM and Sallehuddin Othman, Assistant Editor (Production) NST.

All three panelist echoed the sentiments of the government that the Media Council should only be established if journalists agrees to it. But all three are also of the opinion that the Media Council should be established to enable journalists to regulate themselves without the government's intervention.

They also concur that presently there are various Journalist Codes of Ethics but none of them are being complied with. Therefore the Media Council can streamline and enforce the various existing Codes of Ethics.

B. FINDINGS OF THE NUJ MEDIA COUNCIL SUB

-COMMITTEE ON DEC 9, 2003

About 73.2% of NUJ members polled support the formation of a media council in which about 67.6% felt that such council could promote greater press freedom.

More than 2/3 of the respondents want the media council to self regulated and participated by 50:50 public and media.

More than 71% of the respondents felt that Malaysia should have a body for the public to file their complaints and arbitrate disputes between the public and the media.

More than 41% want the Malaysian Press Institute (MPI), the National Union of Journalists and media organisations to fund the media council, while 37% want public money to be used.

About 51% of the respondents were unaware of MPI's proposed Media Council. (An earlier independent poll showed that 98% of the respondents were unaware of MPI's proposed Media Council)

About 77% of the respondents felt that the Official Secrets Act, Internal Security Act, Printing Press and Publications Act should be reviewed, repealed and replaced with an Access to Information Act.

About 68.7% felt that existing laws such as the Printing Presses and Publications Act, Official Secrets Act, Internal Security Act, and Sedition Act were curbing press freedom.

About 72% felt that the media council should be granted with power to reprimand and not to punish as internal mechanism within media organisations are sufficient to handle disciplinary matters.

The power to punish may lead to the media council becoming too powerful and introduce another layer of control on the press.

The NUJ submitted its findings for the formation of an independent media council to the Prime Minister on August 4, 2004 The Union is still waiting for a reply.

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CONCLUSION

NUJ members polled want an independent and self-regulatory media council to be formed with 50:50 public and media participation. Funding for the media council should also come from the public and media associations.